



The anatomy

The diaphragm – this ‘upside down bowl’ – is attached by its ‘rim’ to the bottom edge of the ribs and then curves up inside the rib cage (much higher than you might think). The key is to give it room to move downwards as you breathe in – without any interference or impediment – so that your lungs (above it) are stretched and made larger. When your lungs are stretching, air is ‘hoovered’ or ‘sucked’ into them. So this is how the ‘in-breath’ (inhalation or inspiration) happens. It is all about air pressure changes and some brilliant laws of physics that we needn’t go into here.

Meanwhile, efficiently packed up under this amazing bowl-shaped muscle, are your liver, stomach, intestines, etc. Too much information? ... There’s more. As the diaphragm moves down, everything in the ‘kitchen department’ (as I like to call the abdominal contents) gets squashed and displaced. It has to move out of the way somewhere if your lungs are going to get the benefit of a good stretching and fill with air. So where could it go?

To answer that, try taking a look at yourself in a mirror, or place a hand – with spread fingers – on your abdomen. If you are relaxed in that area to start with, you will feel and see a slight expansion at ‘tummy’ level as you breathe in.

You might be wondering what all the fuss is about. After all, nature intends that breathing happens instinctively and naturally. The problem is that we do it brilliantly while asleep (but unconscious) and we interfere with it in our waking and working moments. We can tense

the abdomen as we breathe in leaving nowhere for that kitchen department to

displace (resulting in insufficient breath) and usually raising our shoulders into the mix.

Ladies, our ancestors wore corsets – and are mostly on record as having quieter voices and less vocal stamina too! Today, we ‘self-corset’ because the pressure to be small-waisted is still there. As a result we can end up breathing in with our shoulders visibly moving up and down instead of letting our abdomen soften and move forwards. Gents, I am not letting you off the hook either! With the fitness culture of recent years, there’s a great deal of self-corseting happening with you too (oh, yes there is!). And there, as Shakespeare would say, ‘is the rub’ (problem).

In summary

If we self-corset as we breathe in, the abdominal contents don’t properly displace (move forwards), the dome-shaped diaphragmatic muscle can’t move down as far, and our lungs don’t take in as much air... Not to mention the subsequent tension in the raised shoulders and upper body that happens.

It’s a good moment to mention the rib-cage, by the way. The ribs are moved by their own muscles – including the intercostals – but these are more like the ‘supporting cast’ rather than ‘leading players’ at getting the air in and will usually join in for larger amounts of breath. The Diaphragm is where we need to retrain the habits of a life-time.

So what controls the out-going air?

Answer: The abdominal muscles. Try putting your hand on your abs and breathe out slowly on ‘ssssss’. Take another breath in, then breathe out quickly on ‘sshhh’. You should feel the muscularity of your abs moving at different speeds for each exercise to pull that ‘kitchen department’ back in. So the relaxed diaphragm returns to its starting point and the lungs send air back up the airway and out from your mouth or nose.

What next?

There are many exercises that help practice this ‘abdominal release’ when you breathe in. It can also get more complex if you want to get into super-voice with your spoken or singing voice.

Yvonne Morley

For more information, please don’t hesitate to contact me if I can be of more help or recommend exercises for you. The practice can take 5 minutes a day and create a healthy habit to support you and your voice. Perhaps I’ll see you at a future VONetwork workshop.