

Art of Breathing in the Time of Covid

The breath is a powerful healing tool. This is what I teach to the Alexander Teachers who participate in my Art of Breathing postgraduate certificate training program. One of my students, Jane Julier, recently shared a story with me about how she used Art of Breathing to help her daughter with the respiratory damage caused by Covid-19 infection. Jane and Laurie live in England, and I asked them to share their accounts.

In her own words, Jane Julier's story:

My daughter, Laurie, was infected with Covid-19 only six months after starting her first job as an Occupational Therapist at a hospital near London. Six months into her new job, the pandemic hit the UK. Laurie was working in a very stressful environment, with increasing numbers of patients and staff testing positive. Laurie tested positive April 24, 2020.

My daughter is a fit, young 25-year-old with no pre-existing conditions, and, whilst her symptoms at first seemed to be mild, she started to develop respiratory problems after seven days.

Laurie agreed to work with me every day during her three-week recovery. I am a qualified Alexander Teacher, but the skills I learned in Jessica Wolf's Art of Breathing program proved most crucial. I led my daughter through body mapping to calm her nervous system. Through our screens, I guided her with breathing procedures that would help build and restore her breathing coordination.

I am so happy to say that Laurie has fully recovered from Covid-19 and has returned to work at the hospital. She continues to notice that her breathing rhythm becomes compromised when she is tired, but she now has tools to help herself work through this. Jessica also sent Laurie an audio lie-down recording, which helped so much on so many levels.

(Jane is a Teacher of the Alexander Technique, MSTAT).

In her own words, Laurie's story:

I tested positive for Covid-19 in April. As an occupational therapist, I felt well-positioned to self-manage the fatigue and symptoms associated with the virus. What I was not prepared for, however, was the respiratory distress and excruciating anxiety I would experience shortly after being infected.

During the course of my illness, I struggled to breathe. The rhythm of my breath fluctuated so much that I felt as if someone had cleared my airway and subsequently blocked it up again. I would describe to my mum the feeling of having a tight band across my chest, restricting my lung capacity and creating a very claustrophobic internal environment. This feeling was akin to breathing through a tight straw, and I experienced recurring periods of burning sensations and inflammation. I understood that my respiratory distress and anxiety were connected, one leading to the other in a perpetual cycle. Even so, I spent almost every minute of every day ruminating and worrying about my ability to breathe.

My mum's training in Art of Breathing was critical to my recovery. Our sessions helped to calm my sympathetic nervous system and quiet my anxiety around my struggle to breathe. For a short period following the sessions, breathing became less tiresome and I could focus on other things.

It was amazing to feel more and more freedom as my mum continued to lead me through visualizations of my breathing mechanism and procedures that helped expand my lungs without pain.

These sessions were very special. Despite the unsettling nature of my illness, this focused attention to my breath provided me with a restorative routine. I believe that any person experiencing similar respiratory struggles would benefit from this breathing practice. I am grateful to have recovered from Covid-19, and even though there may be residual anxiety about my respiratory function, I now have the tools and resources to overcome it.

I'm grateful to Jane and Laurie for sharing their stories, and most happy that Laurie has recovered. This mother-daughter duo reminds me of the power of breathing coordination to restore both physical and emotional wellbeing. We all can find greater peace when we allow an easy and effortless exhalation to prompt an easy and effortless inhalation.



Laurie and Jane