

Resting Expiratory Level

This exercise focuses on rib awareness as a pathway into structured breath.

1. In a supine position, take a moment to explore the shape of your lower ribs with your hands. This exercise asks you to notice changes of shape in the rib "basket". How much movement, if any, do you perceive when breathing quietly?
2. **First experiment:** Take a deep breath. Keep breathing in, without exhaling. This should be effortful over-breathing, and you will likely notice the size of your rib basket increase. Breathe in some more.
 - a. Let go of all effort suddenly and notice the way the ribs quickly fall back to the size and shape where they started. This is due to your body's *elastic recoil*.
 - b. Try this experiment again and notice, with your hands, the size and shape of the rib container at maximum effortful inhalation and after suddenly releasing all effort.
3. **Second experiment:** This time, exhale effortfully, squeezing as much air out of your lungs as you can. As you continue to exhale, notice the size and shape of the rib container decrease. Keep exhaling.
 - a. Again, let go of all effort suddenly. This time, notice that the ribs quickly pop back up to their starting position. This is also due to *elastic recoil*.
4. Try both of these experiments another few times and start to memorize, with your hands and with your inner felt sense, the "medium" position of your ribs, when they are neither working to elevate nor working to compress. This is the point of equilibrium in the lungs and thorax that happens at the bottom of an easy "survival" breath. The volume of air in your lungs at this point in a breath cycle is referred to as *resting expiratory level*.
5. **Third experiment:** Once you have memorized what the "medium" position feels like, and keeping your hands on your lower ribs for sensory feedback, try telling a short story toward a point above you on the ceiling-- something that doesn't take too much brain power, such as the story of what you ate for breakfast or the story of how you got ready this morning-- and notice what happens in your ribs during speech. Do they tend to float above that middle position? Do they squeeze below it at all? Do they move back and forth through that middle position?
 - a. At any point, feel free to go back to the first two experiments to refresh your felt sense of your ribs' position in space.
 - b. Note that your medium position may feel slightly different from one day to the next.
6. So far, we have explored a range of motion in the ribs and the extremes of shape that are possible in a breath cycle. Now, let's explore, with intention, one possible pattern of rib movement:
 - a. Allowing the ribs to float up above REL on an easy inhalation, let's practice with a simple text: "One by two by three by four by five by one by two...etc." Keep cycling through this five-number sequence on a whisper.
 - b. Each time you sense that your ribs have descended back to the middle position, allow another breath to drop into your body, floating the ribs back up. Allow this breath to happen wherever it might need to within the spoken line-- in other words, the breaths

will not necessarily come at the same point in the five number sequence each time. This breath should happen at the point *just before* the ribs start to squeeze down below REL.

- i. An image that came to me just now is the game where you try to keep a balloon in the air, volleyball-style, by batting it up with your hand each time it floats down. If you wait too long, the balloon will fall below the level of your hand, and it will be very difficult to recover it!
 - c. You may add voice to the whisper at any point. This will likely allow you to speak more numbers in a row before taking a breath (a whisper will "leak" more breath than a voiced sound.) Still, be mindful that you allow an in-breath at the point *before* your ribs start to squeeze.
7. **Fourth experiment:** Let's briefly try the opposite pattern. This time, on numbers, squeeze the heck out of your ribs. Make sure they stay below REL consistently.
 - a. Notice that you can still make voice and speak this way.
 - b. Do you notice any change in the shape or sensation in your throat?
 - i. In most cases, rib squeeze is accompanied by throat squeeze. These structures are designed to contract in tandem. Sound-making is only the third function of the larynx:
 1. Its first, most important survival function is to protect the lungs from foreign objects and to keep us from inhaling (literally) our food and drink. Without this protection, we could drown ourselves with a glass of water!
 2. Secondly, the vocal folds can trap air in the lungs. This stabilizes the torso and allows our skeletal muscles to work more effectively for extreme tasks like lifting heavy objects. This closing at the glottis is called the *Valsalva maneuver*. This is one reason why, often, **rib squeeze equals throat squeeze**. This, in my mind, is the primary purpose of structured breath-- to reduce rib squeeze, thereby reducing throat squeeze. We may put a lot of focus on a particular abdominal action, but the real point is to reduce pressure in the ribs and throat. That's it!
 - c. Moving back and forth between the two rib patterns while speaking (ribs lifted and ribs depressed,) note any difference in throat feeling.
8. **Fifth experiment:** Let's return to the ribs-floating pattern. Allow a generous breath (allow the ribs to float up and away from the spine as the belly relaxes.) Allow that breath to release on a text of your choice, but encourage part of your attention to remain on the ribs, allowing them to float back up and out to take in a new breath each time they reach the point just before they must squeeze.
 - a. Are you taking more breaths, or different breaths, than you might normally take in this text?
 - b. While you focus on avoiding rib squeeze, do you notice any activity in your lower torso? In other words, does the transverse engage automatically when you are aware of inhibiting rib squeeze? Do the rectus and obliques become less active when the focus is on floating the ribs? (This may or may not be the case-- different body-minds work in different ways!)
 - c. Can you make an association between this pattern in the torso and open-throated communication?

9. **Choice:** Remember, if a breathing pattern becomes rigid, it is no longer useful. As Cynthia said, structuring is an offer, not a mandate. It's something I return to because of its usefulness, not something I must retain in order to be virtuous. Sometimes I squeeze my ribs, and sometimes I squeeze my throat, and that's a human thing to do. What I've found over the years is that I squeeze less habitually than I used to, and that has felt satisfying and empowering, so I continue to explore what structure can mean to me, in my body. And that continuing assessment of what's useful and cultivating a playful sense of choice is what I hope I've offered to you too!