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Shelby Stanger:

In these uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic, one thing we can all do is breathe. I've been doing breathwork for a few years now, and for me it's been a game changer. Instead of having to relieve my anxiety by going running or a whole yoga class, I can do 15 minutes of breathwork and I feel so much more grounded, centered, and just calm. I got into breathwork after reading James Nestor's book about freediving. It's called *Deep*, and it became a New York Times bestseller. After writing about freediving, James also got way more into breathing. He studied with experts around the world, looked at the science behind it, and he even studied the bones of ancient humans, to see how our breath has changed over the years. The results are in his newest book. It's called *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*, and it comes out in May. I'm excited to have James on the show today, because not only do I think we could all use some more tools to help us be more calm and centered right now, but also because this is James's first interview about his new book. Today, we're exploring what he learned about breathing while researching the book, and the simple things you can do right now to breathe better, adding more health, joy, and peace in your life right now. The cool thing about breathing, it's free, and you can do it anywhere. I mean, you have to breathe, but before we start, a reminder, this podcast is for informational purposes only, and it's not medical advice. For that, consult your doctor. I hope you enjoy this informative episode.

Shelby Stanger:

James Nestor, welcome back to Wild Ideas Worth Living.

James Nestor:

Thanks for having me.

Shelby Stanger:

It's a wild time. How are you guys hanging in there in San Francisco?

James Nestor:

We're getting by. A lot of time around the house. A lot of cleaning my office. A lot of reorganizing files. But what's funny is, I was talking to a friend and this way of living is really no different from any other day in the life of an author. You know? You just kind of sit around in front of your computer all day, walk your dog. That's it. So, it's not a huge adjustment for me.

Shelby Stanger:

Well, right now, there's so many amazing classes about breathwork. And I'm so excited for your new book to come out - *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*. It's not coming out until May. James, tell me a little bit about how you got enchanted with breathwork? Just kind of the quick and dirty.

James Nestor:

It was actually about the same time as I got enchanted with freediving. This was years and years ago. I was out in Greece, and met some freedivers and asked how they were able to dive so deep for five, six, seven minutes at a time. And they told me that the key to breath holding was breathing, as contradictory as that may sound. And they told me that we could breathe in certain ways to reduce our weight, to heal ourselves of disease, heal ourselves of asthma, on and on and on. Which of course sounded like complete BS. So, it was interesting enough, though, and there were enough nuggets of truth in it, that I spent several years in laboratories with experts, doing my own self-experimentation, and finding that all of these claims are entirely true. Breathing is something few of us ever think about. And yet, how we breathe is as important as what we eat, how much we exercise, what genes we have, on and on and on. It's really a missing pillar of health. That's what I've discovered.

Shelby Stanger:

Okay. I have so many questions. I'm so excited. So what are some of the things you did to research your book?

James Nestor:

Well, I talked, first, and foremost, I don't have a medical background. I'm not a pulmonologist. I'm not a rhinologist. So I went and talked with the experts who have studied this stuff for decades and decades. And I was able to research alongside them. So, in one study I had heard that mouth breathing and nasal breathing, even people in the medical community said, "It's all the same thing. It's all about getting air into your body. Your body figures it out from there." So, and some people still believe this. So, I went to Stanford and worked with the chief rhinologist at Stanford, a man by the name of Dr. Nayak, and we plugged my nose for 10 days with silicone. And I took about 60 markers, inflammation markers, other blood markers, on and on and on. And then, for another 10 days, I breathed almost entirely through my nose, so I wore tape over my mouth.

James Nestor:

And we compared what happens to the mind and body during that time. And within two days of having my nose plugged, I went from not snoring at all to snoring for about four hours throughout the night. I got sleep apnea, my energy plummeted, cortisol went through the roof, on and on and on. Everything reversed instantly, once I started breathing through my nose again ...

Shelby Stanger:

Wow.

James Nestor:

... and was no longer breathing through my mouth. So, this is something that, it's so obvious, and yet no one really seemed to be paying attention to it. Why do 50% of us snore right now? And what can we do about it? Why do so many of us have sleep apnea? And that just really opened things up. So, that was one of the many experiments. This is not like a Tim Ferriss self experimentation book, but that was an experiment I knew nobody else would ever do. So, I figured I should sign up for it and figure out what happens.

Shelby Stanger:

How did you measure the snoring? Was it your wife that just told you you snored? Or did you have something that measured it? Or did you video yourself?

James Nestor:

Oh my God, yeah, we had so many ... I did this with one other person, because I didn't want it to just be one person. I wanted to compare the data with one other person. And so this guy from Sweden, by the name of Anders Olsson, breathing expert, did it along with me. And our data was almost exactly the same, the whole way through. So, at night we wore pulse oximeters. I mean, you should have seen this. It was, we looked like fricking robots. We had cameras on us, we had microphones. Every morning we'd look at the pulse ox, we'd measure our blood glucose, we'd measure our nitric oxide. I mean, I could go on and on and on. All the data sheets will be available for everybody. So, that's how we did it. The best measure was an app called SnoreLab, which just records sound throughout the night, and then it gives you a chart in the morning. And I have all of these charts and all of the audio samples.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm so geeking out and I'm so excited. But also I'm sure the audience listening to this podcast knows I sound a little funny. I've sounded a little funny for just the last, since January of this year. I've had some sort of sinus thing that hasn't gone away. And breathing through my nose is really hard, so I get that the first tip is breathe through your own nose as much as possible. But what do you do if you have a little breathing problem through your nose?

James Nestor:

That's absolutely right. So as people are listening to this, maybe for the next few minutes as we talk about this one subject, just breathe through your nose. And try to breathe through your nose all the time. Just breathing through your nose is going to increase your oxygen levels, your oxygenation in your tissues and muscles and whatnot, by about 18%, over breathing through your mouth. It's also going to allow you to preserve about 40% more water than breathing through your mouth. I could go on. I mean, I have lists and lists of how bad mouth breathing is, and how beneficial nasal breathing is. So what can you do about it? It turns out that our skulls and our mouths have changed over the past few centuries in ways that have been detrimental to our health. So, there's a reason why humans are the only species on the planet, mammalian species on the planet, to have crooked teeth, because our mouths are too small. And if our mouths are too small, our airways are constricted. And if our airways are constricted, we're going to have trouble breathing, just like you are right now. So, this is a chronic problem across our species, and fixing it is tricky, because people have various levels of congestion. What I've found, and I was talking to a Stanford expert breathing therapist, who looked at 30 patients who had laryngectomies, and found that within a few months to a couple of years, all of their noses completely plugged up, because they were no longer using their nose, their nose just plugged up. So that's a long way of saying, using your nose and nasal breathing is really about use it or lose it. So you want to try to use it as much as possible. I have to give a couple of disclaimers about this. I'm not here giving clinical advice on what people could do. Sinus infections are real things. You need to see a specialist with it. If you just want to decongest your nose, and for someone with chronic sinusitis, which it sounds like what you have, Shelby, I would suggest a neti pot. Something you can do is exhale, hold your nostrils, hold your breath as long as you can, bob your head up and down, sideways, exhale, and do that six times. And for people without sinus infections who just have a plugged nose, that tends to work quite well.

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah, we've been doing that. How do you say that guy's name, Buteyko Breathing?

James Nestor:

Buteyko.

Shelby Stanger:

Buteyko Breathing.

James Nestor:

Buteyko. Yeah, you're already on this. You don't need me. You got it all figured out.

Shelby Stanger:

We need you. So we're going to tell the audience a little bit. We'll put a link to Buteyko Breathing. Before we keep talking about the four ways that you could try to breathe better right now, and how they can help you, I really love hearing about the things you just did to research your book. Is there anything else you can tell us? I know the book's not coming out until May, but that's really funny that you sleep with tape on your mouth, and I imagine you did some other weird things.

James Nestor:

I've found that the how of breathing well is pretty easy. There's a zillion books on pranayama and yoga and how to breathe right, and how to breathe wrong. That story wasn't very interesting to me. I wanted to know why these breathing methods were so effective, and what they did to the body, rather than just how to do them. So, that was the big experiment I did at Stanford. But in each chapter I go and hang out with the experts. We do studies. A lot of the book is looking at medical history, because so much of what we know about the power of the nose had been studied and used for thousands and thousands of years. There's this Chinese adage from a thousand years ago that says the breath inhaled through the mouth is called adverse breath, which is extremely harmful. Be careful to never breathe through the mouth. That was a thousand years ago. And we've been refinding this wisdom about nasal breathing over and over for centuries and centuries. We've just been forgetting about it the whole way through. So, to hang out with experts now who are now proving these ancient claims, I found was very interesting and thrilling. So, a lot of the book is with anthropologists, with dentists, with psychologists, with people you wouldn't assume would have an interest in a biological function, but it turns out they're studying breathing, because it applies to all of their practices in some very specific ways.

Shelby Stanger:

But did you hang out with like yoga gurus or people like Wim Hof as well?

James Nestor:

I hung out with all of them.

Shelby Stanger:

You did?

James Nestor:

So, yeah, yoga gurus, all of that. That's all great. I love that they're experts in practicing the art of breathing, but again, when it came down to understanding exactly what is happening in the human body and brain, there was a gap of understanding there with a lot of breathing therapists. Because breathing therapists are concerned with teaching people how to breathe, the best ways of breathing, and they're incredibly helpful to so many people. But I wanted to know why these things affect us in certain ways. How breathing can lead to anxiety, how it can cure depression, how it can cure autoimmune problems. And to find that information, I had to go much deeper into the medical community, which is a lot of what this book is. Wim Hof, specifically, I think he's done more for breathing awareness than anyone in the past 20, 30, 50 years. And I love his mission and what he's doing, but what he is doing is not new. The Wim Hof method, breathing in those certain ways, has been practiced for thousands and thousands of years. So I was looking at that backstory of how these things came to be, and what's actually happening to us when we practice them.

Shelby Stanger:

Okay, so a lot of us right now are experiencing anxiety and all sorts of other emotions right now. We're in a time like we've never been before. So can you talk to us a little bit about some types of breathing we can do right now, and why they work?

James Nestor:

For sure. About 20 years ago, a researcher, an Italian researcher, was looking at different prayers, and he was looking at the Buddhist prayer, Om Mani Padme Hum. He was looking at the Latin version of the rosary. He was looking at the Kundalini Sa Ta Na Ma. He was looking at Om. All of these different prayers, and it turns out, to practice these prayers takes about five to six seconds to vocalize them, and there's about a five to six second break. So, by practicing these prayers, you have to breathe in this very specific way. And this was across Hindu, Taoist, Native American cultures, they all had prayers that were in this very specific way of breathing. So, being a scientist, what he did is he brought a bunch of subjects in, hooked them into every imaginable sensor, and measured what happened to their bodies and their brains when they breathed this way. And he found that all of the functions of the body entered a state of coherence in which everything was working at peak efficiency. So, circulation increased, more oxygen was delivered to the brain. The heart rates would beat more in sync with the ways in which they were breathing. So what he said was, he's like, "Yeah, prayer heals when it's practiced at about five to six breaths per minute." So this is one of the most simple things that anybody can do, and it involves this. Inhaling very slowly for about five to six seconds. Don't worry about the exact timing. And then exhaling very slowly for about five to six seconds. And continually doing this. And to do this as long as you can, because there's no such thing as having too much peak efficiency. So, being a curious person, I got a pulse oximeter which measures the oxygen in the blood, and was curious if there was any oxygen deprivation of breathing this way, because I'm like, "God, this feels really slow. I don't feel like I'm getting enough oxygen." So I went to a gym and got on a stationary bike, and just pedaled as hard as I possibly could, breathing in this way. And my oxygen levels actually went up. They didn't go down, they went up. So, the idea that you need to breathe really fast and through your mouth to increase your oxygen, it's complete BS. This way of breathing, especially at rest, is the best way that you can breathe. And it's as easy as can be. And there's two doctors right now who have been studying this for years and years on depression, on anxiety, and other fear-based problems, maladies, even things like anorexia, and it's extremely calming to people and transformative for a lot of people.

Shelby Stanger:

I love that. So if you're listening at home, in five seconds, out five seconds. And James, is there any mantra we could say that also helps us besides just one, two, three, four, five, and on?

James Nestor:

Pray. Prayers are great. You can pick any prayer from any religion, as long as you're inhaling about five to six seconds, and exhaling five to six seconds.

Shelby Stanger:

I love it. You're just like, five to five. Okay. I love it. No, no, like, I got it. I get your drift. I think it's great. It's cool. We just keep it simple. Just breathe five in, exhale five out. That's really cool. Johnny's been trying to run nose breathing only, using that method. You told us about this six months ago. And he's gotten almost faster than me, so I guess it works. What else? What else can we try right now? I mean, that's obviously the most simple. Breathe through your nose, five in, five out. Anything else?

James Nestor:

Well, speaking of training, just this little side note here. This guy John Douillard, a trainer to Billy Jean King, and the New Jersey Nets, and a bunch of other sports stars in the '90s, took a bunch of athletes and placed them on a bike and had them just breathe through their mouth while they were on a bike, and peddling against different resistance. And then he had them just breathe through their nose. And he found that they were able to exert the same amount of energy breathing at about a third of the rate if they were breathing through their nose. So, enormous gains in endurance and enormous gains in recovery by just breathing slower, and through the nose.

Shelby Stanger:

So, really quickly, why? So, I get that the nose is also a good filter. So during this time maybe that helps, too?

James Nestor:

Yeah. Yeah, to a certain degree. I mean, there's so many benefits of nasal breathing. A lot of it has to do with nitric oxide, which is this amazing molecule that opens the capillaries, opens the veins, delivers more oxygen, gets circulation going, plays a role in immune function, indigestion, on and on. So nitric oxide, amazing thing. You get six-fold increase of nitric oxide breathing through your nose. And if you hum, you get a 15-fold increase. So, humming, as much as it may annoy anyone near you, is a wonderful thing to increase nitric oxide. So, that's another thing people can do around the house. Go hum. Hum a tune, hum a prayer, hum whatever, but try it for a few minutes.

Shelby Stanger:

What's your go-to hum?

James Nestor:

Oh, you know, Dixie. Just humming Dixie. Yeah, I used to whistle it, but now I just hum it. Or the Carpenters, Rainy Days and Mondays. That's a pretty good one. So, that's probably far before your time there, Shelby.

Shelby Stanger:

Are you not going to hum for us? I was giving you an invitation to hum.

James Nestor:

No, no, no, no. I'll let people, you can take these moments right now to hum. Spend a minute humming, as I tell you about one other hack, and it is breathing less. And this is going to answer your question, I hope. So, the idea that you're going to go to the gym, you're going to work out, you're going to breathe as much as you can. You're going to open your mouth, just get all that air in there. The idea that you are increasing the oxygenation in your body by breathing this much is completely false. In so many cases, the less you breathe, the more oxygen you're going to be delivering more easily to all of your tissues, muscles, and hungry cells. This sounds completely counterintuitive, but trust me, I've spent a couple of years talking with the top docs in this world, and seeing this for myself and this is all true. So, there's been a lot of marketing around oxygen and going to an oxygen bar, inhaling oxygen. For somebody who's healthy ... For sick people, that's very good. Okay? So, people below 90% oxygenation, of course, it's a lifesaver. For people who are healthy, that additional oxygen will do nothing for your body. This is a really hard thing for people to understand, but you will breathe it back out. No more oxygen is going to your tissues, muscles, or anywhere else by inhaling pure oxygen. So, sorry to burst the bubble.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm a little curious. What about climbers? We've interviewed a lot of people who go up to Everest, and obviously they need oxygen for different reasons. Did you look at altitude climbers?

James Nestor:

Of course. Because the altitude, there's so much less oxygen at 28,000 feet. So, at sea level, right, where oxygenation is normal, you do not need additional oxygen. What you need, and here's something concerning Everest. So, Luciano Bernardi also studied, an Italian researcher breathing expert, studied climbers, and he took six of them and he said, "I want you to practice breathing extremely slowly for the next several months." He took the other six and said, "You can breathe any way you want." Those six who practiced slowly were able to summit Everest without oxygen, because they were utilizing the oxygen that was already in their body more efficiently. And that's really the key here. It's not about getting more oxygen in, it's about utilizing the oxygen already in your body in the most efficient way. And you do that by breathing less, and by breathing slowly. Yes, there is a limit of breathing way too slowly and way less. But chances are, no one is really going to go to hit that. If you feel dizzy, then that's a problem. But the vast majority, whether we're working out, whether we're sitting around, whether we're doing anything, we're breathing too much air, too often. And the key is to slow that down.

Shelby Stanger:

This is really helpful. So just to recap, breathe through your nose, breathe in five seconds, slowly breathe out five seconds slowly. Just breathe a little less if you can, and hum. Was there something else that you thought maybe we could all benefit from?

James Nestor:

I think humming is a good one. Don't do it for hours a day. Do it for a few minutes a day. I think that's all you would really need. Those are some tips for people who can practice this all the time, for the vast majority of the population, right? This isn't asking people to do too much, to breathe slowly, to breathe less. But I understand some of your listeners ...

Shelby Stanger:

They're studs, man. They're athletes.

James Nestor:

... these are people who like to, like, they're studs.

Shelby Stanger:

They want to go further.

James Nestor:

They want to go out, they want to go further, they want to get weird. And for them, I spent a lot of time in the last third of the book practicing and researching something that I called Breathing Plus, which is the stuff that people who don't have a bunch of ongoing health issues or whatever, can really get into this stuff. And that's where I get into Tummo, and that's where I get into carbon dioxide therapies, and lot of the heavy duty pranayama stuff. So, Sudarshan kriya is another one. And I'm sure most of your listeners know Wim Hof, and know who he is, and his breathwork, which I think is again, fantastic. But it's not new stuff. So almost all of these kriyas practice the same, breathing extremely fast for a while, and then holding your breath, or breathing slow. And then breathing extremely fast, then holding your breath. So there are a zillion different ways of doing that. And I went into labs and figured out what actually happens to the body when we do that. And what we found was that, by forcing your body to breathe extremely fast, you are taking control of your nervous system. You are telling it when to turn on, and then you're telling it when to turn off. Because most people who are in chronic states of mild stress, which is like most people on the planet right now, especially now, live in this state in which they're not entirely off, but they're not entirely on. When you're in that state, your organs aren't getting efficient or enough oxygen, enough circulation. And your mind is constantly rattled. But to really push yourself to feel stress, and then to push it off, is a way of reclaiming that. And once you reclaim that, you can really heal your body in a bunch of amazing ways. Autoimmune diseases especially, have been found to really halt when people have practiced these extreme breathing methods. Also lowers blood pressure, and on and on and on. But it was interesting looking at the history of Tummo, and looking at how many people have, Westerners have practiced it, before Wim. So I get into that history as well.

Shelby Stanger:

So, Tummo is like breath of fire breathing, correct?

James Nestor:

Breath of fire breathing. Wim Hof method is definitely a variation of that. The Kundalini pranayama as well. And I would suggest to listeners, if you're bored on a Monday night, which nowadays means like everyone on the planet, this guy Chuck McGee, a Wim Hof instructor, offers free sessions at 9:00 PM Pacific on Monday nights that anybody can tune into on Zoom. And this guy's amazing. Hung out with him, did a bunch of interviews, breathed with him many, many times. Awesome guy. And it's entirely free. So I'd suggest people tune into his little cast.

Shelby Stanger:

That's really cool. Yeah, I'll include a couple of other free and paid stuff. So like I have friends who do Our Breath Collective, and it's a morning Wim Hof style breath class for 15 minutes every morning. And

they have a lot of free content, just on Instagram. It's pretty cool. I mean, in San Diego there's breathing spas opening up, where basically people can breathe and then jump in a cold bath or a sauna. I mean, it's really cool. So, what was your favorite Breathing Plus type of breath exercise? Because you've done it all, what do you like to do when you want to feel really good? And I'm just going to preface with, I've tried stuff with a guy named Dan Brule, I've done tons of different Wim Hof style classes. I did this thing called transformational breathing, and some of them I felt really good, like almost kind of embarrassed because I felt so good. And then other times, I've just felt, and I haven't really experimented with drugs, like I don't know how, but I felt like just euphoric. And I've always been able to get into meditation very quickly if I do breathing techniques first. I don't know why, and I just kind of do it. I mean, I don't have the science background that you do. I just, I'm like, "Oh, it feels good. I'll just keep doing it." So, for you, what's your Breathing Plus that you love, and why do you think it works?

James Nestor:

Well, the method that actually convinced me that there was something more than just an article, but a book in all of this is called Sudarshan kriya, which is taught through the Art of Living. Big organization. They have hundreds of schools, thousands of schools all over the world. And this was several, several years ago, but I went there. I was in a bit of a funk, like I was fixing my house, that was stressing me out. My job was stressing me out. And a doctor friend actually told me a breathing class could help. And so, I went to this class, and we just sat there cross-legged, and breathed very slowly, and very fast, and very slowly again, very fast again. And at the beginning, I was like, "Oh my God, when can I get out of here? I'm hungry. What am I doing here?" And then, without sounding too spacey, something happened to me. And I don't know what. I really felt like I fell asleep, or maybe I just had a little lapse in time or something, but when I came out of it, my jeans were completely wet with sweat. So were my socks. My hair was sopping wet. I sweated through my sweater. And I live in San Francisco. The room temperature was about 68. I was sitting next to a window, and the instructor came out and was just like, "Whoa, are you okay?" And I felt amazing. So, I talked to doctors about this. I said, "What happened to me?" And they said, "Oh, you must had a fever." "Oh, the room was too hot. Were you wearing a heavy jacket?" And none of those things had happened. My body had gone through something really profound. And so, that's why I spent the next several years researching this stuff. That's why I'm so fascinated with it, because there is really a gap in Western science right now in our understanding of the potential of breathing. Eastern medicine has known about this for thousands of years, but we're just catching up now. And I think it's a very exciting time. So, Sudarshan kriya, it's tough, because I can't tell you how to do it. It takes like 40 minutes, and it's the most heavy-duty, hardcore breathing thing I've done, but nothing has been more cleansing or more transformative for me in my understanding of the potential of breathing. And there's like, something like 60 studies that have been done on this breathing method, which shows how it transforms people's bodies and minds, lowers blood pressure, and autoimmune disease. Basically all of those things that Wim Hof method does, Sudarshan kriya does. Because it's doing the same thing. You're breathing really heavy, and you're breathing really soft.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm so excited.

James Nestor:

So, to answer your question, that's the one. I wish I could tell everyone how to do it right now, but you're going to have to go check it out for yourself. There's some YouTube stuff you can check out. Some people have posted it.

Shelby Stanger:

I've been looking to get certified in breath technique, and I've been reluctant to do kind of what everybody else is doing. So there you go. I will go get certified in this, teach it, and then anybody who wants to join, I'll just teach you guys. Well, once again, folks, this is not medical advice. Consult a doctor, but dang, James, I'm really excited to read your book. This has been so much fun. James is a surfer, his first book, *Deep*, you can get it anywhere right now. You'll be able to order *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* now, for preorder. It comes out in May. Anything else you want to share? This has really been awesome. Thank you.

James Nestor:

No, I think as long as people practice this stuff, set up some breathing timers so you don't forget, maybe every hour a little chime goes off. You breathe those five to six seconds in, five to six seconds out. And I think you're going to really feel and experience how transformative this simple little breathing hack can be.

Shelby Stanger:

Remember, we can all breathe better now. If you want to try some of James's exercises, here's a reminder of some of the tools he talked about. First, just breathe through your nose. Try to limit breathing through your mouth. Breathe five seconds in, five seconds out. Then try doing this over and over for about five minutes and see how you feel. Hum a song. Humming is really good for opening up your nasal passages. And try breathing less by slowing down your breathing. Thanks again to James Nestor. James, I can't wait until we're able to go surfing and breathe together again. You can follow James at mrjamesnestor.com. That's M-R-J-A-M-E-S-N-E-S-T-O-R.com. You can also follow him on Instagram at Mr. James Nestor. To all of you, I hope you're staying safe and well. *Wild Ideas Worth Living* is part of the REI Podcast Network. It's hosted by me, Shelby Stanger, written and edited by Annie Fassler, and produced by Chelsea Davis. Our executive producers are Paolo Mottola and Joe Crosby. As always, we appreciate when you subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you listen. There's been some creative reviews lately, so I appreciate them. And remember, you can still live wildly by staying safe. That's the most important thing right now. I'm sending you all virtual hugs. We love you.