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June 6, 2004

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We do it without even thinking, but breathing well can turn our lives around, says Bronwyn McNulty.

When Ivan Brownrigg lost his 17-year-old daughter, Amy, in a car accident three years ago, he didn't know what to do with himself.

"I wasn't great at crying," says Ivan, 52, a Disaster Recovery Consultant from McMahons Point, Sydney. "I had a dark feeling of emptiness inside that I couldn't shift."

A counsellor suggested Ivan look at attending therapy sessions, but Ivan wasn't keen. He turned to his doctor, who prescribed anti-depressants. Ivan knew they would probably help dull the pain in the short term, but he felt simply taking a pill would only mask his feelings, rather than actually help resolve them.

"I never took the pills because I got all the wrong feelings when they started talking about medication," he says.

Then a friend suggested he try a simple breathing technique called Sudarshan Kriya (SKY), which is based on the ancient Indian practice of yoga.

"I was aware almost immediately that something had changed," says Ivan. "I'd had an argument with Amy before she died, but when I did the breathing I felt a complete sense of forgiveness on her behalf. I didn't need to feel upset that the last time we'd met I had been angry. All I felt was love and warmth. I think that unresolved argument was part of why I was feeling so bad."



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banishing depression

"The more I did SKY, the more the depression lifted. Within a month, after practising every day for 20 to 30 minutes, I started to notice that all areas of my life seemed to be less stressful and more enjoyable than before," Ivan continues.

While Amy's death was still bitterly hard to bear, practising SKY made Ivan feel he could carry on.

"It changed my thoughts about Amy's death in the sense the heavy feeling lifted, and I felt I could get in touch with her more - but not in a sad way. I got a sense of who she was, but differently than when she was alive. She seemed to be such an incredible being and I was so glad to have known her." It's an incredible result given that SKY is little more than breathing in and out. That's right, this amazing new therapy is simply a specific sequence of breathing patterns separated by brief periods of normal breathing. Because breathing is closely linked to the emotions, focusing on the breath can alter your emotional state. For example, when you're feeling unhappy you'll often breathe more slowly and end the occasional breath in a long sigh. Using SKY's breathing sequence you can trigger a sense of calm, creating a balance between mind, body and spirit, releasing negative emotions and rejuvenating the body.

Sudarshan Kriya practice has three different breathing cycles. The first is slow with seven to eight breaths, the second is medium speed with 15 breaths and the third is fast with 30 breaths. These cycles are then interspersed with normal breathing.

totally natural therapy

And it's not just anecdotal evidence from practitioners like Ivan who swear by the benefits of SKY. Clinical trials show it to be as effective for some people as electroconvulsive therapy. Other studies have found that it has some remarkable therapeutic benefits, including increasing lung capacity and reducing the blood plasma levels of the stress hormone cortisol. It also helps maintain good sleep patterns. Numerous medical studies have also shown that just 20 minutes of SKY breathing per day can alleviate the symptoms of depression.

Professor Marc Cohen, a graduate of western medicine and head of the school of complementary medicine at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, says those who use SKY also display positive changes in the brain. "A study comparing it with other depression treatments such as the drug Imipramine showed that SKY had a similar effect," he says. "Unlike medication there are no side effects and the patient has more control over their own health."

The benefits are not just for those with depression. SKY can help healthy people to feel relaxed, focussed and invigorated. "And you don't need any equipment," says Professor Cohen. "Anyone can use this technique. "

the hard facts:
depression

- According to the World Health Organisation, by 2020 depression will be the second biggest cause of disease and disability in the world.
- Currently about 121 million people around the world are depressed, and one in four people will develop one or more mental or behavioural disorders at some time in their lives.
- "In 20 years, depression will disable more people than AIDS, heart disease, traffic accidents and wars combined," says Bill Wilkerson, president of the Global Business and Economic Round Table on Addiction and Mental Health.
- Treatments are available for depression, but World Health Organisation figures show that nearly two-thirds of people with a known mental disorder never seek help from a health professional.
- Symptoms include depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in life, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, low energy and poor concentration.

- To find out more about Sudarshan Kriya, visit www.artofliving.org.au or call (02) 9671 6309.

The Sunday Telegraph

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