

Breathwork and Couple Relationships: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract: Breathwork is a transpersonal approach to counseling in which manipulating and focusing on the breath is the means toward promoting healing and wholeness. The researchers investigated participants' experiences in the breathwork treatment process, the treatment effects on participants' personal growth and more importantly marital relationships. The results from this study can be used to help counselors understand the triumphs and challenges in doing breathwork with married couples.

Introduction

A marital or intimate relationship is one of the most important relationships in a person's life. However, many couples find it difficult to maintain a positive long-term relationship as evidenced by the high divorce rate in this country. In searching for effective therapeutic interventions, counselors and researchers have studied stable relationships. Researchers have concluded that the common characteristics in stable relationships include equality between partners (Gottman et al., 1998), the ability to express personal vulnerability and accept spouses' emotional expressions (Cordova, 1998, Fruzzetti & Rubio-Kuhnert, 1998), the ability to communicate confiding tasks (Kobak & Hazan, 1991), and stress management skills (Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987). These research findings suggest that an individual's psychological condition or internal system is essential in building relationships or construing his or her external system. As Virginia Satir noted, "Making contact involves two people at a time and three parts. Each person in contact with himself or herself and each in contact with the other" (as cited in Braza, 1997). An individual will not be able to build solid relational contact with others if the individual is not capable of being in contact with him or herself.

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To understand human internal systems and behaviors, the field of psychology has gone through several development stages namely, the First Force (psychoanalysis), the Second Force (behaviorism), the Third Force (humanistic approach), and the Fourth Force (transpersonal psychology) (Lapham, 2000). Each force attempts to fill in the missing components from the previous force. The Fourth Force, transpersonal psychology, includes all the facets of personal psychology and psychiatry, adding the spiritual or transcendent levels of consciousness to its study. This approach attempts to study the entire spectrum of human consciousness. This spectrum ranges from pre-personal to personal to transpersonal experiences, from instinctual to egoic to spiritual modes, from subconscious to self-conscious to super-conscious structures, and from pre-rational to rational to trans-rational states (Wilber, 1996). The intervention in this study, breathwork therapy, is an approach that can be classified within the transpersonal psychology realm.

Breathwork Therapy

Counselors who use breathwork techniques instruct clients on utilizing breathing patterns that result in access to non-ordinary states of consciousness, thereby promoting therapeutic effects for clients (Lee & Speier, 1996). A nonordinary state of consciousness is slightly different from the ordinary state of consciousness or the waking state. Examples of non-ordinary state activities include dreaming, lucid dreaming, precognition, intense concentration, daydreaming, childbirth, orgasm, etc. People perform daily functions and interact with the material world at the ordinary state of consciousness, such as working, studying, talking, cooking, writing, and driving.

The non-ordinary state of consciousness is often referred to as a trance state of consciousness, altered state of consciousness, or Alpha-Theta state. In this state individuals are able to access suppressed memories and emotions from their subconscious. The non-ordinary state creates an expanded view of one's identity and increases one's sense of connection to other people and to the world (Taylor, 1994).

Accessing non-ordinary states of consciousness through manipulation of the breath is a practice based on ancient traditions (Lee & Speier, 1996). For centuries, consciously altered breathing has been practiced in Eastern cultures and various religions (Rama, Ballentine, & Hymes, 1979, Shin, 1996, Soo, 1977, Lampman, 1999, Larson, 1967, Katz, 1973). In the early part of the 20th century, a German psychiatrist, Wilhelm Reich,

rediscovered the function of breath and utilized it to help clients build the mind-body connection and promote therapeutic effects (Mann & Hoffman, 1980, DeMeo, 1998). After Reich, many important figures contributed knowledge and techniques in developing Breathwork therapy.

Alexander Lowen's bioenergetics approach (Lowen, 1994), Leonard Orr's rebirthing techniques (Orr, 1977), Stanislav Groff's Holotropic Breathwork (Groff, 1985), and Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks' relationship work (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1998) have all provided rich clinical observations regarding the effectiveness of breathwork therapy.

Research data regarding the effects of breathing has been documented. The data has primarily illuminated that breathing patterns are closely connected to human emotions, health, and consciousness (Shannahoff-Khalsa, 1991, Martinez et al., 1996, Hegel & Ferguson, 1997, Holt & Andrews, 1998, Munjack, Brown, & McDowell, 1993, Rapee et al., 1992, van den Hout et al., 1992, Wilhelm, Trabert, Roth, 2001). However, research studies related directly to breathwork therapy are still sparse.

Published literature that supports the efficacy of breathwork therapy is primarily based on clinical observation rather than on hard empirical data. In the past decade, four doctoral dissertations have provided positive results regarding the effects of Holotropic breathwork treatment (Pressman, 1993, Holmes, 1993, La Flamme, 1994, Hanratty, 2002). This study attempted to further explore the effectiveness of Breathwork therapy with relationship issues.

Counselors who utilize breathwork in their practice believe that unresolved significant experiences produce psychological and/or physical symptoms for individuals. Through the breathwork process, unresolved significant experiences emerge from an individual's unconsciousness. The physical, mental and emotional effect from the breathing process help the individual reconnect to distress or traumatic events that have heretofore been suppressed. The breathing process further helps the individual make connections to irrational and erroneous beliefs and behaviors that he or she created from the event. The support of a counselor and the use of energy-releasing interventions provide an opportunity for an individual to fully experience the event, while making it possible to complete and integrate the information from the event.

Re-visiting the experiences in a counseling setting and from different perspectives helps the individual to release previously held limiting thoughts and opens him or her to positive potentials (Lapham, 2000). However, Grof (1980) stressed that re-visiting past events is not sufficient

to create a therapeutic effect. Successfully integrating information that exists about a particular psychological issue is crucial for the healing process.

Breathwork therapy sessions require that the counselor be trained and experienced with the techniques and also be familiar with non-ordinary states of consciousness. In an individual breathwork session, the client will be the breather and the counselor will be the “sitter” to provide a safe space for the client’s breathing process. In a breathwork therapy group, two breathing sessions are conducted in sequence. The clients in the group work in pairs. One is the breather and the partner is the sitter that holds the space for the session. The pair reverses roles in the following session. During the process, the counselor watches all the pairs and supports the sitters and breathers if necessary. Each breathing session usually lasts from one hour to one and one-half hours.

The goals and intentions for the session are reviewed prior to the breathing. The intention or goal is merely a stimulus or catalyst for the session but is not a guiding force of the session. The breathing part of the session begins by lying down on a comfortable surface, relaxing, and breathing fully. When the breath and energy flow freely through the body, the breather is then encouraged to increase the depth and frequency of the breathing, which is the primary mechanism leading to non-ordinary states. During the process, the breather maintains the breathing flow, and the counselor chooses appropriate interventions to facilitate the breather to work through unresolved issues. After the session, activities and verbal sharing are conducted to help the breather reflect his or her experience.

Method

Participants

Eighteen individuals (nine intact couples) were recruited in San Antonio, Texas. Announcement and referral information was posted in the local counseling centers and bookstores. For the purposes of this study, a marital relationship is defined as: two individuals who agree to have a committed monogamous relationship and who have lived together in the same household for more than six months. Therefore, to be eligible for the study, the couples had to have been married or living together for at least six months.

As summarized in Table 1, participants in this study group consisted of nine intact couples. The couples’ ethnic backgrounds included two Hispanic couples, six Caucasian couples, and one interracial couple,

making a total of 18 individuals. Participants' ages ranged from 26 years to 76 years of age. The length of the couples' relationships varied from six months to 48 years. Five of the participants in this study group reported having had Breathwork therapy experience in the past. Pseudonyms for each couple were used to protect their confidentiality and identity.

Table 1
Demographic Data of Participants

Couple	Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Education Level		Previous Breathwork	Time Together	Children from Current Marriage	Children from Previous Marriage
1	Julia	53	White	Masters	No	25 yr.	2	0	
	Oscar	53	White	Bachelors	No				
2	Alma	58	White	Associate	No	32 yr.	1 Biological 1 Adopted	1	
	Michael	65	White	Associate	No				
3	Linda	27	Hispanic	High School	No	8.5 yr.	1	1	
	Vincent	28	Hispanic	High School	No				
4	Donna	48	White	Ph.D.	Yes	14 yr.	2	1	
	Kyle	40	White	Masters	Yes				
5	Rebecca	72	Hispanic	High School	Yes	48 yr.	3	0	
	George	74	Hispanic	Bachelors	No				
6	Barbara	56	White	High School	No	24 yr.	0	2	
	Carl	64	White	High School	No				
7	Rose	24	White	Masters	Yes	3 yr.	1	0	
	Chris	26	White	Associates	No				
8	Sara	24	White	High School	No	5.5 yr.	1	0	
	Alex	35	White	Masters	Yes				
9	Debra	48	Hispanic	Masters	No	6 mo.	0	2 Adopted	
	Dean	50	American Indian	Masters	No				

Design and Analysis

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research method to study participants' experiences in breathwork treatment and the treatment effects on participants' marital relationships. Phenomenological study identifies the presence, absence, or nature of the phenomenon being studied rather than the degree or amount as in quantitative research. It is an approach that pays attention to how the participants make meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998) and provides a means of systematizing the scientific endeavor through the "context of discovery" rather than the quantitative stance of "context of verification" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 14).

The main investigation of this study explored the effect of breathwork therapy on marital relationships. Breathwork therapy literature has

indicated that individuals can gain an understanding of the patterns of their life experiences and reconstruct their basic beliefs by experiencing the breathwork process (Lee & Speier, 1996). With this process, individuals can make positive decisions for themselves and their relationships. Since an individual's personal growth could be correlated to the quality of his or her relationships, personal changes and the effect on marital satisfaction were also studied in this research.

In a one-month time frame, recruited couples participated in three breathwork therapy weekend workshops. Each weekend workshop lasted approximately five hours. Before the first weekend workshop, an orientation meeting was provided to all participants. In the orientation meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the research, introduced the breathwork therapy process, and then obtained informed consent from each research participant. A pre-treatment interview with each couple was conducted after the orientation meeting. After the third weekend workshop, a post-treatment interview with each couple was conducted.

The phenomenon investigated in the interviews included: 1. Do the participants perceive relationship changes over the course of treatment? If so, how do they believe that change occurred? 2. Do the participants perceive personal change over the course of treatment? If so, how do they believe that change occurred? 3. What are the breathwork therapy experiences of the participants?

The researcher met with each married couple for the pre-treatment and post-treatment interviews, and conducted a total of 18 interviews that produced approximately 432 pages of text. After assessing the volume of data, the researcher used the coding system developed by Rubin and Rubin (1995) to code the data into three categories: concepts, emotive stories, and themes. The coding of concepts involved identifying the concepts through which the participants understand their world (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). These concepts were typically found in specialized vocabularies and narrowed or altered meanings to common words and phrases. The researcher also coded for stories and narratives that were part of the participants' answers or explanations. Stories were particularly important because they communicated significant themes and often addressed a difficult topic. The code for themes often described the participants' beliefs and values. Themes were repeated throughout the interview and addressed issues raised by stories or concepts.

The texts from the pre-treatment interviews were utilized to provide the couple's relationship context prior to the breath work treatment. The

researcher coded the text from the post-treatment interviews for themes, concepts, and stories related to the research questions. During the process of data evaluation, areas of further research emerge.

Results

Through the process of analysis, six dominant themes emerged. These six themes were: (1) relationship changes, (2) individual changes, (3) breathwork experience, (4) inhibition, (5) life transition, and (6) psychotherapy comparison. The following is a summary of the themes which will first focus on the marital relationship changes, secondly, introduce the individual changes, and finally describe the overall breathwork experiences.

Relationship Changes

The relationship changes due to the breath work experiences were identified in eight categories: (1) understanding each other, (2) communication, (3) affection and support, (4) closer emotional connection, (5) physical touch, (6) activities, (7) willingness, and (8) accepting differences. In general, participants reported positive improvement in their marital relationships both during and after the breathwork experiences.

Participants reported that they gained more understanding of each other through the breathwork experience. As Alma described, *“The breathwork workshop is kind of like a miracle because it gave Michael a glimpse of something I didn’t think I could ever show him... he had never been able to see [my point of view]...and he can not figure out why I act and feel the way I did... I think this [Breathwork] gave him a glimpse into what really happened to me, and that’s extremely important to me.”* Michael explained, *“As I sat there, holding the space, I felt a lot of the emotions that Alma felt, more than I ever had before...it’s amazing that I don’t need to know everything to reach the point and understand [her].”*

Participants also reported that the communication with their spouses had been improved since the breathwork workshop. As Carl shared, *“She [Barbara] says that since we’ve been going there [breathwork workshop] I’m a much better communicator... I think it’s better because she’s been talking more to me too... I feel like I can communicate more without getting upset. I can express myself more...”* Barbara added, *“Before [the workshop], he [Carl] would just keep everything in himself, and I felt like it was more me [trying to share thoughts and feelings], and him not getting it because he wasn’t brought up around that...now, he is sharing more.”*

Linda also described, *“He [Vincent] finally was ‘there’, sitting down for that moment, and finally listening...there is no ‘you did this, you did that’...just be there, talking, listening, and expressing...that helped out a lot.”* Vincent explained, *“In the workshop, you zone everything out, you know it’s just both of you, which is like {something} you’d never do, unless you are in a heated argument. But it’s heated and it’s an argument, you never really talk.”* Vincent added, *“Basically, we are accepting what is going on, and when that happens, there is a lot of communication, and when there is a lot of communication, problems are solved.”*

Couples reported that they sense more affection and support from each other, and a closer emotional connection with each other. Oscar described, *“It [breathwork] broke through some real big things for us...we kind of shut each other out. The thing that was so emotional for both of us was the other one reaching through the wall.”* Julia added, *“I was not even used to looking at Oscar in the eye. We couldn’t even look at each other... We just totally avoid each other, so just having eye contact [in the workshop] was huge for us.”*

Rebecca stated, *“The good thing that happened was when we tried to hold hands and say ‘thank you’ to each other... We had been through years without touching each other...so...it was...”* George added, *“I sense the closeness there. It’s kind of meaningful.”*

In addition, couples reported that they had more physical contact with each other after the breathwork workshop. Oscar described, *“I get hugs that are just wonderful hugs, they’re not obligatory hugs, they’re real hugs. And physical contact, I love that. I’m a happier person.”* Julia added, *“He [Oscar] has been massaging my neck. My neck hurts, and he’ll just walk up and start massaging for no reason, which I love. I mean I just melt when he does that. He’s making an effort just to have a little more bodily contact that doesn’t have anything to do with sex. He’s making an effort to just kind of pat me as he walks by or just connect in some way.”*

Alma and Michael also stated that they have more physical touch. Alma said, *“In the past, he [Michael] wouldn’t touch me, but now he does...he also sleeps closer to me in bed.”* Alma and Michael reported that they had stopped their sexual activity 14 years ago, and they had started working to regain their sexual activity. Alma shared, *“We kind of got out of the practice. We’re trying to work with that, because when you’re out of practice, it’s harder to get back into practice, but we’re working with that.”*

After the breathwork experiences, couples reported that they started and planned to do more fun activities together despite their busy schedules.

Vincent shared, *“I’m going to plan something beautiful for Valentines’ day, and we are doing something with the family... I never wanted to drive an hour to just eat food with her [Linda’s] folks, but this time, I did, and we had a great time.”* Oscar also reported, *“After the second session, we walked out hugging each other. We went to a movie. And we don’t generally do much...Actually; Mark [their son] still needs rides places... on weekends he is a very big socialite...and we just kind of came home and said... we’re going to a movie, you know, it’s like good luck finding a ride wherever you’re going... we just took care of ourselves and went to a movie, and we were arm in arm going into the movie and coming out... we’ve talked about having more physical contact and nurturing the relationship.”*

Participants reported that their spouses’ willingness to participate in the workshop had made a difference in the relationship. Rose shared that it means a lot for her to have her husband participating in the breathwork workshop with her. Rose stated, *“It’s a huge deal, and I just feel very loved that Chris was willing to try it for me.”* After the workshop, Rose and her husband also recognized their differences and their interaction patterns. Chris described, *“I don’t understand how it [breathwork] works...it was very frustrating for me...”* Rose added, *“I usually am the one who jumps into new things... he [Chris] wants to understand exactly what all the perimeters are, exactly what is going to happen, exactly what is not going to happen. He needs to have that analytical, very detailed understanding of it...”* Both Rose and Chris were able to use this experience to reassure each other that they are willing to respect the other person’s need in either staying in a safety zone or trying new experiences without making negative assumptions toward their relationship.

Participants also reported that the therapeutic effect was built up through the entire three breathwork workshops process. In each breathwork session, participants were able to move into a deeper emotional level than their previous session. As Oscar reported, the therapeutic effect resulted from *“not just one thing... when we did the breathing on back and forth [first session], it was kind of the beginning, to me. And we made eye contact [second session], and the forgiveness thing [third session] was incredible. The kind of holding each other’s space. The touching at the end...everything leading up to it was what made it feel special...it was just kind of like a climax of the whole thing... All these things were saying that there was this barrier, this brick wall, and we pushed through it here with the breathing, and we pushed through it again with forgiveness, and then*

truly connecting. All those things, it wasn't just one. But it was a process of going, connecting, and breaking through this barrier that was there."

Julia agreed, *"It was a process... like with the first session we were kind of feeling things out, we weren't sure what was gonna happen, a little bit uncomfortable, .. Um, the second session, I felt like I kind of settled in and I knew what we were doing, I knew what the goal was, I was working towards the goal. And for me, in the third session, it happened when I was asking for forgiveness, and Oscar looked me right in the eye, he took both of my hands, and he said, 'you've done enough. That's it. You don't have to ask anything else.' That really touched me... It was a progression. It was not easy the first time, what I needed the second time, then really deep the third time."*

Rose also described, *"The three different sessions have built on each other in such a way that I can't say it was just of the last session that that [new realization] came from. I think it's been building through as the process...because I'd gotten into it [the realization] already before the last session, but the last session solidify it."*

The result of this study showed that the three breathwork therapy sessions made a positive impact on participants' marital relationships. They reported great improvement in being more intimate with their spouse both physically and emotionally because of the breathwork experience. Three out of nine couples stated that they had been avoiding physical contact with each other for a number of years, and they had started giving and receiving pleasant physical contact with each other after the workshop. Most of the participants in this study reported increased physical contact and rebuilt a sense of closeness and emotional connection with each other through the breathwork experience. This result suggests that the quality of a marital relationship can be improved in a short time, and that breathwork therapy is a valuable therapy approach that counselors and psychotherapist should consider utilizing in their psychotherapy practices.

Several essential relationship skills, such as communication, time management, and demonstrating affections, were reportedly improved in participants' marital relationship. More than half of the participants in this study stated that they and their spouses were less defensive or less guarded with each other, which improved their communication greatly. A majority of the participants in this study also described that they had an increased desire to show caring for their spouses which influences them to reprioritize their daily schedule and behaviorally demonstrate more affection for their spouses. This information suggests that poor relationship

skills may not be the only cause of marital tensions, and marital therapists who focus on behavioral skills training for couples may not be as effective as the therapists who also focus on the clients' emotional states.

Individual Change

Besides the relationship improvement, participants also recognized positive changes on an individual level. Individual changes due to breathwork experiences were observed in four different areas, which included feeling at ease, emotional change, physical, and connection with others. Many participants reported having an overall sense of well-being as a result of the breathwork experiences. There were no negative effects reported, although a small number of participants stated that they could not recognize changes in themselves at the time of the interview.

Michael described the peaceful feeling he gained from the experience, *"we had a long period of time that was very difficult and the opposite of peaceful... but I've seen a difference just in the time since we went through that [breathwork workshop].... I feel more at ease, more at peace than I was."* Julia also described, *"My body's seems so much softer, and more relaxed."*

In addition, participants reported that they recognized the emotion changes in their spouse as well as themselves. George stated, *"She [Rebecca] is working at being in a joyful mood, and they [Rebecca and her sister] are happy to be with one and another; that's a sign of coming from the breathwork. She told me how she felt and she seemed to feel a lot better because now she knows [more about herself]."* Oscar stated, *"That monkey on your back...the thing that has been taken off, and you're relaxed, and, I think it changes the way you look at the world. It really does for me... I'm not as needy... I think there's a sadness to that [neediness], you know there's a tension to it, and there's a burden to it, and when you don't have those things, life's a little more refreshing... you're not as needy. You have it. You are more secure."*

Several participants reported that they were sick in the interval between workshops. Debra had skin infections and was hospitalized for it. Vincent reported, *"I was sick like a dog,"* but he was able to recover from it shortly. Both Oscar and Julia had a cold, and Oscar described, *"It [the cold] really wiped her [Julia] out, and it lasted for over two weeks."* And, many other participants were influenced by seasonal allergies.

Participants' sickness could have been related to the weather and the general environment in January when the workshops were conducted. At

the same time, the sickness could also have been a “detoxification” process. As Julia experienced, *“I have been tense for a long time, and now I can feel at ease and relaxed with Oscar [husband] at the same place.”* When people hold their emotional guard or physical tension long enough, releasing of the tension or the guard could create a physical reaction, such as feeling ill (Hay, 2002).

Participants reported that they were able to create closer emotional connection with other peoples. As Donna described, *“When I went to work, I could feel the effects of how much it [breathwork] had done for me... it was so smooth and peaceful, and they [the clients] told me so much, and they were just sharing so much that I feel I may have come across even just a little bit different.”* Julia also reported, *“Everything went smoothly, the machinery worked ok. Dr. Tim is ... he scared me, the first time I met him, and [recently] he just bent over backwards to be nice to me ... It was just the result of feeling good about yourself. Just, not being burdened. I mean, I feel like people probably pick up that I’m depressed and unhappy and struggling with my own issues. Why should they trust me to work on them when I’ve got problems. But now, I feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing, and I’m going to go forward with it and I’m excited about it.”*

The results of this study showed that the three breathwork therapy sessions had positive effects on individuals and couples. Participants reported feeling at ease with life, feeling less angry and sad, having more self-understanding and self-acceptance, and feeling more connected to people in their lives. This indicates that breathwork therapy can produce strong therapeutic effects and facilitate personal growth in a short time. In addition, participants reported that they were confident in maintaining the positive changes that they had obtained from the breathwork therapy, although future research on the long-term breathwork therapy effects is needed to solidify the participants’ report.

Breathwork Experience

Participants’ relationship and individual improvement can not be looked apart from the entire breathwork experience which leads to the changes. The physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual process involved in the breathwork provided an opportunity for the participants to create change for their relationship and themselves.

Participants reported that they experienced physical sensations, such as mild pressure, pain, cold, tingling, coughing, or suffocating, when they started to breathe fully. However, those physical sensations dissolved at the

end of each breathwork therapy session. One participant, Kyle, stated, *“As far as it [the psychological issue] being emotional, it was a physical sensation connected with it.”* Another participant, Linda, described her physical experience, *“...the whole physical thing was crazy. I just felt crippled...that [crippled sensation] eventually went away... it felt like something I let go of, some kind of emotion... I guess whatever I was hold on to, you just letting it go...its amazing of all the things you feel when you breathe.”*

Participants also experienced pain in different ways when they breathed fully and oxygenated their body. Some of the participants felt the pain covered their entire body, and some of the participants felt the pain in a particular area on their body. However, all of the participants who experienced pain reported the pain eventually dissolved during the breathwork therapy process. As Oscar described, *“I was feeling kind of a pain in my heart, and I felt a spear in my stomach ...and I really got into this thing about my emotions, letting my emotions out, and I did, I cried...in the third session, I felt [the pain] here [the chest], and I just held it, with some compassion, and it kind of dissolved. I got very...kind of spacious...asked me if I had an out of body experience...it was almost like that.”*

Participants who experienced cold stated that they felt the coldness once they started breathing fully. The coldness usually dissolved as the breathwork therapy progressed. Vincent said, *“My feet were super cold all of the sudden, and I was hungry, and than, I had some emotions came up... problems I was trying to [work on].”*

George reported the tingling sensation he felt in the process, *“Every time [in breathwork process], I had this sensation on my feet and my hand, tingling.”* Oscar also described, *“I had a great body rush type of thing... The whole body was tingling. Almost like when your foot goes to sleep... It was my whole body...it’s kind of neat.”*

The sensation of suffocating or difficulty to breath was also reported by the participants. Alex described, *“It felt like I had a knot stuck in my chest... I had a hard time breathing because of allergies, and different things, but part of [it] I think was emotional.”*

A few participants reported that coughing and vomiting sensation happened during the breathwork process. They also reported that the coughing and vomiting sensation were related to the issues they were working on, and they intentionally wanted to “cough it [the emotion] out.” Kyle described, *“I was trying to cough out all the anger and fear...and, it’s*

funny, because when I went away...a sinus thing that was into my chest area...it actually went away...so, a lot of coughing...most of it came up."

Participants also reported that breathing fully helped them get in touch with their emotions and helped them to release negative emotions. In addition, participants acknowledged that it was a valuable experience to sit and hold space for their spouses' breathwork sessions. As Alex described, *"This [breathwork] is the only thing that I know that can get into the gut level...in the breathing [process], I get in touch with my feelings, which I usually don't..."* Participants were also able to feel the nurturing from their spouse in the breathwork process. Oscar described, *"At the end of the session, she [wife] put her hand on my bald head ...and I just broke down in tears. It was...it was reaching through... that moment, I was so moved, I just sobbed... I mean this moment I've been waiting for I think longer than our marriage, you know, it's a moment of somebody genuinely reaching out and caring."*

Many participants described that they were able to make connections with their life events and gained further self-understanding through the breathwork process. Rebecca described, *"It's incredible how the bits and pieces from my life come together; how they have come together since I was six years old. How they connect to each other...all the darkness in my life, and I knew that...I mean I knew that [all the past events], but I hadn't put them together. And then, [after I put them together,] I understood how I can get out of there [the darkness]."*

Most of the participants who had never experienced breathwork therapy reported that before the workshop they were feeling skeptical about the effect of breathwork, but were willing to try a new experience. After the workshop, participants reported two different reactions about their "not knowing" experience. (1) Participants with the practical perspective reported that they experienced positive personal changes and relational changes from the breathwork therapy. They were satisfied about the effects from the breathwork although they cannot conceptualize the mechanism behind the process. As Michael said, *"I was very skeptical about it, because I didn't understand. I still don't understand what happened, but I came away from there [the workshop] attaining several goals. I didn't understand why it happened as it did, but even though, I was able to attain it [the goal]...That whole thing is a mystery to me...I don't understand why, I just know it works."* Oscar also described, *"The best way to go about this is just not to expect anything. I really didn't know what to expect, and I didn't want to go in expecting the same thing that happened"*

in the [last session]. And honestly, it was different [in each session]... I didn't know what to expect...It was all surprises...they were all incredible surprises. There was nothing negative."

(2) Participants with the analytical perspective reported discomfort and hesitation throughout the entire breathwork workshop process. As Chris described, *"It's all very confusing to me...I try to figure out what I'm suppose to get from [the breath work experience] in my mind, I thought maybe it's this, but no, that's not it. And I thought maybe it's that, but, no, that's not it, either... It's very frustrating"*

The majority of the participants in this study said that they experienced non-ordinary states of consciousness. Donna described, *"I've done hypnotherapy before. I feel as though I go to a hypnotherapy... like I'm hypnotized in a way, and I get to a place...like a trance kind of a place where things are really, really vivid and happening and connections can be made."* There were three types of non-ordinary state of consciousness experiences reported by the participants: dream-like state, meditative relaxation, and spiritual experiences.

Dean described the dream-like state, *"There were moments...I'd start to experience a vision, the flashes, the scenes, scenarios, scenes I was engaged in .. activities... I tell Debra [wife] about dreams that I have all the time, and she's commented once that, my dreams are like movies...that's what those moments were kind of like."* Rose stated, *"It [my mind] was quieter...I was able to find almost a meditative peace in the midst of the chaos."*

The spiritual experiences mentioned by the participants included feelings connected to God, saying good-bye to a loved one who had passed away, and past life experience. Several participants mentioned that they felt deeply connected to God's presence during the breathwork process, as Debra stated, *"I just felt really at peace with my experience of God, I felt faith,...I just felt really calm."* In one of the workshops, Barbara got in touch with the grief related to her father's death. She said, *"I didn't think I was holding on to him, but I guess I was...I came in for his funeral but I didn't get to see him and say goodbye."* During the process, Barbara released her father by saying good-bye to him and visualizing him going away to heaven. She said, *"[before the workshop], I thought about him a lot, and had a lot hurt feelings because of the situation that went around after he passed away."* Barbara added, *"[after the workshop], I feel a lot more comfortable and calmer...I think that he [the father] had finally realized that we want him to go."*

Donna was surprised to experience a past-life image in the workshop. She described, *“It really was extremely powerful, because I had never had a past life experience, and it was very, very vivid. I was there. I knew that I was observing my mother dying. And I knew that I looked like a little boy. I was devastated... I was crying and feeling exactly like I was mourning, and, then, when we linked my present relationship with my mom to this little boy’s experience. Because of the pain that little boy had gone through in that life, and didn’t want to go through it again, he made a decision that ‘I would never have a mother with a soul.’ It just exactly fit. For me, that was really...more than emotional, it was very...a revelation. That was something that I don’t think I could have gotten out of in talk therapy, no matter how many times and different therapies I’ve gone to...”*

Inhibition

According to the participants’ breathwork experiences, the researcher identified three primary reasons that inhibited couples’ breathwork process, therefore restrained the therapeutic effects on the results. The reasons are (1) the intent for the workshop, (2) the individual’s self-dialogue, and, (3) the couple’s attempts to protect each other emotionally.

Participants reported higher levels of frustration and hesitation in the breathwork process when they stated that they came to the workshop for their spouses but not for themselves. In the pre-treatment interview, Sara mentioned, *“I think that I really have a good system going for myself, but I want to watch my husband grow... if it’s making him a better person and helping him, I want to be there for him...it’s more for my husband.”* In the post-treatment interview, Sara reported, *“the atmosphere, the intense getting in touch with your feelings... It’s not my cup of tea... I noticed some things that could make things go better. But, I like to be more relaxed, more calm...I was used to doing it my way, it was nothing like this. It’s not for me.”*

Participants also described having difficulty in experiencing the breathwork process fully when they reported having constant self-dialogue. The researcher in this study defined self-dialogue as a cognitive process where an individual was busy communicating with himself or herself and was unable to fully experience the present time and space. As Chris described, *“I tried to figure out what I am supposed to get from there [the breath work experience] in my mind, I thought maybe it’s this, but no, that’s not it. And I thought maybe it’s that, but, no, that’s not it, either... It’s very frustrating....”*

Self-dialogue is a problem-solving skill. Many participants reported that they usually found solutions for difficult issues through self-dialogue. Alex described, *“I think through everything by myself.”* Vincent stated, *“I figure out solutions in my mind.”* Individuals who use self-dialogue as their primary means of searching for solutions may feel uncomfortable when they enter a situation where they are unable to practice their usual problem solving skills. In the breathwork workshop, music was used to facilitate participants get in touch with the present moments, and stop self-dialogue. As Chris described, *“That [the music] was distracting, mentally... I was not focusing on anything because I was listening to the music...”*

Individuals stay within their own cognitive process when they focus on their self dialogue, and physical awareness and emotional process becomes inaccessible. It is important to tone down the self-dialogue because emotional process and physical awareness are essential therapeutic elements for breathwork. Vincent described, *“I think [the facilitator] might have to work harder on guys to help them breathe, because they are more closed minded...I mean, I know I would just loose concentration. I would breathe, then I would see what to think about, and I would just go off on something else...think again...think again... it is hard.”* He further described, *“If you’re in the moment, and you want to, you’ll be fine. But, if you are in the moment and thinking ‘well, you know, I’m about to look like a fool’...and then you think, ‘but it’s okay, I am in the moment’, but then, again you start thinking ‘well, we are about to finish in a few minutes, we are about to get in the car, and I am going to remember that I acted like a fool.’ and you start thinking, ‘well, what if I start yelling, and start hitting the floor too much...’... all these thoughts make it hard to just breath...that’s why I think [the facilitator] need to work harder on guys.”*

Finally, participants showed a tendency to withhold their emotional expression and verbal sharing in the breathwork process when they were concerned about their spouses’ reactions or judgments. As Alex described, *“I was quite aware that she [wife] was there. Can she handle this? What is she going to think, if I really let go? So, those thoughts really came in. I tried not to stop the process that was going on. But I was aware that she was there... I don’t want to scare her. I do want to protect her. I want her to see part of it, but sometimes, I don’t want her to see part of it...”* In general, when the couples were able to fully immerse into the breathwork process regardless their fear or concerns on their spouses’ reactions, they reported more personal and relational growth compared to those who withheld themselves in the process.

The theme *life situation*, is related to the circumstances and changes happening in the lives of the participants. When the post-treatment interview was conducted, four out of nine couples reported that they were experiencing life transitions. Participants acknowledged that many changes of their lives were concurrent with the breathwork workshop. Also, all these circumstances and changes could have influenced their lives both as individuals and as partners in a marital relationship.

The theme, *psychotherapy comparison*, is related to the participants' views of breathwork therapy when making a comparison with traditional conversational psychotherapy. Participants reported that they found the breathwork therapy to be more effective than the traditional conversational psychotherapy approaches. Julia stated, "*I think the amazing thing about it [breathwork], and maybe it's because we're doing it six hours at a time, but it seems to me that in three Saturdays, to accomplish so much... and like I said, Oscar and I have been in counseling for months and months... Nothing happened. So accomplish so much in three days, I think it's pretty incredible.*" Oscar agreed that when they went to the traditional conversational counseling, they were circling around similar conversations and stories, but with breathwork, they were able to go to a deeper level and make changes,

When comparing traditional conversational counseling to breathwork therapy, Sara acknowledged that because of her "dealing things on her own" nature, "*I would rather breathe, rather than talking to someone like a counselor or a therapist.*" Alex, a marriage and family therapist, also stated, "*This [breathwork] is a process I do want to continue. This [breathwork] is the only thing in my life that has gotten to that gut level.*" Donna described, "*For me that [the realization from the breathwork] was really... more than emotional, it was...a revelation. That was something that I haven't gotten out of talk therapy, no matter how many times and different therapies I've gone to.*"

Implications

The results from the participants' breathwork experience can be used in practice to help the counselor who desires to use breathwork techniques understand the triumphs and challenges in doing breathwork with married couples.

The research results indicate that a counselor needs to be aware of the clients' intentions for the breathwork process. It was observed that participants' intentions for participating in the workshop had greatly

influenced their breathwork experiences and the counseling outcome. Participants who were satisfied with the experiences stated their intentions as, "I don't know what to expect, but I want to get the most out of this experience for myself, whatever it is." Participants who were dissatisfied with the experiences stated their intent as, "I'm doing this as a favor for my spouse." This information indicates that individuals' desire to gain benefit for themselves in breathwork process is essential for the therapy outcome.

Feedback from participants indicates that it is more comfortable for married couples to do breathwork therapy in a non-group setting instead of a group setting. However, it was also observed that the group setting had encouraged some participants to deepen their therapy process. Participants recognized their relationship strength and weakness by relating to other couples in the group. This information suggests that a non-group setting can create an intimate atmosphere where a married couple can feel free to focus on their therapy process. When a group setting is necessary, a counselor needs to help participants build trust and comfort with other group members in order to create a safe environment necessary for the therapeutic process.

It was recognized that many participants wanted to provide comfort and help for their partner quickly when they were sitting and holding space for their spouse. The quick comfort and help, however, could have the opposite effect in the breathwork therapy process. For example, a husband had never allowed himself to feel his own sorrow, and in the breathwork process, he was able to get in touch with his feelings and release the sadness through tears and crying. While he was in this process, the wife's responses of "It's okay!" and "Don't be sad" served as a verbal cue that blocked the husband from his feeling. In another situation, a breather may not show clear physical reactions or movements while in a deep breathwork process. A concerned spouse may urge the breather to see changes and attempt to do or say something that could be distracting for the breather's process. It is not easy for a sitter to decide when to provide comfort and when not to. It is even more challenging for a sitter to know what to say or what to do. Therefore, when a married couple decides to practice breathwork for their relationship, it is necessary to have a trained counselor present to facilitate the process.

Participants in this study reported that after an intense breathwork session, they often needed some time to recoup emotionally and physically. According to the participants' experiences, the length of time needed for recouping could range from twenty minutes to two days. Individuals

reported a need to be quiet or alone during this recouping time. Counselors can use this information to remind their clients to reserve time and space for themselves after an intense breathwork session.

Discussion

The results of this study provided an overall description and effect of breathwork on marital relationships and individuals participating in the study. Future research is needed to provide further understanding on the long-term effect of breathwork therapy and the therapeutic mechanism behind the breathwork process. Future research that provides empirical data from a larger research sample will also help to solidify the research result from this study.

The researchers observed that the marital interactions between elderly couples are different from the marital interactions between younger couples in the study. For example, it appeared that younger couples demonstrated public physical affection toward each other following the breathwork intervention than older couples. It was noted that the elderly couples appeared to use silence in dealing with frustrations in the marital relationship to a greater extent than the younger couples. In this study, participants' ages ranged from 26 years to 76 years of age, and the length of the couples' relationships ranged from six months to 48 years. A future study that focuses on different age group comparisons would provide interesting information in understanding both marital relationships and breathwork effects.

Five participants in this study group reported having had previous breathwork experience. The researcher recognized that individuals having previous breathwork experience had less inhibition and had more spiritual experiences in the therapy process. A future study that examines the differences between new breathwork participants and experienced breathwork participants would helpfully expand the breathwork therapy literature.

It would also be beneficial to replicate this study with a focus on different cultural and racial groups. In this study, the couples' ethnic backgrounds included two Hispanic couples, six Caucasian couples, and one interracial couple. There were limited cultural elements identified in this study.

Married couples from this study suggested that a non-group therapy setting could provide a more intimate atmosphere for their breathwork process. Therefore, performing a study in a non-group setting and

comparing its result with this study result could give breathwork therapists a better understanding of how the setting may influence the married couple's breathwork process.

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