

Valuing Breath

BY ROBIN OAKS

We all know that breath is necessary for life, but let's explore how valuable our breath is to our effectiveness as legal professionals. I'm advocating that we make awareness about breathing a part of our legal toolkit because of its benefits for emotional, mental, and cognitive functioning. Today, as I've been glued to a computer screen writing a report, my energy became drained and my posture had slumped, constricting movement of my diaphragm, which causes shallow breathing. Even worse, I realized that I had been holding my breath! Well, not so long that I fainted, but I was freezing my breathing likely because I was intensely thinking and felt time pressure—and my body mirrored this inner tension. This common breathing habit of holding one's breath while looking at computer screens has a name: "email or screen apnea."

Dr. Margaret Chesney, a "breathing" researcher at UC San Francisco, who studies the physiology of optimal breathing practices, raises awareness about how habits of shallow breathing and breath-holding can cause a range of negative effects on thinking, energy, and physical and mental health.

So, what can we do to breathe well?

Nose, Slow, Exhale, Low

Key characteristics of optimal breathing can be remembered by thinking of the words: Nose, Slow, Exhale, Low. First, healthy breathing is always through the *nose*. Close your mouth, especially during inhalation. *Slow*, rhythmic breathing patterns (not fast or erratic) signal specialized neurons in the brain that we don't feel threatened, which then

causes our nervous system (via the vagus nerve) to restore balance and promote a calm demeanor. Beneficial breathwork practices typically suggest making one's *exhale* longer than the inhale, and to breathe *low* by engaging the diaphragm, not the upper body muscles, to expand the lungs.

In his book, *Breath, The New Science of a Lost Art*, James Nestor notes that like the ocean's ebb and flow, the diaphragm's movement during breathing acts



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as a thoracic pump, creating a negative pressure drawing blood into the heart during inhalation and during exhalation causing blood to flow outwards. Many humans use only ten percent of the diaphragm's movement capacity, which overburdens the heart, elevates blood pressure, and contributes to disease.

Dr. Sundar Balasubramanian has authored numerous books about breathing (ancient "pranayama" practices) and works with the Department of Radiation Oncology at the Medical University of South Carolina. His research established that certain breathing practices stimulate changes in salivary biomarkers related to immunity, which has important implications for prevention and management of various illnesses, including cancer.

One amazing characteristic of breathing is that it is both an automatic and voluntary process. Our capacity to change our breathing at will provides us with a priceless opportunity to self-regulate our nervous system, circulatory, respiratory, and cognitive functions to our advantage. Current cutting-edge research, ancient wisdom traditions, and spiritual/ritual practices around the world recognize the power of breathwork to reduce stress, anxiety, and illness,

EXERCISE

1. Take a moment and tune into your breathing—remembering: Nose—Slow—Exhale—Low.
2. Breathe through your *nose* only. Comfortably *slow* down your breathing rate.
3. Practice gently letting your *exhale* become longer than your inhale.
4. Bring your breathing *low*, allowing your diaphragm to move and your abdomen to rise and fall.
5. Set a reminder to tune into your breathing patterns, especially when thinking and staring at a screen. Become a legal life partner with your breath and value how optimal breathing can benefit your work and well-being.

Well-Being

and enhance energy, focus, memory, stamina, cognition, and consciousness. ■

Robin Oaks has been an attorney for nearly forty years, and for twenty-five years has provided legal services focused on independent workplace investigations and mediation. She is certified in and has studied a wide range of healing, emotional intelligence, cognitive fitness, and mind-body practices. She is a well-being consultant and offers confidential professional life coaching sessions for legal professionals seeking to optimize potential, restore balance, and thrive during stressful life changes and challenges. Contact: Robin@RobinOaks.com or 805-685-6773.