BREATHWORK

The following 12-session online workshop integrates breathwork techniques into a therapeutic framework to help reduce stress, process trauma, manage symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve attention in those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), support individuals on the autism spectrum, and address other mental health conditions. It is designed in a trauma-informed, person-centered manner, with an emphasis on the social and communal dimensions of healing that characterize a more liberal and progressive perspective.

Each session offers both theoretical and experiential components, guiding participants through various breathing exercises and exploring the role of the vagus nerve, polyvagal theory, and the value of communal support in achieving mental and emotional well-being. The goal is to build a sense of empowerment and collective resilience by highlighting how these techniques can be practiced, adapted, and shared within diverse communities.

Session One – Introduction to Breathwork, Mind-Body Connection, and Polyvagal Basics

This initial session introduces participants to the role breathwork can play in regulating both body and mind. The facilitator begins by defining breathwork as a set of intentional breathing practices aimed at influencing physiological and psychological states. The group discusses how breath serves as a communication channel between the autonomic nervous system and conscious awareness. A particular emphasis is placed on polyvagal theory, as described by Stephen W. Porges, which explains how the vagus nerve helps regulate emotional responses, social engagement, and stress. Polyvagal theory identifies three primary nervous system states: the ventral vagal (social engagement and safety), the sympathetic (fight-or-flight), and the dorsal vagal (shutdown or freeze).

Participants learn that deliberate, controlled breathing can stimulate the ventral vagal complex, encouraging a calm and open state that improves social connection and emotional regulation. The group then practices a short guided diaphragmatic breathing exercise, where participants place one hand on their belly to feel each inhale expand the abdomen, and each exhale gently contract it. This exercise helps them notice changes in physical tension and mood. They are encouraged to practice three to five minutes of diaphragmatic breathing daily and note any shifts in emotion or bodily sensations, understanding that consistent practice can gradually enhance vagal tone and foster greater feelings of safety.

Session Two – Stress, Trauma, and Vagus Nerve Activation

Session two examines how chronic stress, unresolved trauma, depression, anxiety, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorder can all involve dysregulation in the autonomic nervous system. The facilitator explains that the vagus nerve, a key component of this system, provides a two-way communication loop between the brain and internal organs. The parasympathetic branch, when

activated, supports rest, digestion, and restoration. However, for individuals with trauma histories or heightened sensitivities, the body can remain locked in a sympathetic state of fight-or-flight or a dorsal vagal state of shutdown.

The group explores how controlled breathing can stimulate the ventral vagus branch, leading to a calmer state. For instance, “Box Breathing” is introduced as a simple yet powerful method: inhale for a count of four, hold for four, exhale for four, and hold for four. Participants discuss how the mind and body respond to this structured pattern. The facilitator emphasizes that if anyone feels uncomfortable or triggered, they can pause, open their eyes (if they are closed), or switch to a simpler breathing style. This mindful respect for personal limits is part of a trauma-informed approach, ensuring that everyone exercises choice as they learn new techniques. By session’s end, participants understand how breathing can help “tone” their vagus nerve, offering immediate relief from stress and contributing to long-term improvements in emotional well-being.

Session Three – Emotion Regulation and the Social Engagement System

Session three highlights how breathwork can help regulate emotions and support healthy social engagement. Building on polyvagal theory, the facilitator describes that when an individual shifts toward the ventral vagal state, they become more receptive, socially attuned, and capable of processing emotions without feeling overwhelmed. Emotions like anger, sadness, and anxiety are connected to breath patterns—fast, shallow breaths often correlate with anxiety, while slower, labored breaths can align with heavier moods.

The group practices an extended exhalation technique, in which the out-breath is slightly longer than the in-breath (for example, inhaling to a count of four and exhaling to a count of six). This approach helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, nudging participants toward a calmer ventral vagal state. The facilitator explains that, with repetition, individuals can begin to use these techniques preemptively, reducing the likelihood of emotional overwhelm. Participants reflect on how the sense of safety cultivated by such exercises can enhance not only personal well-being but also how they relate to others, particularly in settings that might trigger social anxiety or emotional reactivity.

Session Four – Grounding and Sensory Awareness: Expanding the Window of Tolerance

The fourth session deepens the focus on grounding techniques, especially for those experiencing symptoms of dissociation, sensory overload, or attention difficulties. The “5-4-3-2-1” grounding method is introduced, combined with gentle, steady breathing. Participants identify five things they can see, four they can touch, three they can hear, two they can smell, and one they can taste or recall tasting. By pairing this sensory check-in with controlled breathing, individuals learn to anchor themselves in the present moment.

This grounding strategy is particularly beneficial for trauma survivors who feel detached from their surroundings and for individuals with ADHD or ASD who can become overwhelmed by environmental stimuli. The facilitator links these exercises to polyvagal theory, noting that a ventral

vagal state is more easily accessed when the body perceives safety. By regulating breath and maintaining a mindful awareness of one's senses, it becomes possible to expand the "window of tolerance"—the emotional range in which an individual can operate without dysregulation. Participants are encouraged to personalize their grounding strategies, adjusting for their unique sensory preferences or aversions, fostering an inclusive and empathetic group environment.

Session Five – Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) and Vagal Toning

Session five incorporates Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), which can further help individuals attune to stress patterns stored in the body. Participants systematically tense and relax different muscle groups, coordinating each action with intentional breathing. For instance, they might inhale as they tense their feet and exhale as they relax them, gradually moving upward through the body. By pairing slow inhalations with deliberate muscle contractions, participants become more aware of physical tension and learn to release it.

This deeper bodily awareness can help strengthen the vagal tone—the capacity of the vagus nerve to respond flexibly to stress and restore calm. Clients with ADHD or ASD benefit from the sequence and focus required in PMR, while individuals dealing with anxiety or trauma can use it to gently reconnect with the physical self, often a challenging step if one has learned to tune out bodily signals due to traumatic experiences. As the session wraps up, the group discusses how to integrate PMR into daily routines, emphasizing gradual progress and self-compassion. The collective support in the group helps normalize the idea that healing involves ongoing practice and communal encouragement.

Session Six – Mindful Observation of Thought Patterns and Polyvagal Engagement

Session six centers on the power of breathwork to aid in distancing from distressing thought patterns and negative self-talk, particularly relevant for those dealing with depression, anxiety, or PTSD flashbacks. Building upon prior sessions, the facilitator leads participants into a mindful breathing exercise, instructing them to notice thoughts as they arise and to label them as "thought," "emotion," or "memory" before gently returning focus to the breath.

This mindful detachment, sometimes called "cognitive distancing," can reduce rumination and catastrophic thinking. The session highlights how a regulated breath fosters a ventral vagal state, making it easier to observe thoughts without being overwhelmed. The facilitator reassures the group that the purpose is not to suppress or judge mental content but to cultivate a kind, curious stance toward one's inner experiences. This supportive approach can be especially helpful for individuals whose background includes trauma or chronic negative self-perception. The session closes with a reflection on how breath-centered mindfulness can become a daily tool for redirecting attention and promoting a healthier emotional landscape.

Session Seven – Coherence Breathing for Heart Rate Variability and Vagal Tone

Session seven introduces Coherence Breathing, a method designed to optimize heart rate variability (HRV) and improve vagal tone by synchronizing the respiratory rate and heart rhythms. Often, coherence breathing involves a rate of about five or six breaths per minute, typically inhaling for five or six seconds and exhaling for five or six seconds. This practice helps stabilize the autonomic nervous system, keeping the individual within a comfortable window of physiological resilience.

The facilitator explains that heart rate variability, a measure of the variation in time between heartbeats, can be a strong indicator of overall wellness. Greater HRV is often linked to better emotional regulation and adaptability. Clients with trauma histories, ADHD, ASD, anxiety, or depression may find Coherence Breathing especially beneficial because it can be a simple, structured practice that yields immediate, calming results. The group engages in several rounds of guided coherence breathing, noting how they feel at the end. This exercise underscores the workshop's consistent theme: breath-based strategies can reliably shift the body toward a more balanced state, promoting clarity, compassion, and social engagement.

Session Eight – Calming Techniques for Restlessness and Hyperactivity: 4-7-8 and Beyond

Session eight delves further into strategies for restlessness and hyperactivity, issues common in ADHD and anxiety-prone individuals. The 4-7-8 breathing method is taught: inhaling through the nose to a count of four, holding for seven, and exhaling slowly through the mouth for eight. This approach, popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil, prolongs the exhalation to encourage a deeper parasympathetic response, often resulting in a notable state of calm.

The facilitator addresses the neurodevelopmental roots of ADHD and the sensory processing challenges in ASD, underscoring that neither is "cured" by breathwork. Rather, these techniques help manage attention and emotional regulation by giving participants concrete tools to modulate their internal states. The sense of personal control gained from breathwork can be transformative, especially in moments that might otherwise spiral into overwhelm or impulsivity. Each participant is invited to share experiences of using these practices in real-time, such as before a stressful work meeting or while studying for an exam, demonstrating how breathwork can be seamlessly incorporated into daily life.

Session Nine – Sensory Modifications and Trauma Sensitivity

Session nine explicitly addresses how breathwork can be adapted to respect diverse sensory preferences. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder, PTSD, or even severe anxiety may find certain breathing techniques or bodily sensations overwhelming. The workshop underscores that personal boundaries and comfort should guide all practices. Some may prefer to keep their eyes open, add soothing background music, use gentle aromatherapy, or hold a grounding object while they practice. Others might avoid these stimuli to minimize overload.

Participants come to understand that maintaining a ventral vagal state often relies on feeling safe on both a physiological and psychological level. Thus, customizing the breathwork environment can

play a significant role in sustaining comfort. The group is reminded of the importance of a trauma-informed stance: encouraging client choice, pacing, and the freedom to pause or adapt as needed. This inclusive mindset helps ensure that breathwork remains a source of empowerment, rather than another potential trigger, for all participants.

Session Ten – Trauma-Sensitive Breathwork: Approaching Challenging Memories

By session ten, participants have practiced multiple breathwork methods and gained a stronger grasp of how to shift themselves into calmer states. This session addresses trauma-sensitive breathwork in more depth, focusing on how to gently approach, rather than avoid, difficult emotions or memories. The facilitator explains that traumatic memories can become “stuck” in the body, influencing our autonomic states. Through slow, steady breathing and affirmations of safety, individuals can practice confronting emotional triggers with a sense of agency.

Throughout the exercise, the facilitator underscores that participants remain in full control. If distress rises, they can return to simpler grounding practices such as the 5-4-3-2-1 method or any technique learned earlier. This approach respects that each person’s healing trajectory is unique and that pacing must be self-determined. Drawing again on the logic of polyvagal theory, the workshop highlights that consistent ventral vagal activation can help dismantle the physiological underpinnings of trauma, enabling participants to feel less trapped by their past and more anchored in the present.

Session Eleven – Connecting with Others: The Role of Breath in Interpersonal Dynamics

Session eleven shifts the spotlight to social engagement and community building. Polyvagal theory emphasizes that humans are inherently social creatures; when individuals feel regulated and safe, their capacity for empathy, relationship-building, and collective resilience grows. The facilitator discusses how breath patterns influence interpersonal communication, with steady, calm breaths often correlating to calmer, more receptive social interactions.

A guided partner exercise is adapted for the online setting, in which participants pair up to practice synchronous breathing. Even in a virtual group, noticing someone else’s breathing rhythm—inhale to inhale, exhale to exhale—can foster a surprisingly strong sense of connection. Participants also explore how these practices can extend to family members, friends, or colleagues, potentially improving conflict resolution and fostering a supportive environment for continued healing. The session ends with a reflection on the ethical and communal aspect of mental health, emphasizing that by creating calmer, more empathetic interactions, individuals collectively contribute to a more just, caring society.

Session Twelve – Integration, Maintenance, and Collective Future

The final session celebrates the progress made and provides a roadmap for ongoing practice. Participants reflect on how their relationship to breath and body has evolved, acknowledging that

real change takes time, community support, and an element of social justice that ensures access to mental health resources for all. The group revisits key techniques—diaphragmatic breathing, Box Breathing, extended exhalation, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Mindful Observation, Coherence Breathing, 4-7-8, and trauma-sensitive adaptations—tying them together under the overarching framework of polyvagal theory and vagus nerve activation.

The facilitator encourages participants to integrate breathwork into daily routines, using it not just as a response to stress but as a preventative measure to maintain emotional balance. They also discuss potential next steps, such as continuing with advanced breathwork programs, seeking individual therapy that incorporates these techniques, or advocating for expanded mental health services in their communities. The group concludes with a collective breathing exercise, symbolizing unity, shared responsibility, and hope for an emotionally healthier world.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

This 12-session breathwork program underscores that deliberate, structured breathing can be a powerful catalyst for healing a variety of mental health conditions. By weaving in the concepts of polyvagal theory and vagus nerve activation, the workshop offers participants a framework for understanding why and how these practices are so effective in promoting emotional regulation and social engagement. The sessions reflect a trauma-informed, socially conscious ethos, recognizing that each participant's journey will be shaped by personal experiences and the broader social context. Above all, the workshop aims to nurture a sense of solidarity, both within the group itself and in the larger community. Through consistent, compassionate practice, individuals can reclaim agency over their bodies and minds, mitigating the effects of stress, trauma, and dysregulation. The ultimate goal is to foster a collective culture of empathy and mutual support, strengthening not only individuals but entire communities.

References

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By combining these references with compassionate facilitation and a commitment to social equity, this breathwork workshop can serve as a vital resource in a larger, progressive mental health care strategy. The recognition that each person's body, mind, and community are deeply interconnected informs every session, paving the way for a holistic and transformative healing experience.