



Conscious Life presents

The Power of Breath for Balancing Anxiety

Guest - Anthony Abbagnano

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview, where I'm super-excited to be talking with my good friend, Anthony Abbagnano. We're going to be talking about how breathwork can be a huge support to rebalancing the system and really understanding anxiety in a different way. Anthony is also going to offer a practical experiential piece to actually give you a tool that you can use to help with calming anxiety and regulating your system.

To give a little bit of Anthony's background, Anthony Abbagnano is a visionary thought leader, breath expert, and founder of the internationally accredited breathwork school, Alchemy of Breath, which is a 100,000-person online community dedicated to evolving collective consciousness.

He currently lives in Italy, where he co-founded Alchemy School of Healing Arts with his wife, Amy. ASHA supports... As in Alchemy School of Healing Arts. ASHA supports breathwork, holistic practices, sustainability, growing food, and building community. Anthony, welcome, and thank you for joining me.

Anthony Abbagnano

Thank you. It's great to be with you.

Alex Howard

Maybe let's just start with what sounds like a simple question, but actually, it's a question that has many different facets to it. But when we're talking about anxiety, from your perspective, what are we talking about? What is anxiety?

Anthony Abbagnano

I love that question. I think the deepest answer to that is that anxiety is the measure of distance between how we're presenting ourselves to the world and what our true inner being wants us to do. In other words, if we are tucked into purpose and we have that effervescent resource of life force because we're doing what we really want to do, anxiety seems to disappear.

So I would say it's one measure of that difference between those two things. So the question will be, are you really doing what you want to do? Do you feel like your life is valuable? So that would

be a generic answer. Another answer that I would give to that is that, what if... It's actually a question, what if anxiety is just a form of energy that is running wild and is not tamed?

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So then it begins to become a slightly more hopeful situation than just having to take a pill or even use a practice, which I'm going to encourage you to do if you do suffer from anxiety anyway. But just to begin with, what if it's just the 10 stallions inside your belly or inside your heart that are running rampant because they don't know what to do?

And what would it be like to create a relationship with anxiety that isn't one of sweaty hands, palpitations, panic attacks, short breath, and so on. But actually, when the anxiety is not there, becoming curious and seeing if there's some intimacy that we can create with it.

Alex Howard

What I think is really important in what you're saying is that you're really speaking to there being wisdom and an intelligence within anxiety, but also within our wider system. And I think so often people's relationship to anxiety is this feeling feels not okay, and that therefore means that something's not okay. And what you're saying is that maybe something different to that's happening.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, exactly. I believe, well, was it Fritz Perls that said anxiety is enthusiasm without the breath? Something like that.

Alex Howard

Yeah.

Anthony Abbagnano

And that's the principle of the transformer breath that I use for anxiety. It's to take a moment and reinterpret this energy and become familiar with it in a non-threatening way. And then we find that actually there's something quite resonant with what... If anxiety had an intention, it would be to inform us of something.

So if we open our hearing, if we open our listening a little bit to what that might be, then we open all kinds of different new possibilities. And perhaps most of all, we open to hope, because I think that's one of the horrid parts of anxiety is the slide towards depression because we feel so helpless. And we also know that the more anxious we become, the less range of choice we feel.

So the frontal lobe starts to close down and we start moving back into the amygdala and survival systems, and then it becomes traumatic, and it reinforces any sense of trauma that we have, any PTSD from trauma that we've experienced in the past. So I really feel like we need to get the tip of the shovel underneath the rock if we're going to move the rock. We can't just hammer at it from above. It's not going to work that way.

Alex Howard

It's also really interesting in what you're saying is that there's the experience of anxiety, and then there's how we are in relationship with that experience of anxiety.

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I'd love you to speak a bit more to that because what I'm hearing you say is that there may be some intelligence, some wisdom. That there's an experience that's happening, but then we're meeting that from a place that's either perpetuating that cycle or at least what it's not doing is helping calm and actually helping connect to what's happening.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, I think it's almost like a negative embodiment process that happens with anxiety, right? The palms get clammy, the whole body is... It's a very embodied experience. It's not just a mental one, but there's a really good flow of information between brain and body because the brain is really perceiving the upset and the dysregulation.

So to me, I think a lot of it is about using the body in other ways to remind ourselves that there are choices. I think one thing... Another truism, I think, is when we feel, I think...

An example of emotional alacrity or emotional intelligence is the ability to take a breath when we don't want to. And if we can just take that moment to create the space for one breath, then during that moment, other things can happen. We give ourselves the chance to have other things happen.

Another great teacher, Gay Hendricks, taught me another way the body can inform us when we feel tension or that adrenaline coming up, which is to make a sound as if you were in a state of wonder. So to go, "Hmmm..."

And actually, what's happening when you do that is the body is beginning to reinform the mind of what happens when the mind is in a state of wonder. So by simulating and emulating, we can begin to communicate with the mind in a different way.

Alex Howard

Well, it's almost like when we become anxious, we stop breathing. Our breath contracts and somewhat stops. And when our breath contracts and somewhat stops, we become anxious, right? So there seems to be this real connection between... The state we're in impacts our breath, but our breath impacts the state that we're in.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, absolutely. I have a friend who's... He's actually a coach as well, and I'm going through some tense stuff right now in my life. And he said to me, "When you wake up, are you contracted?"

And I said, "Yeah, as soon as I wake up, I'm contracted." He said, "Well, then you want to let go of the contraction, right?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Okay, well. There you are." And then the next morning, of course, I woke up and I felt all the reasons to be contracted.

Alex Howard

It's funny how that works, isn't it?

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, exactly. And then I thought, "Okay, I'm not going to worry about the reasons. I'm just going to work with the contraction. Just let go of the reasons for now. Just work with the contraction.

Take a breath and see if I can soften a little bit. And then take another breath and see if I can soften a little bit."

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And I think there's something fundamental here is that we're so used to measuring how we fall short in life. And it's like we've got the wrong end of the ruler. We've got the wrong end of the tape measure. If we could just start to measure how things are actually changing, then we have a much better chance of getting traction and movement. Momentum.

And we need not just to be staring anxiety in the face. We need to create a working relationship with this information system that's overloading us, and we need to be able to put up filters and find the volume switch and the velocity switch and learn how to work with it.

There's a whole dashboard that's available to us. And when we become aware of that, if we can just find one switch that tells us that there are things that we don't know that can actually help us, and we can begin to become more inquisitive and more open to understanding what this phenomena is.

Alex Howard

It's really interesting. As you were talking, Anthony, the thought that was in my mind was that an anxiety response is typically good when there's an immediate physical danger, when we need to have that hit of adrenaline and cortisol to respond quickly to what's happening.

But when it comes to decision-making, and particularly, complex decision-making, where we've got to choose a direction in our life, because people often will say, "Well" but just like you said, "I need to have this anxiety because I've got to decide what to do in this situation."

But it struck me as you were talking that the more contracted we are, the less able we actually are to see multiple perspectives, the less able we are to see the limitations in our own thinking and perspective. Which means in a way, it may help us survive a physical threat, but actually, it probably makes us far less effective when we've really got to weigh up and make choices in life.

Anthony Abbagnano

Completely. I think it shuts down our processing power entirely. And yes, you're right. It's such a handy thing, anxiety. That rush of adrenaline and epinephrine and cortisol as you said, those are all designed to make us quick and snappy and strong, like you could lift a truck if your son was underneath it.

But it's a habit that we've learned to use in our life. I mean, this is what horror films are about. This is what high tension movies are about. Go to a modern movie today as opposed to one 50 years ago where you had long, languid scenes where you could interpret things.

And now it's like such a barrage of information that our adrenaline is being manipulated by the outside world. We've lost control, and we're in the back seat of a taxi with a mad taxi driver, and we're getting thrown around, and it's exciting because he's going fast.

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But there are consequences. There are body memories of this, that then high adrenaline becomes normal, and we need to make it higher in order to get excited. So the nervous system is getting exhausted. These things are finite. Adrenaline is finite. It's not infinite.

So we need to learn how to modulate. And again, doing this without being anxious is a much better way than trying to do it when you are anxious. I had a story when I... I think it was four or five years after I started working professionally with breathwork, and I was returning my car to Gatwick Airport in London, and I couldn't find the car rental company.

I could see the sign of it over there, and I went to the roundabout, there was no exit. I turned around, went to the other roundabout, no exit. I was getting frustrated because I was late for the plane. So I called the rental company, and of course, they didn't answer. It went to an answering machine.

So I was like, "Oh.. Okay, the plane." So I called a couple more times. By the time the young lady answered the telephone, I went, "Do you understand? I got to return the car. I can't find you. Where's the exit? I'm late for my plane." And she said, "Excuse me, sir, would you just breathe? And we can talk about it."

Alex Howard

That's very funny. If only she'd known who she was talking to. Yeah, exactly.

Anthony Abbagnano

Well, it made me laugh at that point, the bubble burst. And doesn't it show that we all professionally do what we need to learn most of?

Alex Howard

Yeah. It feels like a good juncture to bring in breathwork. So maybe you could just for those that may be new to you and your work, or maybe new to the concept of breathwork... Maybe you can just say a few words about what it is and why it's so important, and then we can make that connection with anxiety.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah. Okay. Breathwork is such a big word... Such a small word for such a big subject. But the first step that I would say is most important to know about is breath awareness, and that's really half of the task. If you are in any physical condition at all, you are breathing in a corresponding way or emotional condition. You are breathing in a corresponding way.

So to develop breath awareness, the best thing to do is just to start mentally cataloging what's going on. So if you are anxious, you are breathing an irregular breath. You're probably stopping your breath, and you're probably breathing more quickly when you do breathe.

If you're feeling lazy, therefore, and indolent, and you don't want to get up in the morning... If you start breathing in a regular breath, a high-paced breath, and you hold it once in a while, you'll probably get your energy going.

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So that's a simple example of how the symptom that breath is revealing to you can be manipulated from the other end. So if you change your breath, if you are feeling anxious by breathing a calm and measured breath, you're going to manipulate your anxiety back down.

You're going to manipulate your nervous system, and you're going to bring it back down to a level that's more manageable for you. So breath awareness is the number one step. Then after breath awareness, generally, which honestly, I think is half the deal, because once you've got that, then you... Anytime you apply a practice, you understand what it's doing to you.

And then you can employ those practices in any given condition, from your most anxious moment to making love. Everything in between. There's a breath that you can use that will make things easier, more joyful, more fruitful, more experiential, more alive. Remember, breath is the stuff of life, right?

The next step is then with these breath practices to seek to achieve specific things. And breathwork today is used generally for something that's called a conscious connected breath, which is an odd breath. And I'm going to give you an example. It goes like this.

And that is used for what people call breath sessions, which are usually guided sessions. It could be one-to-one or it could be in a group. Breath sessions are a limited period of time. There might be music being played at the same time.

There's usually a guide or with some types of breathwork, there's no guide. You're left on your own and you breathe in your own way. And then at the end of the session, you come out of it feeling differently. Now, that feeling differently could be compared to LSD or ayahuasca type of strength, or it could be seeing things from a different position.

And I consider the use of conscious connected breath almost like a surgical tool to approach issues in life that we might find are blocking us. So I tend to use it... I don't think I'm allowed to say in a therapeutic way in some countries, but it's very restorative and it's a very good way to see things differently.

Actually, the curiosity, and perhaps the irony when we talk about trauma and anxiety, is that when we breathe a conscious connected breath, we're onboarding more oxygen into the body, into the bloodstream, but we're actually slowing down the thinking mechanism of the frontal lobe.

But because we're doing it by choice, imagine how we can begin to think differently, if we could get out of the neuron pathways, out of the grooves and furrows that we burrow in with our normal thought patterns.

So it's a great way to break out of the normal way of thinking and to experience a completely different point of view, and I think a more ample point of view. So that's the realistic practice. Now, there are many people who do conscious connected breath just to get high, have a good time, drink some cacao, and then dance, and then do a breath.

There are many different ways that it can be used, but my preferable way to use the breath is to actually apply it. I call it applied breathwork, so it can be used for a purpose.

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And for anybody who's a teacher, if you're teaching difficult concepts, which I often do because I work with really the human inner journey and emerging consciousness and how that happens, and how we can manufacture it, then some of these concepts are quite abstract to a mind that's used to thinking in a certain way. But by the power of the breath, we then can really embody them. We can really understand them with our whole body and not just with this tiny mechanism that we give all the credit to up here.

Alex Howard

One of the things that strikes me is that it's like what anxiety does is it moves us away from our feelings and our emotions. In a way, it's a defensive strategy because there's things going on that we don't have the resources and what we need to process and metabolize.

So anxiety becomes a way to disconnect. The breath is a way that helps us to connect. And I'm curious as to your thoughts around how that connection actually helps us to move through that stuff. So we don't need to keep disconnecting and moving away.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, thank you. I think what's most important is once you have learned to use the breath as a tool, you get to re-approach emotions that might have been too uncomfortable to feel. And if you look historically at your life, the times you've felt most emotional are the times that you've lost your breath.

And indeed, if you've ever been traumatized and if you're suffering from PTSD, then you will lose your breath again. And so imagine if you had control of your breath, if you became the master of your breath patterns. Imagine that every breath that you take consciously could go back to a time that you lost it unconsciously.

So you're really beginning to restore something that was missing in the first place. And once you're used to breathing and making that your practice, then you can begin to consider where to go with it. Here's an example. There's a doctor in Montreal, I think Dr O'Hare, who uses the coherence breath, which was developed in Northern California.

The heart coherence breath, it's called, which is five seconds in and five seconds out, and I believe I've shared it with you folks once before. He would have someone embody that practice sufficiently long, and then he would say, "Okay, I want you to imagine your trauma 150 yards away, and just start your breath. And is that far enough away for you?"

"No, I need it further away."

"Okay, let's make it 250 yards away. Is that better?"

"Yes." So he would get agreement, and then he would say, "Okay, let's start your coherence breath. And just notice what's happening in your body. This thing is so far away. It's not even here right now. I just want you to regulate your nervous system until such a time as you feel well enough that you could take one step forward."

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And then that one step becomes the accomplishment of that moment. I think that that's so important that, again, we measure by how we fall short. We're going to measure the 249 that we still got to do, right? And go, "Oh, this isn't going to work. It's no good at all." But actually, what we've done is we've moved away from stasis into some kind of forwards movement.

Then the question is, how can we do it again? That way, we begin to erode this horror that we call anxiety, and we begin to understand that, well, there is an opening to reinterpret this. How can I transform it into enthusiasm? What if I could take all that energy and get those stallions all in a row and get the reins on them all and like, "Whoopie, here we go!" What could I be doing? There's such a positive outcome from transforming anxiety.

Alex Howard

Yeah, that's beautiful. Anthony, should we come to some practical? So I know you've got a practice here that I think can be a helpful way to give people a bit of a taste of working with the breath, but also a practice to start helping with anxiety.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah. Okay, I'm going to give you this. Again, I want to say this should be done at first when you are not anxious. Try, take a time that you're not feeling particularly anxious and start to put this practice into place. And you can also use it in an emergency.

But until you've got it as a practice, you might not want to breathe. Just like I did when I was taking my car rental back, I was so upset. I'm a breath worker. I knew that I could use the breath, but I actually unconsciously chose the anxiety. So in order to overcome that inner reluctance from the subconscious, I want you to put a practice into place that's repetitive. And this is what it is.

We're going to breathe in for four, and we're going to breathe out. We're going to start with eight, and then we're going to extend to nine and then to 10. And this is just a sample to show you what you can do. And you're going to find at first that you can't match it. You're probably going to breathe in too slowly or too quickly, or you're, likewise, on the out-breath, you're probably going to get it wrong, and that's okay.

What's important is that you begin to move in that direction. Don't think you've got to get it right in one go. That's anxiety-ridden, and that's not going to help you. What's going to help you is realizing that you're actually choosing to do what you're doing.

And before we start, I just want to acknowledge you for being here right now watching because that's half the job. The other quarter of the job is to learn to breathe, and then the breath we're going to use will do the whole thing. Okay? So are we ready?

Let's inhale to exhale. And then we're going to breathe in for 1, 2, 3, 4.

And you can breathe through the nose. Close your eyes if you need to, and we're going to breathe out for 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

And breathe in for four. 1, 2, 3, 4.

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And breathe out for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Breathe in 1, 2, 3, 4.

And breathe out 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Breathe in 1, 2, 3, 4.

Breathe out for nine. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

Breathe in for four. 1, 2, 3, 4.

Breathe out for nine. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

Breathe in for four. 1, 2, 3, 4.

And breathe out for 10. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Breathe in for four. 2, 3, 4.

And one last time, breathe out for 10. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Breathe in and relax.

Alex Howard

So my experience was a couple of things. Firstly, I couldn't breathe out past seven, so I ran out of there at about seven each time. Even when I tried to slow the out-breath, it still seemed to be the same outcome.

The other thing that was interesting was just something as simple as just working with the breath, but noticing each time this dropping a little bit deeper and also noticing a sense of more spaciousness coming in. So noticing I was somewhat narrowly focused in our interview, and then there was a sense of spaciousness and opening that was happening.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, exactly. And that spaciousness is edging out the other consideration, right? We're in this interview and this has got to work and I've got to get the right buttons and all of the alertness that's required. And that was quite intense. Normally, I would take someone repeating it eight, for seven or eight times and then nudge into nine and number 10.

And when you practice on your own, you can extend this up to 30. And there are other things you can do, too. You can explore where you are controlling your breath? Is it up here or is it down in your belly? Because those are two very different things. An advanced form of this is actually to control it from your belly, not from up top in your head.

Another way to exacerbate the benefits of this is when you exhale to hum. And to put a little turbocharger on that humming, you can also hum and block your ears at the same time. So that resonance, what will happen is that resonance will do a number of things.

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But perhaps in this case, most importantly, it will help activate your vagus nerve, so you'll get an increasing sense of well-being. It also clears your sinuses and other things in the head as well. But in this case, what we're talking about is the chance to moderate, modulate ourselves.

Alex Howard

And what would be your recommendations for how often someone should do this? When? Where? Just give people a little bit of direction on how they can integrate this practice.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yeah, I would be trying to do it at least three times a day. And then just play with it. This is a breath that's not going to transport you to another dimension. It's not a breath that you need to be... The conscious connected breath, please don't do that if you're driving or if you're operating machinery or anything like that at all. Create space for it.

But this breath is much easier. I wouldn't do it necessarily while driving, but if you're commuting or you're in public, those are good times to be practicing this because people won't really notice what you're doing. But you'll be actually learning how to... You know how anxiety isolates you in a negative way?

But this is a great way to isolate yourself consciously in a positive way. You're taking space, you're creating space. So this really admirable quality that anxious-ridden people have of being hyper-alert, that alertness, can actually be used to create your own space rather than to be in reaction all the time.

Alex Howard

And what, Anthony, can people expect from doing this? So if someone does this practice three times a day and they do that over a sustained period, what would be some of the things that they might hope to see from that?

Anthony Abbagnano

Well, you're going to get relaxed. You're going to sleep better. You're going to feel more in control. You're going to learn that anxiety is not necessarily the enemy that you think it is now. And you're going to say, "Thank you, Anthony, for telling me about that. That's a good one."

Alex Howard

I love it. I love it. Well, thank you. Anthony, people that want to find out more about you and your work, tell us the best place to go and tell us what are some of the things that you're offering that people can find out about.

Anthony Abbagnano

Yes, indeed. Alchemyofbreath.com is the URL, the internet address to go to. My job is to train people who want to take this work to the world. We have, I think, the biggest facilitator training in the world on this subject, how to use the breath and how to get other people to use it.

And I also teach extensively... Actually, the core of that training is also something separate, which is an inner journey, which is a discovery of yourself and how to really become the master of your

life, to become the author of your own life. So to have an inner authority instead of being barraged and bullied by things outside.

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And one of my specialties is inner child work, too. I love doing inner child work and working with the fragmented self. But you'll find all of those things if you come to Alchemy of Breath.

You can also breathe with us every Sunday. We have a breathwork in the morning and in the evening UK time. And you can also join us at breath camps in Italy, where we run week-long retreats for breathwork and transformation. So transformation is what I do, and I love to work on a psychological and also spiritual level.

Alex Howard

Beautiful. Anthony, thank you so much. I really always appreciate you and your time and what you have to offer. Thank you.

Anthony Abbagnano

Great. Cool. Great. Love it. Thank you.