

Breathe deeply

Breath therapist mixes yoga and vocal training to relieve stress-based ailments

Chris Zdeb, *The Edmonton Journal*
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EDMONTON - Charlotte Rekken has taken a lot of medication, seen a psychiatrist and a lot of counsellors and alternative medicine therapists during her lifelong battle with anxiety and depression.

But it was singing instructor David Wilson who finally helped her, and he did it by teaching her how to help herself. Few people realize how much power they have to self-heal, says Wilson, a baritone, and choral music teacher at Concordia High School.

His three-step Body, Breath & Voice Integrative Therapy helps not only singers and musicians but people with health problems.

David Wilson talks Charlotte Rekken of Stony Plain through the first stage of his therapy, encouraging her to breathe into her lower abdomen and give voice to a sigh.
Photograph by: Shaughn Butts, the Journal

It's based on his own self-healing experience after he lost his voice while working on his first music degree. "The instant I would start singing, it would hurt my throat," he says, making him tense, anxious, and depressed.

Someone noticed and suggested Wilson take yoga, a system of postures and breathing exercises to attain control of the body and mind. He also studied qi gong, a traditional Chinese medicine that combines movement, meditation, and regulated breathing to enhance the flow of qi or energy in the body, improving blood circulation, and enhancing the immune system.

As he rolled around on yoga mats, learning how to breathe properly, Wilson says he noticed that when he did a certain movement, his voice would come back for an instant, setting off a little light bulb inside his head: he'd stumbled onto the mind-body connection of health.

Wilson continued the therapies for about five years and not only got his voice back, he got over his anxiety and depression as well as his food allergies, asthma, bronchitis and sinusitis. He incorporated everything he learned into Body, Breath & Voice Integrative Therapy (www.body-breath-voice.com) which he says can also help people with throat ailments, heartburn, acid reflux, spinal troubles, high blood pressure, colitis, aching muscles, repetitive strain injury and creative mental blocks.

The mind-body connection of health has always been recognized in the eastern world, and is finally beginning to be understood here in the west, says chartered psychologist Dr. Robyn Mott.

The culture here has long separated treatment of the head from the treatment of the body, but, "what we're thinking affects what happens in our body and what happens in our body affects how we think," Mott says.

This interaction is obvious in people who experience panic or anxiety attacks after thinking fearful thoughts, she says, which is why she often teams with Wilson when treating her patients.

"I would say the people we both work with have the best chance to really make a change in their lives because we've really pulled together the mind and body, instead of providing a partway or Band-Aid solution," Mott says.

"We live our lives through our bodies, everything that we've been through in our life is held in our body, so there's only so much I can do working with the psyche."

By teaching people to breathe, because most people don't breathe properly she says, Wilson helps them to stay grounded, which helps them deal better with whatever life throws their way.

"I think the beauty of it is that anybody can learn to do it, and they can find their way through the blocks in the body, enabling them to move more fully and confidently into their lives," Mott says.



Position is very important in breathing therapy and clients feel most calm when lying down, says David Wilson.
Photograph by: Shaughn Butts, the Journal

Wilson starts by teaching people how to breathe naturally because so many people breathe fast and shallow. He wants them to breathe like babies again, their spines extending and contracting in a full body experience. They probably stopped breathing like that around the age of seven when they started to have to deal with the rigours of life.

Short and shallow breaths are the body's way of protecting us, the fight or flight response when we're under attack, Wilson says. But if it protects us too much we end up with troubles.

For 20 different breathing habits and patterns there are 20 different reasons why people breathe that way.

"The depressed stay at the end of the exhale not wanting to take in a breath of life. Anxious people tend to have fast inhales and no exhales."

Inhales and exhales not only affect every system of the body, they're tied to the body's pH balance as well.

"Inhalations secrete acid, exhalations secrete alkaline. More acid in the body equals more yeast and more weight and more sugar and more stress," Wilson explains.

The sigh, a long audible breath, releases serotonin, a hormone that affects emotions, behaviour and thought and helps oxygenate the body, which is how he starts his breathing therapy.

To demonstrate, Wilson has client Charlotte Rekken recline on a yoga mat on the floor.

Lying down makes most people feel calm, he explains. As soon as they stand up, it usually means the start of a workday and the stress that involves.

"From a physiological standpoint when we're tense and we tighten, the abdominal muscles start tightening into the lungs and spine and that takes away the space the diaphragm is supposed to be able to descend into," Wilson says.

"If the diaphragm isn't descending, it's not giving the whooff! to the lungs to help them expand, and that's where you get asthma, bronchitis and sinusitis. It makes troubles like PMS, indigestion, and ulcers worse."

Traumas -- such as car accidents or incidents of abuse can create a memory of this type of response that can stay in the tissues of the body for years, Wilson says.

He tells Rekken to inhale deeply from down in her lower abdomen and exhale in a sigh.

"The sigh should feel like safety, surrender and relief, but for some people it feels like despair, no hope and no choice," Wilson says.

He then instructs Rekken to add voice to her sighs by exhaling with a clear and strong aaahhhhhhhh!

People who are afraid of speaking their minds or who have been told most of their lives to keep quiet, bring the tongue up and the soft palette down which squeezes the space at the back of the throat, making their voice sound quiet and forced, Wilson says.

He now has Rekken stand up, take a deep breath, lift one leg and step forward while saying "hello" in a confident manner which is meant to boost her confidence.

The third step of the therapy involves yoga-type exercises (Wilson is also yoga instructor), aimed at releasing the trauma memory contained in the body's cells. The stretch that Rekken easily demonstrates, she says she wasn't able to do for the longest time, until she could engage her mind to her body.

She'd disengaged the two in response to the daily pressures of living next door and caring for senior parents with major medical issues, having a husband who works stressful 16-hour days, parenting a teenager and an autistic child, running a small business that employs two people and trying to do some semi-professional music training. It led her to sometimes having four or five anxiety attacks a day where she would suddenly freeze or black out, Rekken says.

She was skeptical about what Wilson could do for her, but two years later, her anxiety attacks have become infrequent, she no longer has asthma and she requires a fraction of the medications she used to take to keep functioning.

"I had to change my basic perspective on life, that I'm not going to get it figured out and then everything's going to run smoothly, because life is going to continue to happen. But I have learned skills, which regardless of what happens, I can pull on and that will enable me to deal better with whatever is thrown at me," she says.

Wilson says his ultimate goal as a breath therapist is to work himself out of a job.

BREATH SAMPLE

To experience what it feels like to breathe naturally, David Wilson says to sit in a chair and sigh 10 times -- inhaling and exhaling from your lower abdomen -- as if you've won the lottery.

"Feel for an instant that emotion that you don't have to worry about anything and see how you feel at the end of it." he says.