

Chapter 4. (From Grof and Grof, Holotropic Breathwork, 2010)

The Practice of Holotropic Breathwork

1. Use of Holotropic Breathwork in Individual Sessions and Groups.

Holotropic Breathwork can be conducted in the form of individual sessions and in small or large groups. Many certified Holotropic Breathwork practitioners offer individual sessions in their private practice, both for people who are interested in experiencing breathwork for personal growth and for clients with minor emotional and psychosomatic issues, who would otherwise be able to do their inner work in group settings. This is not the best use of the potential of Holotropic Breathwork, since conducting sessions in group settings has distinct advantages. The most obvious of these are of practical, economic, and financial nature. While an individual session requires constant presence of one or two people, at least one of whom is an experienced therapist, in groups the ratio is one fully trained facilitator to eight to ten participants.

In Holotropic Breathwork groups, participants do most of their inner work without needing any external help and many of the situations that require assistance can be handled by sitters, including those who do not have any previous experience with Holotropic Breathwork. With some help and guidance from trained facilitators, sitters are able to create a safe emotional and physical environment for breathers and prevent them from interfering with each other. If necessary, they also remind their partners to keep faster pace of breathing, take them to and from the bathroom, provide nourishing physical contact, bring them a cup of water, hand them kleenexes, cover them with a blanket, and provide some other basic care.

While in the groups it is not much of a problem if some participants' Holotropic Breathwork experiences last longer than usual, this can be very challenging for therapists, who have fixed rigid schedules. There is no way of predicting the length of an individual session; the duration of sessions varies and it is mandatory that the facilitators stay with the breathers until the process is completed for the day. The usual practice is therefore to schedule individual breathwork sessions at the end of the therapy day; this naturally limits the number of sessions a practitioner can offer at any particular time.

There are also psychological advantages to group Holotropic Breathwork sessions that make the work more profound and effective than individual sessions allow. Sharing a holotropic state of consciousness with a number of other people in a large room, listening to powerful music combined with the sounds of the other participants, generates a very intense experiential field. The resulting atmosphere makes it easier for breathers to let go of their usual psychological defenses and to allow their unconscious material to surface and find emotional and physical expression.

The opportunity of sharing an embarrassing or private experience with others represents another significant advantage of working in a group. In holotropic states of consciousness, people often encounter sensitive material that they consider ethically or esthetically objectionable, such as violent, sexual, or blasphemous imagery, memories of incest, or antisocial tendencies. Breathers may have difficulties in confiding such experiences to another human being and typically expect a negative reaction – moral judgment, disgust, or rejection.

When such disclosures happen in private sessions and the therapists do not respond with critical judgment, clients may attribute the therapists' tolerance to their special training that prevents them from reacting the way they really feel, or to years of their clinical experience with abnormal individuals that have immunized them toward deviant aspects of human nature. Under these circumstances, the overtly non-judgmental and accepting behavior of the therapists is thus easily perceived as a contrived professional stance and it does not bring the corrective experience that it would provide if it came from an ordinary member of the human community.

For this reason, participation in a sharing group featuring a representative sample of the general population can be extremely redeeming. Listening to the stories of others, we discover that they too harbor emotions, fantasies, and tendencies that we ourselves consider reproachable and manifest behaviors that in our own judgment make us uniquely immoral and despicable. This brings to a sharp relief the recognition that these are aspects of human nature that “flesh is heir to” and that we all are “in the same boat.”

As a matter of fact, the reaction of the group to honest disclosure of the material from the deep unconscious tends to be exactly the opposite of what the individual expects. As a rule, others offer understanding, compassion, and warm emotional support. Sincere confession of a group member often encourages them to be more trusting and open about dark aspects of their own inner life. Group work using holotropic states of consciousness typically leads to meaningful bonding between participants and rapidly generates a sense of belonging. Scottish-American cultural anthropologist Victor Turner spent his professional career studying rites of passage of native cultures. According to him, sharing non-ordinary states of consciousness in a ritual context leads to the development of a sense of community (“*communitas*”) (Turner 1969a).

Under the right circumstances, Holotropic Breathwork can be used with psychiatric patients who have serious emotional and psychosomatic problems. However, for most of them it would be difficult or impossible to participate in groups, which require the ability to alternate in the roles of breathers and sitters and to participate constructively in the processing of the experiences of others. Such patients need undivided attention of an experienced therapist or,

ideally, a male/female team for the entire duration of the session and a special setting where 24-hour supervision is available.

In the following sections, we focus on the steps and conditions necessary for safe and effective practice of Holotropic Breathwork in the context of small and large introductory groups. We describe how to create the physical setting and interpersonal support system for this work and how to prepare the participants theoretically and practically for the sessions. A special section of this chapter is dedicated to the physical and emotional contraindications and it outlines the basic criteria for the screening of participants. We then discuss how to start and conduct a Holotropic Breathwork session, describe the spectrum of holotropic experiences, and explain the roles of the facilitators and sitters. The last section of this chapter discusses the work with the mandalas and provides the basic principles of leading the processing sessions.

Reference: Victor Turner

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Turner

- *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Aldine Transaction 1995 paperback: [ISBN 0-202-01190-9](#)
- *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1974), Cornell University Press 1975 paperback: [ISBN 0-8014-9151-7](#)