

Breathing Exercises

Two I like to use.

Do each twice in the morning and twice in the evening - should take no more than 5-10 minutes.

1. Candle: Hold your finger about a foot in front of you. Imagine that it is a candle flame. Take a deep breath and blow a focused breath that would bend the candle flame. If it isn't focused, the candle flame flickers. Do this until you completely run out of air. Repeat exercise. Time yourself to see progress over time.

Aside: You may hear references to breathing through a straw. This is bad. Demonstrate for yourself. Blow through a straw and blow a candle. Which is more relaxed and creates less tension? You want to keep the vocal mechanism free of strain and muscle.

2. Speed Talking: Pick a magazine article. Take a deep breath. Speak the article as fast as you can at a medium loud voice until you are completely out of air (gasping). Repeat exercise. You will note that as the days go on, you are able to go farther in the article. So, every four days, change the article you use.

Breathing:

The proper way to breathe is what you do naturally. Unfortunately, when we try to increase our capacity, we breathe wrong and create bad habits. Lie flat on the floor or on the bed and relax. Allow yourself to relax and notice how your body breathes naturally. Three things happen.

1. The lungs are located in the back third of your torso, protected by the ribcage. You should feel the ribcage in your back slightly expand (feel friction between your back and the floor). This is the first thing - the ribs move out of the way.

2. Next, the chest will elevate slightly. This happens naturally. You can aid the process by keeping your chest high and not allowing it to sag. By keeping it high, the lungs fill easier.

3. Lastly, the diaphragm lowers. You do not have to put pressure on it to lower. It does it automatically (an involuntary action). It is a muscle attached to the bottom of the lungs.

Once you have breathed in, then you use the diaphragm to push the air out - you can use it to regulate how much goes out.

Another item on breathing is that the shoulders do not move. Notice when you are lying down, your shoulders don't move and don't assist in getting in more air. If you watch yourself when you breathe and your shoulders rise and fall, you are breathing shallow.

If all of the above is too technical, then try these (more visual and physical imagery).

1. Hold an imaginary bellows (the thing that stokes a fire - blows a stream of air). When you open it up, breathe in deeply. When you push the air out of the bellows, push out deeply.
2. Imagine what it would be like to breathe through your feet. Then breathe in. You'll find you get very low breaths without tension in the neck and jaw.

The key to everything is to breathe without tension from the shoulders up. I have been experimenting with three things over the past couple of years to help me sing with less tension, and ultimately, more breath and tone.

1. The tip-top back of the head that goes bald on some of us. Keep that as tall as possible. Don't allow that to ever sink. People will talk about being a puppet on a string, with the string coming out the top of the head. Same thing. It aligns your posture and keeps the vocal tract in its most open position.
2. Keeping the tongue relaxed. As you vocalize, be aware of the part of the tongue as it goes from the mouth down into the throat (where it bends). Keep that free of tension. I like to let it swell up, or get "fat". I have discovered in my own voice a lot better tone quality when I do that, and the principal reason is a better use of my breath.
3. Making sure my "radar detector" doesn't go off. There is a physical spot in the back of the head called "AOJ" (axial occipital joint (something like that)) just above the neck. You can find it by creating a great deal of tension in your lips and then relax. Do the same thing with your jaw and then relax. Then with your neck muscles and relax. Then with your shoulders and relax. Let your jaw go up or down from your "puppet" state (see #1) and then return it. In the ideal singing state, there is no tension here. When you add tension from the shoulders up, the radar detector goes off and creates a knot back there. Monitor yourself as you sing. When does it go off? When you feel it go off, make it go away and see what happens to your tone through those passages.