

What about breathing and better sleep can change the World?

By Aric Spencer, LMP, Certified Soma Structural Integrator

What is the greatest obstacle to quality of life? Is it greed? Competition? The ever-elusive present moment? I feel that gravity is the greatest obstacle to life because gravity can quickly erode the most valuable human expression: Mobility. Without mobility, life just quits.

Watching the agile among us—children, athletes, dancers—their freedom and trust to self-express through movement is exemplary of a quality, joyful life. Perhaps movement is the most potent vehicle in human expression.

In my opinion, of all the valuable movements we create—building community, teaching, making mistakes—what tops the list is respiration. The diaphragm contracts, pooching-out the belly. The ribs expand in all six directions. The lungs tank-up with precious chi energy and the liquid-tissue cocktail of chi-rich blood journeys to all the energy-hungry mouths within us, giving us the vitality to pour even more of ourselves into creative self-expression. A pretty cool movement, perhaps the quintessential self-expressive movement that says, “I want to do this thing called life.”

So, how can gravity erode self-expressive mobility and “breath-ability”? And just how is mobility related to sleeping?

To live upright is virtually effortless. Balancing within the force of gravity, muscles remain relaxed, skilled ambassadors of expression, bones successfully support weight, and joints are open. Living upright lets us BREATHE, MOVE, DANCE and WALK effortlessly, like the intelligent bags of sea water that we are.

However, it is literally a pain in the neck to live slumped, tilted, and twisted. Muscles remain tight, shoddy ambassadors of expression, bone unsuccessfully supports weight, and joints torque into compression. We breath, move, dance and walk effortfully, as our muscles are preoccupied with counteracting gravity. This is bad, bad for mobility, bad for breath-ability.

Injuries, illness, emotional stresses, physical conditioning/patterning, birth trauma, low oxygen blood, poor diet/acidic diet and poor body awareness/attitudes can all traumatize and damage healthy myofascial arrangement, pulling joints out of balance placing the “fidgety monkey” of gravity squarely on painful back and shoulders.

We do not commonly think of breathing as being affected or ruled by the same laws of gravity that give us back, shoulder and neck pain, but for every extra ounce of “monkey” endured, the specific movements involved in breathing suffer.

With my clients, I observe that ridged abdominals stop diaphragm contraction; this results in a pattern of breathing, called vertical or chest breathing, where the clavicles and upper ribs are elevating. This pattern can severely distort the cervical spine and draw the head forward and into extension, resulting in painful overuse of back muscles, further restricting rib expansion and breath-ability. These are the symptoms, in my opinion, that can lead to a major breakdown of the

nocturnal breath machine.

Clients showing symptoms of sleep apnea show evidence of loss of tissue function in these specific areas of breath mechanics:

1. The supra and infra hyoid muscles located above and below the adam's apple
2. Elevators of the mandible
3. The tongue
4. Nasal meatuses
5. Cervical spine muscles
6. Clients have tightly wrapped thoraxes and abdomens, and poor "piston-strokes" of the diaphragm.

Obstructive sleep apnea makes 30 million Americans depressed, irritable, foggy-brained, and drowsy. Serious problems can arise from full-blown sleep deprivation and even mild losses of rejuvenating sleep. I have not seen sleep apnea researched in terms of whole-body mobility and optimal breath-ability, by mainstream western medicine.

What I know about sleep apnea sometimes keeps me awake at night.

Optimal expansion of the thorax requires optimal range of motion of the joints throughout the body. From buoyant foot arches and relaxed knees, to fully operational hip sockets and articulate spine to floating rib cage and open shoulders, the whole-body-party of movement feeds the vital act of respiration—our deepest expression suffers.

Over the past six years my focus with clients as a certified SOMA structural integrator has been to **create better posture through manual manipulation and neuromuscular reeducation of myofascia**. Using sequential soft tissue manipulation I ease compressed joints and tense muscles, and create proper skeletal suspension— enhancing mobility for optimal breath-ability.

I offer these simple insights into body and breath mechanics in hopes of illustrating the value of having rapport with the reality of gravity. Through my SOMA practice I work to improve self-expression and self-expansion through whole-body mobility. Natural breathing gives birth to many a good night sleep, and to the vitality to pour even more of ourselves into self-expressive mobility. I have seen bodywork, yoga, stretching, walking, body/mind awareness, movement patterning, stress management, breath classes and trainings, ergonomic office amendments and just simple good food and water improve breath-ability. **If you feel like your body could use a breath, its easy, just start anywhere.**

I truly understand how plugging into gravity's effects on mobility and breath-ability can change a life's expression to the fullest. Your instrument for getting your inside out can change the World, as easily as it can change your world.

Published in Earth Dance Press's Wellness Directory of the West
Sound & Olympic Peninsula, Spring 2005