

THE BIG IDEAS

Oxygen

= Cell fuel.

VLC

= Vital lung capacity. How's yours?

Superman vs. Clark Kent

Check out their postures.

Your Breathing Brain

Brain eats 20% of oxygen.

Your Nose

Breathing thru it yet?

Smile

And take a nice Recovery Breath.

Breathe

The Simple, Revolutionary 14-Day Program to Improve Your Mental and Physical Health

BY BELISA VRANICH · ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN © 2016 · 240 PAGES

“What if I said I had a medicine that would keep you calm but alert? That would relax and energize you? That would help you recover, boost your immune system, lower the oxidative stress that causes aging, power you up, and fuel every cell in your body, from your frazzled brain to your taxed muscles? You’d say, ‘Give it to me,’ right? Well, here it is. And no side effects. Take it every day—doctor’s orders.

Life-changing? Yes, that’s a word I keep hearing over and over from my clients. The first time, I thought it was an exaggeration. ‘Life-changing?’ I cocked my head. ‘Yes, life-changing,’ they would insist, often after only the first session. ...

By the time you get to the end of this book you will have changed. How intense and how long-term the change will be is up to you, but I know that it will be impossible for you to read what I’m about to impart to you about breathing—in the way that I present it—and not become a healthier person. Even the teeniest change will be for the better; it will have a huge ripple effect on your mental and physical health, owing to the fact that healthy breathing is the foundation, the very cornerstone of health.”

~ Belisa Vranich from *Breathe*

Breathing.

It’s obviously important. And... I’m beginning to realize *just* how important it is. In fact, breathing properly is quickly becoming my #1 fundamental. (More on that in our first Big Idea.)

I got this book after reading Patrick McKeown’s great book [The Oxygen Advantage](#). I adopted his recommendation to start breathing exclusively through my nose. And, quite simply, my life changed. (More on that in a moment as well.)

I read another one of Patrick’s older books called [Anxiety Free](#) and I’ll be working through a bunch of titles as I get ready to teach [Optimal Breathing 101](#).

Belisa Vranich is a clinical psychologist and one of the world’s leading experts on how to breathe right. She created something she calls The Breathing Class and has been featured widely—from *Cosmo* and *HuffPo* to *Anderson Cooper 360°* and the *Today* show.

This is a quick-reading, practical little guide on how to get our breathing right. I highly recommend it. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

It’s packed with Big Ideas and I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

OXYGEN = CELL FUEL

“Oxygen is sustenance in a way that food can never be. Yes, you should eat leafy greens, organic and local, and take your vitamins . . . but the best way to take care of yourself is to deal with the most important thing first: your breathing. Everything else is secondary.”

“Your body’s main source of energy is oxygen. Period.”

~ Belisa Vranich

"Your energy level is low because you don't fuel your cells with the one thing that they need to make all those expensive organic foods and supplements digestible: oxygen. Every time you breathe, you nourish your body and brain. So why don't you feed them better?"

~ Belisa Vranich

So, breathing is obviously pretty important.

But, when I used to think of the fundamentals I would always say "Eat. Move. Sleep."

Then I added Focus.

Now... It's clear to me that *Breathe* should be at the top of the list.

BREATHE. Eat. Move. Sleep. Focus.

Remember: You can live for weeks without food and days without water but only minutes without oxygen. Something THAT fundamental is worthy of some contemplation.

As it turns out, we pretty much all breathe incorrectly. Our stress and bad posture and all that has warped the most fundamental thing we do—at huge costs to our well-being.

Belisa tells us: "How well you breathe is the best indicator of how healthy you are and how long you'll live. 'If I had to limit my advice on healthier living to just one tip,' says Dr. Andrew Weil, 'it would be simply to learn *how to breathe correctly*.'"

The opposite is true as well, and even more extreme than you may realize: 'All chronic pain, suffering, and disease are caused by a lack of oxygen at the cell level . . . Proper breathing nourishes the cells of the body with oxygen, and optimizes the functioning of the body on all levels,' states the eminent Dr. Arthur C. Guyon."

Wow.

If the renowned Dr. Andrew Weil could only share one piece of advice for healthier living it would be learning how to breathe correctly?

And Dr. Arthur Guyon is telling us that *all* (emphasis on "ALL") "*chronic pain, suffering and disease are caused by a lack of oxygen at the cell level.*"

OK. You've got my attention.

VLC = SUPER IMPORTANT METRIC ← HOW'S YOURS?

"While the VLC can give you concrete numbers, you want to 'reach for a more expansive inhale (bigger number) and a smaller exhale (smaller number). The main idea, then, is that you want your inhale to be wider and your exhale narrower. The more change you see between these two numbers, the better. Measuring yourself from time to time to see your progress will help you really integrate the idea that your middle moves when you breathe. Working on the flexibility of your rib cage and back will help this number get better as well."

VLC.

It's short for "Vital Lung Capacity."

It might be the most important metric you've never heard of.

Here's how to calculate it: Wrap a measuring tape an inch below your sternum (you know—that bony thing that connects to your rib bones). Inhale and measure. Exhale and measure. Subtract the exhale from the inhale then divide that by the exhale. The result is your VLC, as a percentage. (Calculator will be your friend.)

Short story: You want that number to be over 100.

Even shorter story: To get that number over 100 you need to breathe into your lower body.

Getting us to do that is, essentially, what the book is all about.

P.S. Before teaching us how to work out our diaphragm, Belisa tells us that there are a few different ways we can mess up our breathing.

"The most important and underappreciated muscle in your body is the diaphragm."

~ Belisa Vranich

We **should** breathe deeply and fully into our lower body (she calls it "Lower-body Breathing"). Unfortunately, many (most?) of us breathe shallowly into our upper body.

She also separates "Vertical Breathers" (whose shoulders rise and fall when they breathe) and "Horizontal Breathers" (whose shoulders stay stable while their belly and lower ribs go in and out when breathing).

Note: We want to be Horizontal Breathers. If your shoulders are rising and falling when you're breathing, drop down into your lower body.

Super-quick practical Pro tip: Practice inhaling fully into your lower body and (very importantly!) exhaling fully—squeezing every last little bit of stale air out of your body.

SUPERMAN VS. CLARK KENT (LOOK AT THEIR POSTURE)

"Despite being the same person, Superman and Clark Kent adopt very distinct postures. One posture is much like that of a guy spending way too much time in front of a computer (or in Clark's case, a typewriter): shoulders rounded, neck jutting forward. Along with the thick horned-rim glasses and the stutter, this posture portrays a man lacking in confidence. When changing to Superman, Clark removes his glasses, puffs up his chest, and narrows his gaze. ...

Now let's talk about *your* posture. You vacillate between hunched over the wheel or cell phone and a stiff 'social' pose. You know your posture is bad but probably have shied away from addressing it because you don't know where to start. Maybe if you ignore it, you hope, it will fix itself right away, right? Wrong. The bad news is that poor posture is not only affecting your skeleton, it's also impacting the most important thing you do: your breathing. The good news is that I'm going to give you the CliffsNotes for fixing your posture, or at least making it way better than it is now."

Did you imagine Clark Kent vs. Superman as you were reading that?

If not, take a moment to do so. (Please.)

See Clark all hunched over, looking goofy and timid and insecure. Then see Superman standing tall, chest up, head strong while gazing out at the world with confidence.

Now, imagine YOU in your worst Clark (/Clara) Kent posture.

Now, see yourself in your best Superman/Wonderwoman posture.

(Seriously. Try it! Which posture do you spend more time in?)

We've discussed the impact of poor posture in a number of Notes—from Amy Cuddy's [Presence](#) and Joan Vernikos's [Sitting Kills, Moving Heals](#) to Eric Goodman's [True to Form](#).

Amy Cuddy tells us that how we hold our bodies directly impacts our sense of confidence and power (and their underlying physiological biomarkers)—warning us against collapsing into ourselves lest we lose our presence and power.

We need to remember: Our posture matters. A LOT.

Get this: Belisa tells us that poor posture can affect our ability to breathe by up to 30 percent.

THIRTY PERCENT!!

(Note from Cap'n Obvious: That's a huge negative impact on **the** most fundamental human behavior.)

Belisa gives us the CliffsNotes guide on how to optimize our posture. Here's the PhilosophersNotes version:

Sit tall. Stand tall. Imagine having a book on your head. (Thank you, Joan!)

"Relearn to breathe by moving the breathing back down to the lower part of your body, where it belongs."

~ Belisa Vranich

"When you pack your knapsack or suitcase most efficiently, you use up every little nook and cranny, shifting things around to maximize space. This is what you're going to do with your lungs, which may result in your ability to access fuller lung capacity."

~ Belisa Vranich

Think: Chest up, chin down. (Thank you, Eric!)

And, perhaps my favorite tool to get your optimal posture and optimize your breathing and your mojo: Sit/stand/walk like the most powerful version of you. (Thank you, Amy!)

All day. Every day.

YOUR BREATHING BRAIN

"Twenty percent of the oxygen you breathe is used by your brain. Let that sink in for a minute. While it doesn't sprint, do CrossFit or pole-dance, that 10-pound blob in your skull *eats up 20 percent of the oxygen you breathe*. That's pretty intense, and if you don't breathe well, it will surely affect your endurance in your workouts. But it will also affect much more, er, mind-blowing things, like memory, productivity, judgment and, yes, the balance of hormones and neurotransmitters necessary for optimum mental health. ...

So, let's say this a different way: remembering your PIN, trouble-shooting, multitasking, organizing yourself, organizing others—all of these activities need oxygen, *cell fuel*, to work correctly. And vice versa. So, is your brain not working quite right? You might be low on fuel.

Yikes! Deep breath. So what do I do, doc, you ask? My answer is that you need to add a short breathing/meditation/mindfulness practice to your day."

That's from a chapter called "Your Breathing Brain."

[In prior Notes](#) (see, for example, *The Happiness Diet*) we chatted about the fact that, although your brain is only 2% of your total body weight, it consumes 20% of your caloric fuel.

Well, now we get to learn that your brain consumes 20% of the OXYGEN you breathe as well.

Think about that for a moment longer...

20% of all oxygen goes to your brain.

And then remember that Oxygen = CELL FUEL.

Conclusion: If you're not breathing properly you're simply not thinking/performing optimally. Period.

Belisa walks us through a bunch of different ways we can integrate a mindful breathing practice into our lives. She shares a few different "counting breath" practices and encourages us to integrate them into our lives.

One of the experts she talks about is Mark Divine. Mark is a former Navy SEAL Commander. He's ALL about using breath for power and calm confidence. (See Notes on [Unbeatable Mind](#) and [The Way of the SEAL](#) for more.)

One of his techniques is something called "Box Breathing" in which you inhale for a count of 5, hold for 5, exhale for 5, then hold for 5 (or 4 or 6 depending on your style). It's a powerful technique. And, fun fact: Mark was up in Ojai visiting us last month and walked Alexandra and I through a guided meditation based on that box breathing pattern. It was awesome.

My personal favorite is inhaling to six, holding for 2 and exhaling for 7+ (I've extended that to as long as I can squeeze it out as I learn more about the importance of a great exhale!).

As I've mentioned, I do that at the start of every single meditation, napitation and every night before I fall asleep. There's something magical about having a consistent breathing practice that can become an anchor for us. What's yours?

Good to know: "Whichever count makes you happy, the most important part is that the breath be Lower-body Breath, and that you focus on the exhale being *thorough and long*."

"Remember that stale air stays in your lungs unless you consciously exhale it. Just keep training yourself to blow out every last little bit."

~ Belisa Vranich

P.S. I like the unequivocal way Belisa tells us we need to make meditation a part of our lives: “If you’re trying to be healthier, wanting to live longer and better, or wanting to heal, you must have a meditation or mindfulness component on your to-do list. Period. Recent research has been confirming this conclusion with ever more evidence as chemical changes, physical brain volumes, and meticulously set physiological markers are tracked and recorded.”

If you’re still trying to figure out how to make meditation a consistent part of your life, check out [Meditation 101](#) and [these Notes](#)!

BREATHING THRU YOUR NOSE YET?

“Your body and brain react very differently to whether air comes into your body through your nose or your mouth.

As an everyday breathing style, mouth breathing (unless you’re doing these exercises or running hard) is bad. Period. Moreover, mouth breathers tend to lean forward with their head and shoulder, which can cause neck and upper thoracic structural dysfunction. Mouth breathing can also disrupt the pH balance of the blood, making it too alkaline. Alkalosis can lead to feelings of apprehension, anxiety, and chronic pain conditions.

Nose breathing, on the other hand, has its own benefits, including increases of CO₂ saturation in the blood, which creates a calming effect.”

In *The Oxygen Advantage* (and *Anxiety Free*) we talk about the power of breathing through your nose. Now, I’m always Optimizing so it’s tough to say what specific thing has the biggest impact on my well-being but I’m willing to bet (a lot!) that my decision to go all in on Patrick McKeown’s recommendation to breathe exclusively through my nose has been game-changing.

Here’s what I changed: First, Patrick is unequivocal that we should breathe through our nose. All the time. Period. Our mouth breathing disrupts (aka diminishes) the amount of oxygen that is released from our red blood cells. Breathing through your nose helps correct that.

Inspired by Patrick’s rec, one of the goofiest things I’ve ever done (and I’ve done a lot) is to start wearing a piece of tape over my mouth at night to *force* myself to breathe through my nose.

Then I started training myself to breathe through my nose every other moment of the day. Specifically, I trained myself to exercise (even at high intensity) breathing through my nose. It was incredibly unpleasant in the beginning but the idea is that by breathing properly you get the right amount of carbon dioxide in your body which triggers the optimal amount of oxygen from your hemoglobin which increases performance and recovery. I’m sold.

And... I changed my morning meditation so the first ten minutes are focused on Patrick’s recommendation of “breathing less to breathe right.”

Short story: I place a hand on my chest and the other on my belly button area. I breathe into my lower hand but try to reduce my breathing as I press gently against my belly. Briefly inhaling (less than I’d like) then exhaling completely. It’s a little weird but great.

I started practicing this several months ago. I’ve never felt more grounded and stable. I used to have a baseline of anxiety that was kind of ever-present. In high school I was so nervous I’d bring an extra t-shirt to school because I knew I’d sweat through the first one early in the day. After meditating for years I quieted my mind and body considerably but still had some of that underlying baseline stress. Then I eliminated all grains as I went from being a low-fat vegan to following a high-fat, tons of greens, lower-carb Paleo-esque approach and I dropped to a whole ‘nother level of calm.

But since I started training myself to breathe right my whole being has shifted. I feel more grounded than ever. A sort of energized tranquility.

“Take two athletes with the same amount of talent, heart, and strength. The one who’d followed a breathing-muscle workout will indubitably dominate.”

~ Belisa Vranich

“If you’re trying to be healthier, wanting to live longer and better, or wanting to heal, you must have a meditation or mindfulness component on your to-do list. Period. Recent research has been confirming this conclusion with ever more evidence as chemical changes, physical brain volumes, and meticulously set physiological markers are tracked and recorded.”

~ Belisa Vranich

Again, I'm always optimizing so I can't say for sure what % of the gains is due to optimal breathing but it's huge. Try it. (More soon in Optimal Breathing 101.)

"On the inhale, you should be thinking two things: Lower-body Breath and expand. On the exhale, think: Lower-body Breath and squeeze/contract. Remind yourself: 'Inhale . . . expand. Exhale . . . squeeze.'"

~ Belisa Vranich

BREATHE

"Maybe, just maybe, you'll assimilate this information and be inspired to help your loved ones and talk to them about their breath, their lungs, their breathing muscles. I'll finish this book the same way I bring to a close Recovery Breath/Meditation: by asking you to 'bring a small smile to your face and let it flow through your entire body. This is a smile of gratitude, giving thanks for everything that you are and everything that you have, for all the love that is around you and all the love that is within you. But most of all, giving thanks to yourself for having made the time to take care of your body, mind, and your soul.'"

Those are the final words of the book.

The "Recovery Breath" Belisa is referring to is a super cool energizing practice I've been playing with. Check out the book for more on this and a ton of other breathing exercises/workouts.

Very quick look: While lying on your back with nothing under your head, place one hand on your belly and another on your chest. Inhale fully into your belly. Then, without exhaling, take another inhale into your chest—not just moving the air but bringing more oxygen in. Basically, two inhales. Then exhale (enthusiastically!) for about the time you inhaled.

<— Five minutes a day = magic.

Now, as we wrap up this Note... Bring a small smile to your face. Let it flow through your entire body. Reflect on all that is awesome in your world. Go forth and shine! :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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you'll probably like...

[The Oxygen Advantage](#)

[Anxiety Free](#)

[Effortless Healing](#)

[Unbeatable Mind](#)

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.