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The Power of Conscious Breathing

Breathing is the most basic human activity, but Hayley Parlen says doing it “properly” can help you in the CrossFit box.

By Hayley Parlen

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All images Dave Re/CrossFit

“In basketball—as in life—true joy comes from being fully present in each and every moment, not just when things are going your way. Of course, it’s no accident that things are more likely to go your way when you stop worrying about whether you’re going to win or lose and focus your full attention on what’s happening right this moment.”

—Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*

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A Personal Account

The other day I set out to break a PR for pull-ups. Shortly after I jumped on the bar, I noticed a tiny battle going on in my mind. When I got to about six, I heard this voice pop up: "You aren't going to make it."

And so began the fight.

Right after I heard that voice, another chimed in, "Come on! You can do it! Keep going!"

The two voices went on for a few seconds until suddenly, without my having to do anything, everything felt really quiet inside of my mind, and all my attention and focus went straight to my breath. It was as if my breath had a voice of its own, yet it did not have any words to speak. It was just there as a very loud, audible sound, kind of like Darth Vader, yet in a strangely peaceful way.

As the breath got louder and louder, my brain felt quieter and quieter, as if I had just dived down to the bottom of a lake. All I could hear was my breath, and then suddenly it was just my own breath, my body, the pull-ups and me. I was completely immersed in the present. I felt no resistance in my mind. My body felt loose, and before I knew it I was on my 20th pull-up. I fought for the next one, bringing my new record to 21.

This experience is one of many in which I have been able to get through a CrossFit workout and do even better than intended because of the conscious breathing practice I have outside my CrossFit workouts.

I believe a conscious breathing practice, which consists of sitting and putting all your concentration on listening to and feeling your breath, can benefit athletic performance and help cultivate the focus one needs in order to resist the commands and the drama of the mind. This is why Phil Jackson felt it so important to teach his athletes Zen meditation. He knew that when athletes think too much about the past and the future—the bulk of all thoughts—they miss the reality of what is happening in the present. Some athletes and coaches refer to this present state as "the zone," while some refer to it as a "runner's high."

Controlled breathing is certainly not a new idea when it comes to sport. Many training texts will talk about breath control, particularly as it relates to athlete arousal and the ideal performance state, and deep diaphragmatic breathing can have important effects on heart rate and

muscle tension. Controlled breathing can also affect oxygen exchange, and most CrossFitters will know that using your breath correctly can often be the difference between a missed lift and a new PR. Breathing ladders are often used as a way to teach athletes to avoid "panic breathing."

Some people certainly associate breathing only with spiritualism, yoga and meditation, but sports scientists have long known that breathing can affect athletic results. One need only use Google to find a wealth of literature linking breathing techniques to sports performance. Still, we don't always need to get so complicated or examine the exact physiological mechanisms of breathing and movement. Sometimes it's enough just to know that the breath can be used as a point of focus when the mind is wandering during a workout.



Hayley Parlen introduces conscious breathing to a group of top CrossFitters in Lake Tahoe, Calif.



Focusing on the breath can calm the mind and help you devote all your energy to the task at hand.

Why Focus on the Breath?

This practice of focusing on the breath, as opposed to getting caught up in your thoughts, is extremely powerful when applied to situations that require intense physical exertion. Of course, the self-talk we all know about can be helpful to get us through tough times and motivate us to do our best, but even getting caught up in positive thoughts while working out can drain us of our energy and perhaps cause us to lose focus on the task at hand. This energy is so precious in these moments. We cannot afford to waste an ounce of it. With every positive thought, there always lies its opposite. So rather than risk getting caught up in the inner battle, or even having to tame the negative thoughts, why not just use your breath as a point of focus?

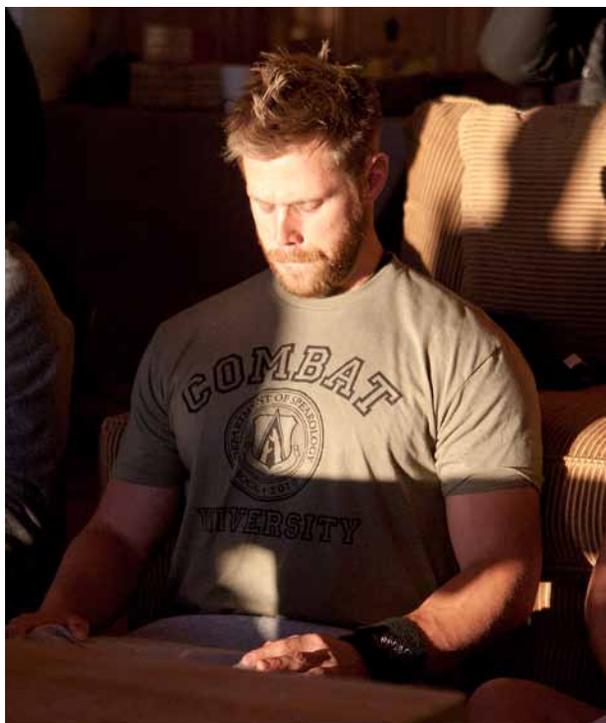
In fact, we really do not have control over the types of thoughts that enter our mind. We do, however, have control over where we want to put our attention. Putting your attention on your breath is far more productive and safe than being swept away by thought. Ask yourself, what is more important: putting your focus on what your breath is doing as you go into a 400-lb. back squat or listening to the mind chatter? In order to get really good at focusing on your breath, you must practice. Just like if you want to get good at squatting, you must squat.

Being able to put your attention on your breath is an amazing tool. Giving your breath all your attention helps

the mind chill out in times when it's freaking out or wants or quit. Having a breathing practice is like a CrossFit WOD for focus, and it can be just as hard. If the core-to-extremity principle is one of the main components of effective movement, then breathing and focus are the ultimate tools of implementation. Think about this the next time you lift something: our power starts with our core, our center, and one way to tighten our core is to breathe into it. If we start to let our breath out before we finish lifting, we weaken our core and thus our chance of injury increases or we miss the lift.

Notice, too, what your mind is doing the next time you attempt a heavy lift and you take a breath into your core. For me, my mind usually goes quiet. If I start engaging in thought, even for one second, I forget about my body and my breath. I might start to exhale too early or I might lose focus, and then I either risk injury or I don't succeed in the lift. The more I practice conscious breathing outside my workouts, the more natural it becomes to incorporate focus breathing when I am engaging in physical activity.

Our breath is an intimate link between our mind and body. The breath takes the mind and grounds it deeper into the body so that we feel more whole, more connected with every part of us. The more grounded we are in our bodies, the more we can increase our own body awareness. The more body awareness we cultivate, the more alive we feel, the less likely we are to injure ourselves, and the better control we have over how we move.



Dave Lipson, full of peace.



Miranda Oldroyd (top) and Kristan Clever experiment with breathing techniques.

What Is a Conscious Breathing Practice?

After attempting my first WOD, I remember thinking that, had I not had a conscious breathing practice all these years, there was no way in hell I would have been able to get through the workout. This practice involves training your awareness to watch what is going on in your mind and your body's sensations without reacting to them, without getting swept away by the mind's stories—to observe without becoming emotional.

In a CrossFit workout, these thoughts might sound like: "I am going to die," "I can't do it," "My coach is an ass," "I can't believe my boyfriend is making me do this shit," "This is crazy and useless," "What is the point?"

A breathing practice will allow you to hurdle these distractions and obstacles to not only achieve a better WOD time but also to experience more enjoyment during your workout. This practice is about cultivating mental toughness, so your will becomes so strong that you are no longer bullied by your own thoughts. It also cultivates the will for one to be in control of his or her actions simply by becoming more aware of what one thinks.

Physically, we need body awareness in order to be good athletes. If you do not know how to loosen your hips or engage your lats, you will likely have problems with the kipping pull-up. Mind you, body awareness happens on a very deep subconscious level. We are often not telling ourselves to do something while in the movement. But we have learned how to move through our training along the way. That's another cool thing about the breath: it pierces through our conscious level, into the subconscious, allowing us to go deeper into our bodies, sometimes without us really even knowing it.

A few days ago, when doing 100 burpees, I remember my mind telling me to quit when it started to get too hard. Again, I was being pushed around by my thoughts. Around 20, I heard the sound again—the sound of my breath—and it grew louder and louder until it was all I focused on. Granted, my breath was all over the place, neither smooth nor rhythmic by any means, but it gave me the will to continue, and I was also able to look around to see the beautiful blue sky, to feel the grass underneath my hands and feet. I went from thinking mode to feeling mode, and the feelings and sensations suddenly did not seem all that bad.



Ignore the perfectly squatting cameraman. Sit tall, relax and bring your attention back to your breath.

Who Can Have a Breathing Practice?

Nothing I could say or teach of a breathing practice is new. This practice has been around forever. It is not man-made. You don't need any equipment (except a pair of lungs and nostrils), you can do it anywhere, and it's free. If you want to see for yourself how the breath is intimately linked with our bodies and movement, try this simple exercise:

Sit up tall, with a straight spine. As you draw in a deep inhalation, pay close attention to the direction your spine moves. Then when you exhale, pay attention to how your spine moves now. On the inhalation, your spine automatically goes into extension. I tell my students to inhale and extend their spines, but really you don't have to do anything. The breath pulls your spine into extension: the lower back arches slightly and the chest lifts towards the ceiling. The same goes for spinal flexion on the exhalation. As soon as you exhale, the spine rounds slightly and the chest draws inward.

As you focus on your breathing during this exercise, notice how little room there is to think. For a brief moment, your mind goes quiet and you get a small reprieve from all the chatter. It is rather pleasant, no? From here, for the next few minutes, allow yourself to sink into your breath. Sit

with a neutral spine and follow each inhalation and each exhalation. As thoughts enter your mind, watch them come in, and watch them drift away. If you notice you start to get carried away by your thoughts, just bring your attention back to the next breath.

Whether for five minutes or an hour, I make it a point to sit and practice observing my breath every day to train my mind to focus its attention on my breath while not getting involved or carried away by my thoughts. When you sit quietly regularly, you will start to see how often you are pushed around by your thoughts. For example, let's say you decide to sit for five minutes, without moving, and focus your attention on your breath. After just a few seconds, thoughts will come in, and before you know it you have completely forgotten about your breath. You might instead find yourself planning your family vacation, what you are going to eat for lunch that day, etc. The biggest bully of them all, is this one: "Wait—I can't sit here. This is a waste of time, I need to get back to" If you are not 100 percent objectively observing that thought, I guarantee you will have forgotten about your breath, and you will get up and go do the thing your mind told you to go take care of.

Sitting still and observing your breath is a very intense experience, but it has to be if we want to see results. Sound familiar? The stuff that comes up, both mentally and physically, when you are sitting still can be overwhelming and emotional. The sensations that accompany emotional pain and pleasure are equally as overwhelming. So to sit through all of these sensations without being able to reach for a comfortable distraction is an extremely powerful accomplishment.

You can always practice breathing at any point in the day, but you can also try to practice just before a WOD. Before you attempt your next workout, try sitting silently for two to five minutes just observing your breath. Sit comfortably with an upright posture, shoulders relaxed, and put all your attention and focus on each in breath and each out breath. There is no need to control your breathing or make it special in any way. Just observe as objectively as possible. In doing this, you are clearing away mental debris and increasing your ability to focus. Hopefully, you will cultivate the will and mental fortitude to bring this state of mindfulness and presence to your workout.

When the workout becomes challenging, as it always does, try to avoid the thoughts that will flood your mind. If you can, return to your breath, clear your mind and keep cranking out the reps.



About the Author

Hayley Parlen was introduced to CrossFit three years ago and knew right away that she had found a fitness program that was about getting physically fit and cultivating "mental fitness." Hayley is a certified Level 1 trainer and has completed numerous other CrossFit certifications. Hayley's dedication to her meditation and yoga practice, coupled with her CrossFit training, has shown her that no challenge in life is too big or too daunting to endure. Hayley also shows unwavering dedication to sharing her knowledge of and love for the art of body awareness and movement to children, adults and at-risk youth, as well as the mentally and physically challenged.