

The path to healthy breathing and restful sleep

Physiotherapist and breathing educator Tess Graham (right) is the author of *Relief from Snoring and Sleep Apnoea*, recently published by Penguin Australia. After her successful visit to Byron Bay in November, 2011, she is holding more workshops for clients and health professionals next month. Peter Thompson spoke to her about her work.

Peter Thompson: The basic point seems to be that breathing is not properly understood.

Tess Graham: Yes, it sounds ridiculous at first because we take breathing for granted. And we don't necessarily associate disease with dysfunctional breathing. But I would go so far as to say that many common chronic disorders have their origin in incorrect breathing. Unfortunately, there's a belief that the 'deeper' you breathe, that is, the more air you breathe, the better. But it does more harm than good.

Your initial training was as a physiotherapist. When did you first become aware that there might be more to learn?

In hospitals, physiotherapists traditionally use exercises that involve deep breathing and coughing techniques. We don't focus on normalising the patient's whole pattern of breathing. My thinking changed when my young children developed asthma and I realised that their everyday breathing was wrong, compared to normal textbook definitions. That was the light bulb moment. They were breathing too fast, and too heavily. In fact, too deeply – too much air! And when they breathed even more deeply when they were running around, even laughing, it could tip them into an asthma attack. **As you say, we take breathing for granted so the idea that we might actually have to learn**

to breathe correctly seems counter-intuitive. What do you mean by 'correct breathing'?

Correct breathing is breathing at the correct rhythm, rate and volume and with the correct use of the breathing muscles. Correct breathing is silent and very gentle. There are myriad symptoms that are directly connected to dysfunctional breathing. You can go from doctor to doctor getting pills and treatments for this and that, but if you don't fix the underlying problem, you can never be truly healthy. No ifs, no buts, no exceptions.

The Buteyko Breathing Method was introduced to Australia in 1990 and you were one of the first people to study it here.

How did that come about?

For seven years, I had been searching for a way to relieve my children's asthma, and I read about Buteyko in a health magazine. That was an end to their asthma and the beginning of a new career for me. I studied the work of the Russian scientist Dr Konstantin Buteyko and others who have shown conclusively that asthmatics characteristically over-breathe and that over-breathing or hyperventilation causes inflammation and constriction in the lungs.

I know from personal experience that breathing retraining can be highly effective. What has your experience been?

Well first of all, it saved my children from a lifetime of asthma and asthma medications. It also rescued my father from severe breathing distress with emphysema and a heart condition and it gave him nine extra years of life. And, despite my training as a physiotherapist, I started for the first time to seriously observe how people breathed! For example, I started counting respiration rates and found that typically they were double the desirable rate. I listened to breathing – audible breathing



is another sure sign of over-breathing.

I could see there was a great need for breathing retraining and not only for asthmatics. Snorers, people with panic attacks, fatigue or poor exercise capacity also needed it. So I studied and apprenticed myself to a skilled breathing educator and then established, in Canberra, Australia's first dedicated breathing retraining centre. Over a period of 20 years I have trained more than 5,000 people with consistently good results.

Does anyone just naturally breathe correctly? And what's

wrong with bad breathing, anyway? Is it such a big deal?

Healthy babies born to healthy mothers breathe correctly. And that's about it. Lots of children and 90 per cent of adults breathe incorrectly, ranging from mild to extreme dysfunction.

Why is that?

Illness, poor posture, emotional stress, feeling overwhelmed by your circumstances, can all trigger bad breathing. There's also chemical stress because our environment and our foods are typically loaded with additives and toxins that have an inflammatory effect on the body and raise your breathing rate, without you knowing or doing anything to keep it in check. Keep up the over-breathing and you can end up with swollen tonsils and adenoids, snoring, sleep apnoea, asthma, anxiety, panic attacks and brain fog. Yes, it is a big deal! So many people are running below par because the most fundamental of all bodily

processes, their breathing, is dysfunctional. Snoring and sleep apnoea increase your risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and depression. Even sexual dysfunction.

But surely doctors know what correct breathing is?

Checking a patient's baseline breathing pattern is not part of standard medical diagnosis. It would be great if it was as common as checking their blood pressure or heart rate or blood sugar level. Until you recognise and address a habit of chronic over-breathing that is a major factor in the dehydration, inflammation and constriction seen in the nose, sinuses, throat and lungs, you're never going to truly get on top of problems like asthma, snoring and sleep apnoea. You will continue to need drugs, surgical procedures or appliances like CPAP machines to relieve the symptoms.

Isn't the breathing retraining you advocate just another alternative health idea? Is there any solid science behind it?

Breathing retraining should not be considered an alternative therapy but part of primary healthcare management for breathing disorders. It is totally science-based, grounded in well-known principles of physiology, physics and biochemistry.

Why did you write your book *Relief from Snoring and Sleep Apnoea*?

I wanted people to know the facts – and get relief. We do not have to just put up with snoring and sleep apnoea and the uncomfortable and intrusive treatments that go with them. We can simply change the way we breathe.

■ Tess Graham's workshops are from March 18 to 21 at the Purna Yoga Centre, 60 Skinners Shoot Road, Byron Bay. Details on www.BreatheAbility.com.