

## SET TALK

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### BREATH OF LIFE

*Prana, orgone, chi, energy* - they all are either increased or discharged through breath, and everyone seems to be in agreement that without them we would not live. Breathing is the most important function of life that we do. Yet, it is often totally ignored in massage. Let's look at breathing and being a successful massage therapist.

First and foremost, as a massage therapist, it is necessary that we be relaxed and energized. The first sign of stress in most of us is shallow breathing or halting of the breathing process. Think about it: how many successful purple massage therapists do you know?

One of the first things that I was taught in massage school was to always breathe while giving a massage. I remember my utter amazement when the teacher came over to me as I was learning massage to tell me I wasn't breathing and said, "just breathe." I hadn't even realized that I had actually been blocking my breath. I now realize that I was not totally comfortable trying a new massage technique while touching a person I hardly knew. It would have been easy to have just said, "I was concentrating on the technique and I had forgotten to breathe". However, I found the truth to be much more interesting and full of potential for my own self-growth.

With my counseling background I knew there were five basic emotions that are manifested in the body with physical sensations. They are Fear, Love, Anger, Sadness, and Happiness (FLASH). Wilhelm Reich, a pioneering psychotherapist in the 50's, coined a term "character armor" to describe chronically tightened muscles that block the expression and limit the intensity of the five basic emotions. He states that from our first breath we learn how to suppress and limit the intensity of emotions by controlling our breathing. Birth is often a painful experience - the baby experiences separation from its mother, exposure to cold, and pain for the first time - so, the first breath that most babies take is painful. Human beings are quick to learn how to minimize the pain and the intensity of the feelings by controlling their breath.

The fear I experienced that was controlling me by limiting my breath while doing one of my first massages needed to be acknowledged so that I would not continue to block my breathing while doing massage. The awareness point was that I had stopped breathing while touching my practice massage student. Once I

acknowledged my fears of not doing the technique properly as well as being rejected and misinterpreted by the massage student, I was able to relax and breathe and continue learning the massage technique. This was a simple little lesson and, even though it encompassed only one aspect of the value of breath in massage, it allowed me to grow.

Another very important point about my not breathing was that it was also communicating to the client "not to breathe", and that it wasn't safe to relax. Exactly the opposite effect of the one I desired. In addition, the flow and projection of energy from my hands was becoming greatly reduced by a lack of charge coming into my own body. In order for my body to charge with energy, the breathing mechanism needs to be free and open.

Again, if we look at Wilhelm Reich's work, we can see the importance of breath in the charge and discharge of energy. One of the principle tenets of his work was that unexpressed emotions in the body were energy, and by using breath to build up a larger charge of energy in the body, the blocked emotional energy would be mobilized to release and soften the chronically tightened tissue - the character armor, which by the way is usually found as a major player in pain and structural distortion. Since one way of blocking the release of emotional stress and energy is to shorten or block the breath while doing massage, it is extremely important that the client be breathing during massage so that when the tightened tissue is manipulated the energy invested in keeping it tight will soften and release. If clients are not breathing, they are fighting this process and resisting relaxation and consequently homeostasis. They are also seeking to maintain the status quo, which is usually myofascial pain and dysfunction, by not breathing.

Reich observed that many illnesses and dysfunctions of the body were directly related to the blocked emotional energy in the affected area and the chronically tightened tissue that could not function at a healthy level. It was by releasing this energy and tightened tissue that people started to release the psychosomatic aspects of their illnesses and dysfunctions. As massage therapists we are constantly engaged in releasing the chronically tightened tissues found in our client's bodies, and helping to re-establish healthy energy flows. Much of the energy that our clients release is emotional in nature and, as Reich observed, releases best when a breath charge is built up to help it mobilize. Does this mean we are psychotherapists? No. It means by manipulating the soft tissue of our clients' bodies, we are mobilizing energy. To successfully facilitate this mobilization, it is necessary for both our clients and us to be aware of staying relaxed and breathing during the therapy.

One of the things I note about new clients when they first lie on my table and are touched for the first time is that they need encouragement to relax and breathe. The most effective way I have found to support the client's relaxing and breathing is for me to relax and breathe myself. My relaxation and breathing communicates through touch and energy flow that it is safe for the clients to do the same. It also helps to create an energy connection that flows from therapist to client to therapist and back to client in a circular pattern. If the breathing of either shortens or stops, it tends to block this flow. Therefore, it is important for me as a massage therapist to consider managing my breath as part of managing the energy flow and the healing process of the session. This is true whether it is relaxation, release of emotional stress, release of pain, structural realignment, or sports performance as the goal of the massage therapist. The energy from breath that flows through our bodies is what makes us hands-on healers and not just hands-on manipulators of tissue.

A parallel to Reich's work is yoga – with each asana (position), breath is essential to allow the release of the tissue. A parallel from yoga for deep massage is to gently apply deep pressure and have the client breathe with the pressure for the release. Also, as with Reich's work, in yoga breath is used to build up a charge of energy to assist the release of stress and increase the health of the yoga practitioner. In yoga the energy taken in by breath is called prana. For Reich this energy is called orgone energy.

In acupressure, energy flowing through the body, chi energy is manipulated and directed so that the body can achieve homeostasis and a high degree of health. One of the most devastating problems in acupressure is a shortened limited supply of available energy within the body. To use acupressure in massage therapy it is necessary for massage therapists to be able to project and stimulate energy through their hands into their clients. One of the best ways to keep the energy open and flowing in the therapist's own body is through relaxed rhythmic breathing that also will send the energy into the client's body. It is also necessary for the clients to be building a charge of energy in their bodies through breath to assist the treatment. In addition, the relaxation that takes place in the client's body is synonymous with having their breathing relax. I find that this is true with trigger points and polarity therapy as well.

If by now you start to see that breath is essential for massage therapy, you are getting my point. Here are some pointers that will help you be a more effective therapist using breath:

- Take several deep relaxing breaths before beginning hands-on treatments

- Observe your own breathing – if you have stopped, 90% of the time your client will have stopped
- If your client has stopped breathing, take an audible deep breath – he/she will breathe with you
- If you have stopped breathing, become aware of why and acknowledge that to yourself – awareness of your breathing is a major step in your own personal growth.
- If you are working deeply in a client, pay attention to his/her breathing, and enter slowly on their exhalation, hold your pressure and allow the client to breathe through the tissue release
- **BREATHING IS FREE AND HEALTHY!!**

I hope this has opened your eyes to the very real necessity of using breathing with massage. Keep breathing and healing until we communicate again in the next installment of SET TALK.