

Softening the Belly

Christopher Uhl

You've seen them—those magazine covers flashing the perfect belly—flat and tight. Indeed, it seems that holding the belly in—tight and braced—has become a way of being for many Americans who seem to believe that a tight, flat belly is a marker of health.

Ironically, that hard, flat tummy may well be an impediment to health in so far as a braced belly inhibits healthy breathing.

Let's get to basics. Each of us was born knowing how to breathe. Watch a baby lying on her back breathing and you will see a model for good breathing. On the in-breath the baby's lungs expand and her diaphragm drops down causing her soft belly to rise effortlessly; then on the out-breath her diaphragm pushes up, helping her lungs to deflate.

Unfortunately, by the time most of us left middle school we were no longer breathing in this natural, full way; we had, in effect, forgotten how to breathe!

Do a check on yourself right now. Take a deep breath. If you are like most folks you will suck your belly in and tighten your abdominal muscles, while lifting and inflating your upper chest. This is what Gay Hendricks (author of Conscious Breathing) calls "upside down breathing." In healthy breathing, by contrast, the chest rises up very little; rather it is the soft belly that inflates outward, as the diaphragm presses down massaging the body organs.

When our breathing is shallow (i.e., *upside-down breathing*), we deprive our bodies of oxygen because the air we take in comes into contact with fewer capillaries in the air sacks of our lungs. Think of it this way: Each minute only about ½-cup of blood flows through the top of the lungs—where many people confine their breathing. When breathing extends to the middle of the lungs, the incoming air has access to about two cups of blood each minute; when breathing is extended to the bottom of the lungs, 4-5 cups of blood are available for the uptake of life-giving oxygen each minute (i.e., about ten times more oxygen uptake potential compared to top-lung breathing).

How is it that we have forgot how to breathe? I think that "stress" is the main reason. Stress has now become ubiquitous in America: Many of us wake to an "alarm" clock, we gulp down coffee to get "geared up" for the day; we "fight" traffic to get to work where we spend our time resolving "problems." Because living under stress is the only thing that most of us have ever known as adults, we might mistakenly conclude that our lives are relatively stress free.

How about you? Stress free? Our bodies are a much more reliable source of information about the stresses that we are holding than our brains because it is in our body that we hold our stress.

You can check your stress level by simply pausing right now and doing a quick "body check-in," noting where you might be holding tension in your body. Start with your face. Are your eyes soft or a bit strained? Your jaw—is it loose and relaxed (teeth not touching) or slightly tensed (jaw 'set')? How about your neck—floating peacefully on your vertebral column or rigid? And now your chest—open and at ease or somewhat constricted? And, finally, your belly—soft like jelly or a bit tight like fudge? So, how did you do?

It is by relearning breathing that we can release stress and regain balance, health, and equanimity. As we soften our bellies, we soften, becoming more open, peaceful, accepting and loving. Gay Hendricks sums it up this way: "It is easy to take breathing for granted, to assign it to the deep background of life. But what if you made a tiny improvement in something you do 20,000 times a day?"

