

The Importance of Air and Breathing Exercises

The most important aspect of playing any wind instrument is getting air through that instrument. I believe that one of the best ways to practice proper use of the air is to do it away from the instrument. When you are practicing with your instrument there are too many other things to do, therefore you don't concentrate enough on your air.

I have some exercises that I really believe will improve the student's conception and use of the muscles of the diaphragmatic area. These exercises are designed to make the student completely aware of how to obtain the best use of the air column.

Please remember that when breathing, we make use of the diaphragmatic area to facilitate the in and out of the air. The diaphragmatic area includes the muscles of the upper abdomen, but not really the lower abdomen. The diaphragm muscle is located just below the center of the rib cage. It follows around the contour of the rib cage and connects with the back muscles. This is why a player who is breathing properly will have their back expanding when they inhale. When doing the exercises discussed here, I try to think of the center of my diaphragmatic area. This is the area just below the sternum. (The middle bone in the center of the rib cage.) I try to center all my thought and feeling right in this area.

Please also remember that the lungs don't do anything by themselves. The diaphragm makes them move. You should not think of breathing from your chest area. The lungs are only reservoirs that hold air and filters to clean the blood, not the means of getting air into the body. The only sensation you should feel in your chest is that of "filling up" with air.

Now that we have learned how we breathe, let's work on how to control the air to make it work for us as wind instrumentalists. The following exercise must be done with complete concentration. Forget everything around you and just concentrate on breathing.

There are five steps to this exercise. I call one time through all five of these steps one cycle of the exercise.

1. Lie down on the floor on your back with your legs straight out and your arms at your side.

2. Concentrate on isolating your diaphragmatic area from the rest of your body. At first you can put a heavy book on it or have someone put light pressure with his or her foot over the center of your diaphragmatic area. Later, you can just put your hand over the area and use that to push against. Work toward the point where you can really feel the location of the center of the muscle. When you can really feel this area and have it isolated, you are ready for the third step.

3. Take air in slowly through a small hole in your mouth by raising the center of the diaphragmatic up towards the ceiling. With your hand on it you can actually see the movement. Keep taking air in slowly until you feel as if you are full, and then make yourself inhale even more. Another way to think of raising up the center of the diaphragmatic area is to pretend that there someone standing above you with a string attached to your diaphragm and that person is pulling up on the string.

4. When you are completely filled up with air, don't hold this air in for a long period of time. Start pushing it out right away (slowly) through the same small hole in your mouth. You need to do this by keeping the diaphragm area muscles flexed. You never let down. Even though you have raised the center of the diaphragmatic area up to take the air in, you still keep the raised sensation going. You still think of raising it up toward the ceiling as you push the air out. You stay flexed constantly. (Remember that FLEXED does not mean tense!) Do not tense or tighten up for this exercise! You flex the muscles so that you have control and are not overdoing it and over taxing your muscles. The only difference in the exhaling process is that you should now get a feeling that the upper abdominal wall is pushing in to force the air out. After you think that you have pushed all the air out that you possibly can, you make yourself push out even a little more air. Really empty your lungs! When you have done this, you are ready for the last step.

5. This step is another relaxation step. It is not the deep relaxation of the first step, but simply a relaxing of the diaphragm as well as the whole body to let your diaphragmatic area rejuvenate itself and get ready for another cycle of the total exercise.

When starting this exercise, go through only four or five cycles at any one time. If you do too much at first, you could strain your muscles. You can gradually increase the number of cycles, as you feel more comfortable.

You will get the most out of this exercise if you do it at least twice a day. I suggest that the basic times for you to do the exercises are in the morning after you get up and again at night before you go to bed. The exercise will really help your body and your mind at both times because it enables you to obtain greater amounts of oxygen than in normal breathing. The exercise will really help your body and your mind at both times because it enables you to obtain greater amounts of oxygen than in normal breathing. You will wake up faster in the morning (no more need for so much coffee to get that "kick start") and you will get to sleep easier at night.

If you do this exercise faithfully every day, it will help your sound, endurance, flexibility, and even your range. Don't be too impatient. All this will not happen overnight. Nothing worthwhile comes without hard work and constant practice. Remember one thing – your diaphragmatic area is always there with you, so you never have an excuse to skip practicing its use. Remember too, that you will probably not play exactly like this exercise. Aspects of it will "creep" into your playing and make your use of the air much easier and more successful.

Another exercise that you can do in conjunction with the preceding exercise is a walking and breathing regimen. Take air in for a preconceived number of steps and then blow it out for twice that number of steps. Example: Take air in for 10 steps and blow it out for 20 steps. Be sure to breathe from the diaphragmatic area. Use the same small hole in your mouth just as you did in the laying down exercise. This small hole will give you some resistance to blow against and will create a feeling closer to blowing through your horn.

CHECK LIST FOR PRACTICING

- Warm up properly.
- Take in a FULL breath with some energy.
- Support your sound at all times.
- Listen to your sound.
- High notes are not higher; they are farther out in front of you. Always think about PROJECTION.
- Use a metronome. Time is of the essence!
- Don't lose concentration every time you make a little mistake or a "flurp."
- Practice slower and speed up gradually.
- Don't learn mistakes by practicing too fast.
- Build confidence in your abilities.
- Work for consistency and control.
- Horn up and KEEP it there. Always play with a good posture.
- Think about the way you look to others when you are playing – always have a confident demeanor.