

Breathwork as a Therapeutic Adjunct in Counseling

Monograph for ASCERVIC (Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling - 2014)

Jim Morningstar, PhD

Over the past 25 years, there has been an explosion in the blending of ancient breathing techniques for health and awareness with contemporary therapeutic practices. The result has been the evolution of powerful and incisive healing and consciousness changing modalities. This has given birth to the field of *breathwork* which has promoted significant advances in medical and psychological domains.

As one of the newly emerging tools of complementary medicine, breathwork has the daunting yet highly exciting task of blending the old and the new for the purpose of creating something better than either in isolation. There are many and varied schools of using breath therapeutically. I am referring in this monograph to the schools that have emerged in the past quarter century which train practitioners to work directly with the breathing patterns of clients to help them more consciously achieve and sustain physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Breathwork reinforces a new paradigm in the field of professional counseling - whole brain learning. It bridges both brain hemispheres and accesses functions of brain stem, limbic system and cerebral cortex. It thereby reaches deeper levels of human motivation and behavioral control. Incorporating breathwork into counseling takes us to the intersection of science and art. We can assist appropriate clients to learn organically, not just with their rational thinking. Issues of addiction, for example, require a profound shift in values and motivation that must be learned experientially, espoused

organically (not just intellectually) and reinforced environmentally for healthy change to be enduring (Rajsk, Piotr, 2002).

We no longer live in world of Newtonian physics, black and white thinking nor do our clients. Treatment that accesses the male/female, right/left, intuitive/logical is not just interesting. At this point it is necessary to help restore wholeness to today's clientele.

Traditional and contemporary uses of breathwork in healing arts

Breathing practices such as yoga and Taoist techniques have been used in the Orient for centuries, not just for health maintenance but for diagnosis and cure. Off-shoots have been used in Western medicine for child birth --Lamaze Technique, pain control --hypnosis, and asthma relief --Buteyko Method.

Psychotherapeutic application

More recently breathwork has been used to treat panic attacks, anxiety and a variety of mental health disorders and emotional trauma not reached by more cognitive therapies. Chronic tension is at times not relieved, but only temporarily masked by medications. Breathwork is a tool that helps reach underlying limiting beliefs and habitual behaviors held in place by negative conditioning.

Practitioners may learn to teach both diaphragmatic--belly oriented and costal heart centered techniques to access either the parasympathetic or the sympathetic nervous system for particular healing effects.

Breathwork gives counsellors both personally and professionally: a) a technique for relieving stress, b) a parameter for daily self care level, c) a doorway to spiritual awakening, d) an adjunct to counseling to assist clients in relief from both acute and chronic emotional and psychological pain and in maintenance of more balanced lifestyles.

A breathwork session typically involves 10 minutes to 50 minutes of clinical interview and issue definition and then approximately fifty minutes to an hour of concentrated connected breathing that works on the levels of body, emotion, mind and spirit.

Body

Learning how to sustain a relaxed yet full breathing rhythm through whatever tension that arises in the body is a precious gift. Chronic holding patterns in muscle as well as connective tissue can be released without exterior manipulation. Once this is learned, a life-long method of tension relief is attained. This is an art form and not a mechanical process. One must sense the right breathing pattern for the appropriate circumstances. Like any skill, it develops with practice.

Mind

Holding patterns in the body reflect continual messages of protection--fight/flight/freeze responses from the brain. If our beliefs are such that we see ourselves as unsafe in our body and our world, our body will respond accordingly. In counseling we are looking for more than temporary relaxation states, but a more enduring sense of inner harmony, which leads to more resourcefulness in dealing with life challenges. Core beliefs are ferreted out and more functional beliefs are paired with new states that the client is trained to access. Tools for working with belief systems and anchoring them with physiological sensations are practiced. They are individually developed tools for the reconstruction of a new consciousness and provide a daily reinforcement of a new level of enjoyment in life.

Emotions

Every family teaches its members by example which forms of emotional expression are acceptable and which are not. This becomes so ingrained that to change this patterning is beyond the normal range of skills even though the effects may be restrictive or dysfunctional. Working directly with the emotion centres of the brain is outside most conscious awareness. Messages to these areas, however, can be altered and the healthy range of expression expanded. The breathwork session provides an arena for more than release, it links positive states with client directed breathing.

Spirit

Breathwork's underlying philosophy is that the key to change is accepting active responsibility for one's life and having one's spirit in the driver's seat instead of past conditioning. This is not a process of speculation and philosophizing, but rather of direct experience. Counsellors do not dictate to clients their spiritual truths. Clients come to know them directly by virtue of their courage to go past fears and self doubts.

Cycle of Breath

A breathwork session often involves: a) a beginning in which one experiments and discovers how to sustain a connected full rhythm, b) a middle period of building an energetic charge to a point of release, and c) an ending period during which the released energy is grounded and suggestions for application are integrated.

Breath and Energy Releases

Holding patterns in the breath mechanism frequently date back to early life up to and including birth. Some people have somatic memories of their birth and the fear that generated their holding. But these memories are not necessary to the release process. There is a distinct difference in the ease and pleasure of the breath after the moment of

breath release. This is most often followed by an energy release felt throughout the body. The physical sensations of this vary with individuals and relate to dissolution of their chronic areas of suppression.

Breathwork Training for Counselors

Use of breathwork in counseling requires the skill and sensitivity of a trained counselor who has gone through the process of learning the breathwork technique. Breathwork can induce mild trance or non ordinary states of consciousness. With the direction of an adept therapist, clients can access material that might take them years to reveal --if ever with traditional talk modalities. This requires the therapist to be conversant with such states, how to use the material --memories, emotions, physical sensations-- and how to assist clients to integrate and sustain insight and behavioral change.

Grof (2000) has enumerated categories of experiences that may arise in non ordinary states through breathwork as:

1. Sensory experiences and motor manifestations which may include tightness, pain, numbness, tingling, temperature fluctuation and even tetany.
2. Biographical experiences of events that have happened to us from birth to the present time both positive and negative, releasing traumas of omission and commission, grieving. This reliving is more than just remembering.
3. Perinatal experiences from the fetal experiences during gestation and pregnancy, through the birth process, to the experiences immediately after birth.
4. Transpersonal experiences which can take us beyond our bodies and our own personal (ego) identities. These could include conception, unity, out of body experiences, merging with other forms of life, becoming one with elements, other levels of existence, communication with an archetype, yogic sleep states.

Ethical Concerns

As with any new tool, breathwork can be used well or misused. Counseling opens participants to very vulnerable states. Adding the component of a non ordinary state of consciousness increases the necessity of clear ethical boundaries and competent training. Fortunately several schools of breathwork have addressed this in training of counsellors (Taylor & Kornfield, 1995). An international alliance of breathwork schools and trainings have begun to create agreed upon principles, ethics and training standards for professional breathworkers (www.breathworkalliance.com). Differential diagnosis is also important in knowing what clients are appropriate for such intervention (Morningstar, 2001). And peer review journals are needed to collate the growing body of literature in this field.

Professionals from varied domains have used breathwork training to enhance their healing skills. Some of the disciplines incorporating breathwork include psychotherapists, occupational and physical therapists, nurses, physicians, dentists, massage therapists and other body and energy workers. Each discipline must monitor the ethical use of the breathwork techniques according to its acceptable standards of practice.

Not every counsellor is going to want to incorporate breathwork as an adjunct to his or her counseling practice. Nor will every counselor be attracted to use breathwork for her or his own well being and self care. This is as it should be in a pluralistic society. But every counsellor and every client breathes. The breathing patterns of a counsellor as well as a client tells a great deal about their moment by moment state of ease and resourcefulness in their lives. The growing field of breathwork is contributing valuable

data to the conscious and therapeutic use of this simple yet powerful tool we all have right under our nose.

Resources

The International Breathwork Foundation (www.ibfnetwork.org) is a central source for information on affiliated breathwork centers worldwide as well as literature in several languages. The International Breathwork Training Alliance (breathworkalliance.com) is helping to set standards for professional breathwork and also has a list of resources for literature and research.

Jim Morningstar, Ph.D. is director of Transformations Incorporated, the School of Integrative Psychology, the Transformations Breathwork Training Program and Continuing Education for Professionals in Milwaukee, WI
<info@transformationsusa.com> and <www.transformationsusa.com> 414 351 5770.

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