



Topic  
Better Living

Subtopic  
Health & Wellness

# How to Boost Your Physical and Mental Energy

Course Guidebook

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Dr. Bonura serves as a peer reviewer and a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*. She is also a peer reviewer for the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *The Journal of Social Change*, and the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*. Dr. Bonura serves as a member of the Master's Thesis Award Review Committee for the AASP and as a peer reviewer for the annual International Conference on College Teaching and Learning, as well as the annual conferences of the American Educational Research Association, the Canadian Psychological Association, and the American Psychological Association. She served as editor in chief of the Yoga Alliance newsletter *Yoga Matters* from 2002 to 2004.

Dr. Bonura has been practicing yoga since 1989 and teaching yoga since 1997. She is a triple-certified yoga instructor, registered with the Yoga Alliance, and a member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Dr. Bonura holds certifications as a personal trainer, group fitness instructor, kickboxing instructor, Tai Chi and Qigong instructor, senior fitness specialist, weight management instructor, and prenatal and youth fitness specialist. These certifications are issued by the Aerobics and Fitness Association

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Dr. Bonura has a line of instructional yoga and fitness DVDs that focus on older adult and adapted fitness programs. She has been published in local, national, and international magazines and journals in the areas of yoga, health, wellness, fitness, stress management, and performance enhancement. Dr. Bonura has developed specialized programs in seated/chair yoga for older adults; pelvic yoga for pre- and postpregnancy, pre- and postmenopause, incontinence prevention, and sexual enhancement; yoga for empowerment, designed to encourage self-esteem in teenagers and young adults; and partner yoga for family and marital enhancement. She has consulted with individuals and organizations, including elite athletes, higher education institutions, nonprofit community organizations, and corporations. ■

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## Disclaimer

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# How to Boost Your Physical and Mental Energy

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## Scope:

“Why am I so tired?”  
“If only I had more energy ...”

Unfortunately, for too many people, these are almost daily refrains. We go through our days under a constant energy deficit, and a recent study showed that baby boomers are the fastest-growing consumers of energy drinks. What can be done to restore our vitality? In this course, we are introduced to the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, seemingly simple self-care measures that can make a profound difference. The underlying message throughout these lessons is that self-care is not a luxury; it's a matter of self-preservation.

There are no quick fixes to undo the benefits of sleep deprivation. To truly be energetic and perform your best now, and to support health and wellness for the long term, you have to prioritize sleep. You will not have energy if you do not get sufficient sleep. In Lecture 2, we review the research on the benefits of sleep, discuss how sleep improves energy and performance, and discuss strategies for improving sleep quality and making sleep a greater priority. Sleep serves as the foundation for an energetic life.

There is no such thing as energy without breath, and most of us live our lives with shallow, compromised breath that we don't even realize depletes our energy. Breath and energy are intimately connected. When your quality of breath is compromised, so are your energy levels. In Lecture 3, we discuss the connection between sleep and exercise, and practice several breathing exercises to provide a toolkit of breathing activities that you can use to improve energy and facilitate relaxation in your daily life.

We spend close to 50 hours per week at work, and the quality of our work lives has an impact on the quality of the rest of our lives, including our energy. In Lecture 4, we will discuss the relationship between work and

energy, and how our work lives can both facilitate and drain our energy levels. We will discuss strategies for effectively protecting and managing energy at work.

The people in your life affect your energy levels. Relationships matter, and scientific research has demonstrated the power of connection to promote health and longevity. However, not all relationships have the same benefits. It is important to know yourself and your own needs for connection versus self-nurturing, and to reflect on the relationships that promote your well-being versus those which may actually reduce your well-being. In Lecture 5, we discuss the relationship between energy and our social lives, and how our interactions with others both nurture and drain our energy levels.

At its most basic, mindfulness is the concept of fully living in the present moment. Learning mindfulness can be a powerful strategy for energy management, by helping us to focus on the moment and activity at hand. In Lecture 6, we will practice four mindfulness activities to help you learn how to implement mindfulness in daily life.

Our environment, including the broader cultural impact of American society, an overabundance of choices, and environment factors like the financial climate, can all have profound impacts on our energy levels. Likewise, the environment can be a positive force, supporting us in more easily making healthful decisions. Key is to understand the impact of the environment on our health, our well-being, and the choices that we make. In Lecture 7, we review the impact of the environment on our energy levels and discuss how choice, in particular, can be a drain to energy.

Your diet is interwoven with your energy level. On the one hand, in its purest sense, food provides calories, a source of energy. However, even more importantly, the types of food we eat and the relationship we have with food will affect our energy overall. In Lecture 8, we will discuss the connection between food and energy, and practice restorative yoga, which can help to develop a healthy, nurturing relationship with food that promotes energy rather than stress.

While happiness may seem intangible, research shows that happiness has a direct impact on our quality of life and our performance. Likewise, play is an important part of life, and finding time to play, relax, and enjoy life can be a vital part of enhancing our energy levels. In Lecture 9, a variety of play strategies are reviewed, including the use of exercise as a form of adult play.

Just as our relationships with others affect our energy for life, our internal relationship has a profound impact on our energy to engage with the world. When we deal authentically with our emotions, it may take immediate energy to process sorrow, fear, and grief, but this is less than the ongoing energy it takes to stuff and avoid our emotions. In Lecture 10, we will discuss how we can better use our emotional perspective to support energy in our lives. We will learn loving-kindness meditation as a healing activity.

Your personal life circumstances and constraints will affect your energy, and provide a framework within which you should build realistic expectations for your energy level. For instance, your age, your health status, and whether you are a parent or caregiver may affect your sleep, your free time, and your overall energy levels. In Lecture 11, we will discuss various life circumstances that affect energy levels, and review strategies for boosting energy when you are fatigued.

Overall, an energetic life exists within a framework of a life that is meaningful to you. Key is to choose the activities on which you want to spend your energy, so that you are making choices that matter to you and improve your overall quality of life. We will end the course with guidelines and a framework for building an energetic life that is most meaningful to you. ■

# Boost Your Energy with Breath

## Lecture 3

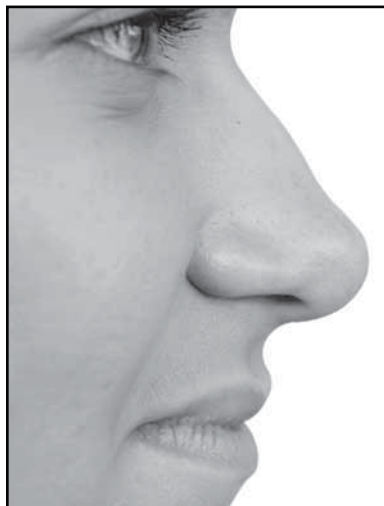
If sleep is the foundation of energy, and good self-care is the frame of the building, then your breath is everything else that it takes to build a home. There is no such thing as energy without breath, and many of us live our lives with shallow, compromised breath that we don't even realize depletes our energy. Spending a little bit of time on something as simple and easy as your breath seems too easy, but it can have a powerful impact on your health, your sense of vitality, and your sense of energy.

### Breath and Energy

- Breath and energy are intimately connected. If you breathe incorrectly, it affects your sleeping quality and your overall health and well-being. It affects your performance in life, work, and personal relationships. Deliberately focusing on the breath can improve your energy level and help you to feel better overall.
- In the military, as part of a resilience-training program created by Martin Seligman's positive psychology team at the University of Pennsylvania, soldiers are taught that breathing is a tactical exercise. In particular, soldiers are taught that they can use their breath as a way to shift their energy to perform at their best, using deliberate breathing strategies to either boost energy or relax.
- The training program specifies that tactical breathing is a skill like any other military skill, which requires regular practice. In particular, the military tactical breathing training focuses on the physical fundamentals, the mental fundamentals, and the emotional fundamentals of breathing.
- The physical fundamentals include inhaling through your nose, using good posture, and breathing into the belly. Mental strategies include using a cadence, or a specific count for the inhalation and

exhalation. The emotional fundamentals include the understanding that you will get better, and have more positive experiences, with practice. All of these are applicable to breathing practices we can use.

- When you are doing breathing exercises, unless you are instructed to breathe through your mouth, always breathe through the nose. Breath through the nose is more deliberate and focused. It's also better for you overall, since your nose provides the benefit of filtering the air—that's what nose hairs are for.
- Mouth breathing can dry out your mouth and affect your oral health. Chronic mouth breathing can dry out your mouth and gums, and be associated with periodontal disease. Chronic mouth breathing can be related to allergies and chronic inflammation in the respiratory system, so if you suspect that you are a chronic mouth breather, talk with your dentist and doctor to rule out any health conditions.
- For all exercises, you should be in a comfortable position. You can be seated on the floor or on a chair, or you can lie on your back. If you are fatigued, and you lie on your back, there is a higher likelihood that you will fall asleep. In fact, deep breathing exercises are a good thing to do as soon as you lie down in bed, because they will help you relax and quiet down from the day, which facilitates sleep.



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**Breath through the nose is more deliberate and focused, and is better for you overall.**

## Belly Breathing

- Belly breathing is the foundation for most breathing practices, including yoga, Tai Chi and Qigong, and the martial arts. Breath training starts with learning how to breathe through your belly. You are not so much learning how to breathe through your belly as un-learning years of sucking in your stomach and re-learning how to let your breath be soft and natural.
- Ideally, as you become more and more comfortable with belly breathing, it will become your normal form of breath, which will improve your energy overall. This happens slowly, over time. At first, you will only breathe into the belly when you focus on your breath—it's a lot like working on your posture. Additional practice and deliberate focus will eventually lead to good posture or good breathing as your natural behavior.
- You may one day become suddenly aware of your back moving against the furniture behind you, or of the expanse of your rib cage, because the deep breath will have become ingrained as the natural way to breathe.
- Belly breathing supports both improved energy and a sense of relaxation, because it provides better airflow and oxygenation to boost your energy during the day, and helps you to calm and quiet your mind to facilitate deeper sleep at night.
- After a belly breathing exercise, you may feel like you are recharged and ready to do something, or you may feel like you need a nap. Either is possible because belly breathing helps you to better connect with how you are really feeling.

## Square Breathing

- Square breathing comes from Qigong, and is intended to help you feel how *qi*, or energy, enters and leaves your body. According to Qigong principles, we inhale and exhale *qi*, just as we inhale and exhale oxygen.

- *Qi* is key to our sense of energy and vitality. The *qi* flows through our body just as blood does, bringing energy and vitality throughout our system.
- In square breathing, four components make the square: the inhale, the space after the inhalation, the exhale, and the space after the inhalation. These need to be equal in length, in order to form a square breath.
- You may find yourself feeling a little stressed and panicky when you hold the space after the exhalation. That is normal. Try to relax into it. Remember that you will get air again. If you have a heart condition or high blood pressure, or if you are pregnant, you shouldn't hold your breath, so keep the spaces to just a count of 1 or 2.

### **Extended Exhalation**

- We tend, naturally, to have longer inhalations than exhalations in our regular breathing patterns. Exacerbating this, many breathing exercises put more focus on the inhalation than on the exhalation. With this focus on inhalation above exhalation, some breath-based instructors propose that we never fully empty our lungs. Because of this, there is always some air still sitting in our lungs, and we can never truly get a good inhalation, either.
- Because you are essentially working with a smaller volume of lung capacity, you have to breathe more quickly to get oxygen and fresh air, which creates stress for the mind and the body. Rapid breathing is often both an indicator and a creator of stress.
- Forced exhalation can be a very energizing form of breath. By completely emptying your lungs, you will find that your inhalations are naturally deeper and more expansive. This brings more oxygen into your body, which can create a sense of being recharged and vibrant and energized. No need to pay expensive per-minute prices for an oxygen bar—just purposefully exhale and your lungs will naturally expand and fill with oxygen on the inhale.

- Purposeful exhaling can be a great breathing exercise to do when you are feeling tired and worn down and need a pick-me-up, or if you need to gather your resources and energy for a specific task. It can provide inspiration, passion, and a renewed sense of vigor.
- It can also help when you find yourself out of breath. When out of breath after a physical or emotional ordeal, we almost pant trying to get a lot of inhalations, which keeps us stressed and revved up. If you focus on the exhale instead, to clear the old air and reestablish deliberate control over your breath, then the inhale will take care of itself in a slower, more relaxed way.

### Stimulating Breath

- Another breathing exercise that can be used specifically to boost energy is called stimulating breath or bellows breath. In the Kundalini Yoga tradition, it is called breath of fire. Dr. Andrew Weil, a renowned complementary and alternative medicine expert, recommends this breath instead of a cup of coffee and says that it leaves you feeling invigorated like a good workout.
- This breathing exercise may actually *be* a good workout, as it requires full abdominal engagement. Stimulating breath involves rapid panting through the nose.
- You'll feel the physical exertion throughout your torso, and particularly in your abdomen. At first, you may only be able to do 15 or 30 seconds' worth, and you may actually feel a little lightheaded. You can gradually increase your time up to one minute of practice. It's a great, simple, one-minute practice for the mid-afternoon slump when you need to recharge and focus to power through the rest of your day.
- Because this is a very fast breath that replicates panting, skip this one if you have a history of high blood pressure or panic attacks.



### **4-7-8 Relaxing Breath**

- According to Weil, the 4-7-8 breath is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. You'll feel a little relaxed the first time you do it, but as you practice it more, you will find it a more powerful way to support relaxation and calm.
- In this breath, you inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. The exhale is the challenging part. You will need to purse your lips a little, and it will make a *whoosh* sound.
- Initially, you'll only do this breath four times in one sitting, but as it becomes comfortable, you can do up to eight cycles in a single sitting. You may feel a little lightheaded at first. If so, just sit calmly and quietly until your balance is restored.

### **Using Breathing Exercises**

- You can use forced exhalation and stimulating breath when you need an energy boost. Square breathing and the 4-7-8 relaxing breath are useful when you need to calm and quiet the mind. Belly breathing is good to practice any time; it can improve how you breathe and provide a better sense of connection among your body, your breath, and your awareness.
- Remember that to truly leverage the power of your breath for improving your energy, you have to practice regularly. Try picking one or two breath exercises that feel particularly good to you, and practice them for five minutes each day.
- Five minutes of breathing exercise per day is a good, simple starting point. It requires a low threshold of commitment, but it's enough to allow you to see and experience the energy benefits of deliberate breathing. As the exercises feel comfortable and you feel the benefits, you can always add more.

## Suggested Reading

Brown & Gerbarg, *The Healing Power of the Breath*.

Rosen, *The Yoga of Breath*.

Stenudd, *Qi*.

Weil, *Breathing*.

## Activity

Select one or two of the breathing exercises and do them at least three or four days a week to develop a solid habit of good breathing.