

Conscious Breathing

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SOMATIC IFS

TOOL #2

The Somatic IFS tool that rests upon base of the pyramid (Somatic Awareness), is Conscious Breathing. With Somatic Awareness, we uncover and develop our innate capacity to be aware of our bodies. We apply this awareness to our breathing. The act of breathing is largely outside our awareness. Bringing consciousness to it is a simple yet radically effective act. Breathing air into our bodies awakens, nourishes, energizes, and creates more spaciousness and calm. Conscious Breathing, resting on the earthy foundation, provides an airy cushion for the tools of resonance, movement, and touch, which lead to the state of Embodied Self.

Try it now. Just simply notice that you are breathing for several breaths. Does anything change for you in your body or mind? You might want to try to notice your breathing as you continue to read.

The connection between breath and Self/Spirit/Soul is evidenced in many cultures and is reflected in their languages. The Latin *spirare* is the root for both “spirit” and “respiration in our language.” The Hebrew and Sanskrit words for breath are synonymous with Spirit. The Greek *psyche* means “breath” and “soul.”

Although technically the lungs occupy a limited space in the body, the breath as prana, as Self Energy, is not limited. Prana is a central concept in Vedantic philosophy, referring to a vital life force comparable to the Chinese notion of Qi. Prana enters the body through the breath and travels to every part of the

body, connecting them with this life force.

Awareness of the breath is at the heart of most contemplative practices. It has been said that the Buddha disappeared for a month while he was teaching in northern India. Upon his return, his students discovered that he had been on retreat, practicing *Anapanasati* (the “full awareness of breathing”). They were perplexed. Why would he spend time in retreat

with such a basic practice when he was already enlightened, they asked. He replied very simply: “Because it is a wonderful way to live.”

For me, it’s easier to notice my breath when I have nothing else going on, but it can be challenging to sustain this full awareness of breath—mine and my

clients’—while sitting in my therapist chair. But as I cultivate this tool, I have found that it is a wonderful way to do IFS as well as a wonderful way to live. My breath is always available to me.

Conscious Breathing in Somatic IFS doesn’t typically involve particular breathing techniques. However, there are many wonderful breathing techniques from Pranayama Yoga and other Eastern practices. These techniques can influence the sympathetic nervous system to help with regulation of parts-mediated body processes (blood pressure, heart rate, circulation, digestion) and to change subtle energies within the body for health and well-being. These specific breathing techniques also can be useful for unburdening and unblending as well as for



accessing Self energy.

The tool of Conscious Breathing reveals the parts and their burdens that affect the mechanism of breathing, and brings Self energy to the parts as they inhabit and use our bodies. Conscious Breathing is useful in every step of the IFS therapy process. I will share some ways I use this tool at the beginning of a session, when working with protectors, exiles, unblending, and polarizations, working with trauma, and the therapeutic relationship.

Are you still aware of your breath?

Beginning a Session

I like to begin by tuning in to my breath. Conscious breathing helps me monitor and regulate my own nervous system and somatic experience and anchor this experience in Self energy. I notice the breathing patterns in my client. I might invite the client to focus on his or her breathing.

To do insight work in IFS, the client needs to be able to go inside. Sometimes they need guidance to do this. Awareness of breath helps the client to turn inward—to slow down, to make space to notice what’s happening inside. Breath is the bridge that carries our clients as they transition from the outer world of activity and things to their inner world of sensation and feeling.

Shunryu Suzuki, in *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind*, described breath as a swinging door:

When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. . . . When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing; no “I,” no world, no mind nor body; just a swinging door.

Not being enlightened, I still differentiate inner and outer worlds. So when we explore our inner worlds with an abundance of Self energy, information

is revealed to us about these inner systems just by noticing our habitual breathing patterns. When Self energy flows on the breath connecting inner worlds and outer worlds, it is contagious.

Working with the Protective System

Manager parts have learned to control feelings by tightening the muscles and fascia. The respiratory muscles of the torso and diaphragm are one of their favorite sites for holding in strong feelings. Once an effective and necessary strategy, the breathing pattern may become chronically restricted, shallow, and rapid. The person has limited access to their emotions and their aliveness, and their physical health is affected. Awareness is the first step to shifting this pattern. Once the muscles finally let go and allow a full breath, the frozen feelings melt and turn to tears.

Our protective system skillfully and diligently uses any part of the body to do its job. I invite my clients to channel their breath to these restricted and armored places. I will say to a client, “Breathe into this tightness (pain, block, numbness, and so on). Let your breath explore the area of tightness, as if it is saying a gentle ‘hello.’ Notice if this tightness feels You present in your breath.”

Working with Exiles

As the protector’s body armoring begins to melt in response to Self energy through the breath, the feelings, sensations, beliefs, and stories of the ones they have been protecting may spontaneously emerge. We focus on the physical sensations of these exiles with the inbreath, and we send the young parts the qualities they are needing (reassurance, acceptance, presence) on the outbreath.

The core beliefs of the exiles can be revealed in habitual breathing patterns. The beliefs that we are not worthy or loved can be reflected in shallow breaths in the top lobes of the lungs. The client can experience

this somatic story of the exile and then experiment with breathing deeply Self qualities of spaciousness and compassion into those restricted areas. Painful emotions and memories may flow as the exile feels connected to this life force. The burdens can be released on the outbreath with sighing and other sounds, and new qualities can enter on the inbreath. Reinstatement of a normal breathing pattern follows.

Unblending

When Self energy in our clients (or in us therapists) is obscured by blended parts, the process of IFS Therapy can be slow going. Conscious Breathing can be a helpful tool when highly verbal, overanalyzing, storytelling protectors don't trust Self, or when exiles flood the system with their emotions. I bring awareness to the blended situation and suggest to my clients that they momentarily shift their attention to their breath. I invite them to be curious about their breathing. They may laugh and say they were barely breathing. I direct them to focus on the sensations of the inhale and exhale through the nostrils and the movements or restrictions in the torso for several breaths. Depending on the part that has been blended, I may suggest an appropriate breathing technique to bring more Self energy to the part. Once the client feels calmer and more centered, we can proceed to develop a relationship between the previously blended part and their Self.

Polarizations

Breathing patterns, as a rhythmic process of expansion and contraction, are often the place where our polarized parts come to play. Existential issues of life and death are reflected in this core process. Bringing full awareness to the entire process of

breathing in and breathing out with exquisite awareness holds the polarization in a place of curiosity and openness where it can be explored.

The polarization may show up somatically with left-right, top-bottom, or front-back splits. The client can breathe into one side of the body and then the other to both parts of the polarization to feel connected to Self energy so the system can move toward depolarization.

Working with Trauma

Physiological reactions to trauma (flight, fight, freezing responses) affect the musculature that controls the breathing patterns. Traumatized parts are frozen in these muscles. Bringing awareness to the pace or quality of the breath can regulate the autonomic nervous system and is effective in navigating the cycling of hyper- and hypo-arousal. With a few full breaths, the client has more access to Self energy and can possibly avoid the blending and dissociation that often accompanies processing traumatic memories.

Therapeutic Relationship

Within the therapeutic dyad, I find that my breath can be affected by my clients—becoming more rapid or shallow, for example. Noticing this, I intentionally shift my breath—breathing deeply into my sides and back, and resting at the end of each exhale—and I soon feel more centered and grounded. My breathing pattern may in turn affect my client's, resulting in a shift in my client toward more Self energy.

Sometimes I intentionally synchronize my breath with my clients' for a few breaths. It helps me to attune to the feeling state that my client may only be expressing nonverbally.

Let's all continue to experience awareness of our breathing—a wonderful way to live!