

How To Breathe

**IN CONVERSATION WITH
MJ RENSHAW**

Words by Beccy Candice Clarke. Photography: Mónica Suárez de Tangil



MJ Renshaw is an energy healer, medium and breathwork facilitator living on Attiwonderonk and Mississauga Land in the Great Lakes Region of Canada. From here, she runs The Being Method, an expansive online breathwork certification course that bridges the gap between science and spirituality, and The Being Portal, a subscription-based breathwork journey with exercises for everything from improved sleep and stress reduction to trauma and emotional release. Each one, a gentle, heart-opening journey for mind, body and spirit. I talk to MJ, my personal mentor, about how she came to breathwork and the lasting impact it has had on her own life, as well as the many students she teaches.

Beccy: I would first like to hear a little bit about your own story. How did it all begin? How did you find breathwork, or did it find you?

MJ: I studied breathwork in 2013 to heal myself. I lost my older brother in

a car accident and later, my dad to suicide. I was really struggling with depression and anxiety, so I went away and I studied breathwork for two months, and it helped my life immensely. It helped me cope with my emotions and it helped me deal with fear and grief, and all the uncomfortable feelings that can arise during your twenties. Ultimately, it supported me in dealing with the harder parts of life.

B: The modern wellness industry spews out a lot of overwhelming and often conflicting information which can be difficult to apply to our own individual health journey. Breathwork feels like something which transcends this sticky territory, where one rule is so often pushed to suit all. What makes breathwork so universally beneficial?

MJ: You're right. Breathwork is universal. Everybody breathes. It's like drinking water or working on your mindset - something that can help, and is accessible to, every single person.

B: You have spoken very openly about your own personal health journey. I'd love to hear how breathwork has helped you to navigate any difficulties and how it's positively impacted your mental and physical health?

MJ: I think the biggest benefit for me, on my own health journey with breathwork, is trauma related. I have experienced many things in my life that have created a lot of anxiety and sadness, which, initially, I didn't know how to process. Breathwork has been an outlet for me to express emotions like anger, resentment, shame or fear, and work through them, instead of letting them dictate the decisions I make in life. So, now I'm able to make decisions for my business, or for myself, from a place of feeling whole and from a place of feeling worthy and from love, rather than from fear.

B: How has your relationship with breathwork changed and evolved over the years, especially now that

you are a mother with another baby on the way?

MJ: Motherhood is definitely the thing that changed my breathwork practice the most. I shifted from having an immense amount of time to do a breathwork to having none at all. But it's been really beautiful to watch my daughter mimic my breathing patterns, or to be able to co-regulate with her when she's feeling upset, simply by breathing calmly. Breathing peacefully beside someone who stressed or anxious can actually balance their nervous system, helping them calm down. So, it's an amazing tool in any relationship.

B: When I first started learning about breathwork, I was so intrigued by the fact that specific breathing patterns, and even just breathing correctly throughout the day, can have such a profound impact on the health of our organs and systems. It's so fascinating to learn how the liver is impacted by improper breathing, for example,

and that poor liver health might show up on our skin as a breakout or rash. It's not something we often take into consideration. You may be faced with a skin complaint and breathwork is likely not going to be the first remedy that will come to mind - and certainly not the first that a doctor or health professional will recommend trying. Why do you think breathwork has been a such niche practice for such a long time?

MJ: I think we tend to really underestimate the basics. It's like remembering to regularly drink enough water to stay hydrated. Breathwork is under that same umbrella. We all live under this capitalist system where we tend to reach for the most beautifully branded new product that we can buy, rather than considering how we can harness the innate healing abilities of the body and the natural world around us. We are not taught anatomy and physiology. We are not taught about the cells in our bodies and what they do on a day to day basis to support us. So there

isn't the wisdom or inclination there to lean into something like breathwork. But, I think it's becoming more mainstream now and people are definitely looking to more holistic practices that don't require buying anything.

B: Can you talk a bit about the science behind breathwork and what makes it such an incredibly powerful healing tool? What is actually going on at a cellular level when we experience stress, anxiety or trauma and how can breath help to facilitate deeper healing?

MJ: Great question. If I answered it completely, it would be a full book! So, I'll just speak to stress. When we think of stress, we tend to think of the adrenal glands first. And that's correct. The adrenal glands do create stress hormones. But something tells them to create those stress hormones and that something is our nervous system. How your nervous system is reacting to the world around you can essentially influence every single

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organ and gland in your body. It can influence the hormones they produce and it can put you into a sympathetic or parasympathetic state. We know that stress has a profound effect on our health. It's probably one of the deadliest aggressors that we face today, because we have to deal with an immense amount of stress, and we receive very minimal nervous system regulation. So, breathwork is one of those things that we can use to consciously move between the sympathetic and parasympathetic to suit our needs in any particular moment. It's one of those simple things that can help us better cope with the stresses of life.

On a cellular level, I mean, this is controversial, but there is a theory that trauma can be held, not only in the brain, but also at a cellular level. This is called, cellular memory theory. And it's thought that with breathwork, we can actually help release those memories from each cell, by releasing the emotion attached to it; by expressing and experiencing that emotion. And, that's why people have such profound breakthroughs with breathwork. Through the study of epigenetics, we now understand that we are actually able to alter the way our genes work through our behaviour and environment. So, learning to process emotions and process events that happen to us with breathwork can actually change your genetics.

B: The Being Portal offers a range of different breathwork practices

that alternate between parasympathetic and sympathetic breathing patterns. What are the benefits of each and how can we use them to our advantage?

MJ: The difference between sympathetic and parasympathetic breathwork types... I just categorise them like this: parasympathetic breathwork puts us into our rest and digest state. This is the state that our bodies will heal in. The sympathetic state is more active and alert. It's the fight or flight state - but it's so much more than this. People tend to demonise it, but it is actually very beneficial. If we didn't have it, we would never get anything done. Anything that is active, anything to do with forward movement or physical activity, that's the sympathetic state. So, if someone finds themselves feeling frozen in life, not knowing what to do, not knowing what their purpose is or where to go, sympathetic breathwork could be really helpful for them because it could help garner the energy they need to move forward and get things done.

B: What impact can breath have on our nervous system? How does this differ on an individual basis? Some people will react very strongly to a simple breathwork practice, crying and shaking - a real physical release - while others may experience something more subtle. What makes our reactions so different?

MJ: Nervous system regulation influences everything. We have a central

nervous system and a peripheral nervous system and the peripheral nervous system sits outside the brain and the spinal cord. How your brain processes your external world can affect every decision you make in life, from the kind of partner or job you choose to what you do on a day to day basis. If you are someone who experienced neglect as a kid, and you don't go through the process of healing what that's done to your nervous system, you could potentially end up in a relationship where you are neglected by your partner, because that's what you know and you've gone with that 'comfort'. Beyond that, you may neglect your own needs. You may forget to eat regularly. Maybe you don't take care of yourself in the way that you'd like to. Maybe you neglect to follow your dreams and live the life you really aspire to. It's important to learn how to regulate your nervous system so that you can design your life from a place of calm and intention, rather than repeating ingrained patterns from the past.

Different people have different responses to breathwork. The brain will release what it needs to release at any point in time. There is no wrong or right response, and the person who is crying is not getting any more of a big release than the person who's not. Crying does help us release hormones like cortisol or oxytocin, but beyond that, you could have a breathwork practice where you think nothing has happened, but it could profoundly change your life. I always

say to people, don't hang your hat on the emotional release that you have. It doesn't mean much. I'm not personally someone who is very emotional. I don't emote in front of people very often, but breathwork has still helped me immensely.

B: During my late twenties, during a period of intense stress, I started experiencing a bout of dizzy spells where I would have to take myself to bed and lie down for hours, sometimes even days, until the feelings passed. It wasn't until some time later that I realised that, during these episodes, I was holding my breath and breathing in a really shallow, dysregulated way. What causes someone to start breathing incorrectly and why are the effects felt so strongly?

MJ: You answered this in the question! Hyperventilation is something that happens when we are overwhelmed by stress. This is something that happens with a panic attack, but someone can have chronic hyperventilation and it doesn't look quite the same. You would not really notice if someone was chronically hyperventilating. It can go on for long periods of time and the trigger to this is usually stress - but it can be any kind of stress. It could be the stress of eating something that you have a sensitivity to, to working on a computer for long hours, or being under fluorescent lights. There are a lot of things that can cause chronic hyperventilation and a lot of people do it. I think it's

estimated that around 60% of people suffer from it. And it can lead, as you say, to feeling light-headed.

B: Why do some of us breath through our noses and some of us through our mouths, and what are some of the issues with this? What is happening on a physiological level when we breath through our mouths?

MJ: There are two factors that have a massive impact on whether someone will breathe through their nose or their mouth. The first is breastfeeding, and this isn't to shame anyone who does formula feeding, but breastfeeding does play a huge role in determining whether a kid will breathe through their nose or mouth. The second is the food you ate as a kid and whether that food caused any inflammation in your nasal passageways. If a kid is sensitive, dairy might clog their nose at night causing them to mouth breathe. This can obviously extend into adulthood too. But, there are a variety of different reasons someone can breathe through their mouth.

Breathing through the mouth - again, if I were to answer this completely, it would be a full book - but I think the biggest thing it effects is our immune system. Our mouth is not built to take in bacteria, viruses and pathogens through the air and filter them, so they go straight into the body. Breathing through your mouth also dehydrates you, which can obviously lead to a lot of problems. Going back to the nervous system, mouth

breathing puts you into a sympathetic state, so a lot of people who are mouth breathers suffer from anxiety. It can affect your oral health too, and we know that poor oral health is linked to things like heart disease and Alzheimer's.

Mouth breathing can even affect the structure of your face. This is aesthetic on one level, but on another, the structure and functioning of your jaw can determine your posture. Incorrect posture can lead to the compression of our organs. If you mouth breathe and you tend to hunch over, this could compress your thyroid, which could lead to thyroid issues. So the benefits of breathing through the mouth are null, but the benefits of breathing through your nose are basically endless. We are simply not designed to breathe through our mouths, so doing so for long periods will eventually lead to some issues.

B: How can we all start breathing a little better?

MJ: The best way to start breathing better is just to bring a greater awareness to how you breathe. Become aware of how it feels in your body to take different types of breath, start taking big, deep breaths throughout the day and focus on breathing through your nose. That would be my prescription for everybody.

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