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Cure snoring: don't waste your breath

David Polkinghorne, sportswriter

Most of us are taking in far too much air every day and this can be detrimental to our well-being.

"Yes, I'm dead." The missus almost jumped out of her skin with fright, but not as much as if I hadn't answered. It was the silence that worried her. For some reason I'd just woken up as she reached out a tentative hand to me in the middle of the night. I knew what she was thinking because she'd told me previously - in between snoring up a storm, sometimes I stop breathing altogether. I didn't really believe her and my wisecrack was the result.

Apparently snoring is a factor in 33 per cent of divorces (wisecracking husbands possibly make up the other 67 per cent).

Hi, my name is David and I'm a snorer and it's been 15 days since I last snored.

I no longer stop breathing - known as sleep apnoea - and the missus doesn't get woken up by the tiles rattling to the tune of my thunderous opera. It's been a remarkable turnaround in a few short weeks since my editor sent around an email asking for a human guinea pig.

Tess Graham had written a book, called *Relief From Snoring and Sleep Apnoea*, and it was my nasal passages' job to put both her and her book through their paces.

It's funny how things turn out. Following my "dead" wisecrack, the missus convinced me to head to the doctor to get some help.



I've snored since I was 10 and been tired for as long as I can remember. Yawning is my middle name. Every morning my throat was as dry as a Woody Allen movie and I'd repeatedly wake up dripping in sweat. But my local doctor said my throat wasn't fat enough to have sleep apnoea and a blood test told him my drowsiness would be fixed by B12 injections. That was two years ago and nothing had changed.

Then I met Graham.

It sounds like the beginning of a love story and my partner now calls me a "breathing zealot" but the improvement was remarkable after just one night. No sweat, no dry throat and feeling great.

I headed around to Graham's house for an interview, expecting to have electrodes stuck to my temples and whiz-bang machines beep and gurgle at me until they told me what was wrong. But all she did was take my pulse and secretly take note of my

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breathing - how deep and how many breaths every minute.

Then Graham dropped a bombshell - I was an oxygen thief. I was breathing twice as much air as I needed and because I wasn't using my nose it was drying out my mouth at night. The sweating was caused by all the extra work I was doing - instead of enjoying a nice peaceful night's sleep all my heavy breathing was equivalent to going for a jog.

I returned the favour and watched Graham. During a 90-minute interview I didn't notice her breathing once - no yawns, no deep breaths and no chest movement at all. Either she's a vampire or her breathing is so gentle it's completely undetectable.

It's the lofty standard to which I now aim. Ironically, breathing less has been a breath of fresh air. I was gulping down 16 big breaths every minute when I only needed half that number of smaller ones.

"And you're exactly average of the last 5000 people I've seen," Graham told me. "So you're breathing double the normal rate now, you're breathing double the normal rate when you're asleep."

It seemed counter-intuitive. Everywhere you go people tell you to take nice deep breaths - sport, doctors, yoga, meditation, they all say the same. But this crazy idea has definitely improved my sleep - something the doctor couldn't manage.

The book is a self-help guide and it first explains the whys and wherefores of sleep disorders before getting into the nitty gritty of how to get better. It takes you step-by-step through how to change your breathing - only breathe through your nose, improve your posture,

use only your diaphragm and not your chest, and it has exercises to reprogram your brain to a new habit. But you have to do it gradually. If you just suddenly halve your breathing you feel like you're drowning.

Modern pandemic

About 40 per cent of adults snore. It's a pandemic caused by the modern world - stress, diet, posture and ignorance have most of the planet gulping down air like it's our last breath.

"Anything that's stressful will lift your breathing rate up ... diet [does as well]," Graham says. "We were not designed to be eating so much sugar in our diet ... it's also the high carbohydrate, starch diet." But where did she get her crazy ideas of breathing less? How does she know the answers when the family doctor clearly had no idea?

Graham was a qualified physiotherapist and started researching because two of her three kids were chronic asthmatics. Seven years later and she had the answer - the human race had forgotten how to breathe. It not only cured their asthma but she's found it can help sleeping disorders as well. She changes the way you breathe during the day to ensure you're breathing correctly at night.

It's kind of like footballers practising their kicking over and over again so when they're in the heat of battle it happens automatically. It's a logical approach that's been overlooked by the medical fraternity, which only looks at what happens during the night. They hook you up to fandangled machines with tubes that force you to breathe correctly when you're asleep, but it does nothing to change the way you breathe when you're awake.

"The brain's got a breath centre and when you've been chronically over-breathing for a long time you've changed the setting of it ... you're not doing it on purpose, that's what you're now programmed to do," Graham says.

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Physical therapist and Buteyko educator
Tess Graham. Photo: Jeffrey Chan



Once you've learnt how to breathe properly then you need to learn how to do it in everyday life, while talking, walking, running and eating. When you're not used to solely breathing through your nose, doing it while you're running flat out will also leave you gasping for air.

Breathing for Athletes

Then Graham dropped another bombshell - better breathing can lead to better performance in the sporting arena. As a sports freak, this was when my ears really pricked up. Finally I had an excuse for being a hack - my breathing was holding me back. The only problem was, most athletes don't know how to breathe either, so they're also performing below their potential.

It's amazing how big an effect something as simple as breathing can have. And it's amazing how easy it is to fix.

I haven't progressed as quickly as I'd have liked - mainly because I don't do enough practice - but I still feel like I've come a long way.

The tiles sit safely at night knowing they, too, can have a restful night and the missus is happier as well - although she's started to get sick of the nagging about her terrible breathing.

What a snore

- Snoring plays a part in 30 per cent of divorces.
- 40 per cent of adults snore.
- 60 per cent of over-40s snore.
- 25 per cent of children snore.
- We only need eight to 12 breaths a minute.
- Less than 10 per cent of us breathes correctly.

In the 1970s, people breathed five litres of air a minute, now we breathe about 12 litres a minute.

Good breathing

- Only use the nose.
- Use the diaphragm.
- Upright posture.
- Don't drink alcohol or eat before bed.

Bad breathing

- Using the mouth.
- Using the chest.
- Slouched posture.
- Lots of yawning and sighing.

From David Polkinghorne's article in The Canberra Times, Australia

Advair Warning:

For all our clients who are on Advair. I know you have all been advised by your Buteyko educator of the dangers of this medication, and to talk with your physician about changing it, but those of you still on it or who have family members or friends using this drug, please read the article at the site listed here, at least the first part, even if you skim the rest!

<http://www.medpagetoday.com/AllergyImmunology/Asthma/36000>



Unfortunately Tess Graham's book is not yet available in North America, but she is a Buteyko Educator and everything she teaches is taught by your Buteyko Educator here.



Some thoughts on Buteyko and COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

By Linda Shampan, Buteyko teacher and COPD sufferer

A COPD person's difficulties with daily activities will be *partly* a consequence of the extent of physical changes in their lungs, and *partly* the secondary effects of trying to compensate for this, i.e. by responding to feelings of breathlessness by hyperventilation and/or by avoidance of any exertion for fear of breathlessness.



At a recent workshop I gave at a hospital COPD Support Group, one woman was very enthusiastic about the tips I presented on improving breathing and said “Yes, my physiotherapist taught me to breathe this way a year ago and it’s changed my life!” which gave great encouragement to the other people in the group. It was striking though, that of these twenty people with COPD, all being followed up in the hospital clinic, only one person appeared to have had access to this kind of approach.

I have worked with many people with COPD, including severe COPD, and found that the key Buteyko principles which are helpful are: encouragement of nose-breathing and awareness (& reduction) of hyperventilation.

‘Slow Breathing’ exercises such as the 3-3-1 pattern have often been useful and nose-clearing exercises if needed, keeping the head movements gentle (with small forwards movement only).

There are three key areas where people can achieve improved day-to-day function:

1. They can *maximise their efficiency of breathing* and feel that, although there is impaired lung function, they can still get the best use of what there is.

This includes working with relaxation, posture, enhancing diaphragm use (for example with the ‘on the beach’ exercise – back of head resting on the hands), nose breathing, and gentler patterns of breath

2. *Work on ‘pacing’* – when engaged in all daily activities, e.g. getting washed & dressed, cooking, eating, walking, going up and down stairs – to reduce onset of shortness of breath, maintain breath control and thus encourage an improved realistic level of activity.

3. *Noticing when hyperventilation is their habitual response to shortness of breath* (due to their physical limitations and/or coughing) and learning alternatives to this to regain breath control.

I trained as a Buteyko teacher 9 years ago, and a few years later was diagnosed with severe COPD, so I had the motivation to develop and use Buteyko to help my own breathing and to experiment on what helps and doesn’t help. While my clinical readings are increasingly low, Buteyko has really helped me to retain a good quality of life.

For many years I found the best response to feeling breathless was using a ‘breath pause’. This gave rapid relief, and sometimes also using the ‘rescue’ positions (e.g. leaning forward with elbows on table). As time has gone on, I find that the ‘pursed lips’ extended out-breath (as generally taught by physiotherapists) works quicker! The ‘long soft-S’ – a long out-breath with a quiet ‘sssss’ sound – is also good.

My impression is that while reducing hyperventilation is a common factor in teaching at all levels, it becomes important in moderate/severe COPD to also learn breathing exercises (such as ‘pursed lips’ or ‘long soft S’) which can reduce air trapping.

What else helped me a lot was using the Alexander technique and joining a singing group - singing is increasingly being recognised as helpful to people with a range of breathing problems including COPD.

