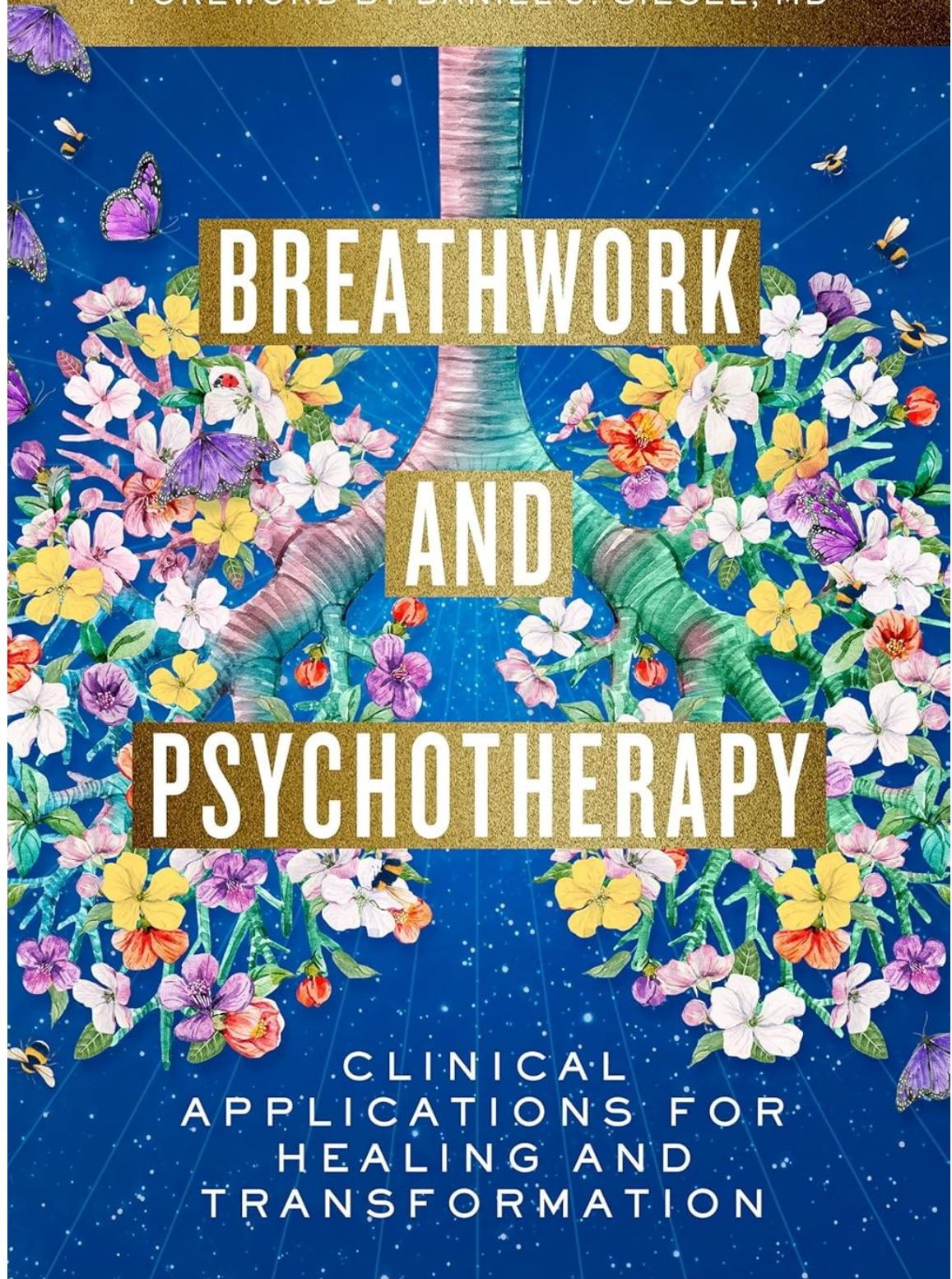


JESSICA DIBB
FOREWORD BY DANIEL J. SIEGEL, MD



Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

Grainy scenes filter from ancient memory caches to conscious narrative recall:



I'm chasing a gentle tide rolling in and out, somewhere off the Jersey shore, when an exuberant wave grabs me. It's supersized and supercharged—no, I didn't see it coming. It tumbles me right then left, then smashes me up and down. I claw my way back to what I think is the surface, all the while gagging for air and sucking in salt water.



I hold my breath when the doctor tells me to, so I won't feel any pain as he injects a long needle into my arm.

I'm confused, wheezing and gasping for air—the whistle in my lungs as I try to inhale is foreign. It's the first spring after my fiancé was killed in a motorcycle accident. My father calmly says, "Oh, you have asthma." The hypothesis? Grief-induced.

Holding my breath, having the air knocked out of me losing the ability to breathe when the love of my 'young' life died. Not breathing in whatever iteration allowed me to detach from life and not feel anything.

Inhale/Exhale

I had never given much thought to past experiences that influenced my present-day breathing patterns until I read Jessica Dibb's breath biography in her recently released book, *Breathwork and Psychotherapy: Clinical Applications for Healing and Transformation*. I realized that I frequently hold my breath in uncomfortable situations, physical or emotional, blocking any impending pain and suffering. Yet the rational cognitive part of me knows that it's not true—it's a myth my brain's recordings cling to and reinforce by demanding extended pauses in airflow. I know air seeps in and out despite my urge to suppress any in- or exhalations, otherwise I'd be dead.



From Past to Present

Breathing, something everyone does who's alive, is coming to the forefront in psychotherapeutic settings. It has been the crown jewel in many cultural/spiritual practices for centuries (i.e., India's yogic traditions, Qigong, Tai Chi, ancient Egyptian practices, Chinese philosophy and medicine, Taoism, Judaism, Christian and Russian Orthodox traditions, and Jewish mysticism, to name a few that Jessica discusses). Physicians have been concerned about our ability to breathe, whether it is related to our lungs or to other organs involved in the breathing process (also discussed in this book).

As far as I can recall, no one discussed breathing during my graduate school years. We discussed body awareness, somatic focusing, and pendulation (a brief point to note), but not how our breath can bring us into our body to then explore what we sense in a particular space or time. Not a negative, just a point: back then, breathwork was not as prominent as it is today.

As of this writing, I have recently received articles involving breathwork for potential publication in *Somatic Psychotherapy Today*. I see that colleagues are offering workshops and presentations on breathwork, and Norton Publications sent me Jessica's new book. I can safely say that breathwork is trending.

When I started reading Jessica's book, I had no idea of the depth and breadth of conscious breathwork, or the practical and essential skills and tools that Therapist-Breathworkers acquired during their training. Jessica's personal practices, extensive studies, life experiences, and teaching history span decades, cross oceans, and dive into the inner reaches of science/neuroscience, spirituality, and psychotherapy. She's written a comprehensive compendium that's part textbook, part training guide, part personal memoir, and part invitation to experience the life-altering existence we can achieve when we incorporate breathwork into our daily lives.

I appreciated her ability to demonstrate in writing that breathing is indeed an active movement, as she notes: "Breathing is the verb at the substrate of all other verbs of human experience" (p. 299).



Structural Details

The book begins with a foreword by Daniel J. Siegel, MD, followed by Jessica's introduction and the elements she feels are helpful as readers navigate through the text and, in turn, their own breathing journey (yes, they are helpful). The book is divided into three parts: Discovering, Practicing, and Expanding. There's an appendix, acknowledgments, credits, references, and a lengthy index.

When I first read Dr Siegel's forward, I felt like I was back in school learning about his life's work (he cites six of his books). However, he creatively offers a solid, supportive foundation for the theoretical presentation Jessica makes throughout her text. The information, although instructional, guides readers through the key points necessary to proceed.

Part 1: Discovering

Each of the four chapters in Part 1 presents an astounding history of breathwork in human life. Jessica's unifying point is that there is no 'us' or 'them', no one is in or out, right or wrong; we all breathe, allowing readers to join in the conversation regardless of their background beliefs and practices. To breathe is to be human, and we are all grounded and connected through our shared act of respiration.

Along with theoretical foundations, Jessica offers practical applications of breathwork within the context of psychotherapy. She discusses the physiological and psychological mechanisms of breath and how breathing patterns influence emotional states. There are discussions of what she calls the five groups of breathwork — breathwork for well-being and conscious living — and a chapter on the mystical science of breathing, cellular respiration, and conscious breathing. For polyvagal 'informed' readers, there are several areas in the book that relate breathing to the polyvagal theory and our wondrous vagus nerve.

Part II: Practicing

The body of the book is dedicated to practical exercises, case studies, and the step-by-step integration of breathwork techniques into our personal lives and into clinicians' therapy sessions. Jessica provides detailed instructions for incorporating breath awareness, diaphragmatic breathing, and other conscious breathing methods to address anxiety, trauma, and emotional dysregulation. She starts the first of seven chapters in this section with her breathing biography.

I was taken aback because I had just plodded through Part I—it's content-rich and dense—and here I land in her personal space. Her voice, her willingness to reveal her historical past, the choices she made, and where they led, were at times so vulnerable that I wondered if she stopped breathing while writing. She notes that "A breathing biography is an intimate meeting with ourselves, our beliefs, judgments, and hopes, as well as our pleasurable, painful, and transformative memories" (p.92).

She delves into the historical development of breathwork, drawing connections to therapeutic modalities such as somatic experiencing, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioral therapy. She also discusses contraindications and ethical considerations, emphasizing safety and client-centered care.

Part III: Expanding

The last four chapters of the book are targeted and enlightening: the Plane of Possibility and Breathwork was a twice-over read, and the chapter on authentic breathing, life urge, and self had me taking notes. She first acknowledges that there is something —a who or perhaps a what—that is "experiencing the life force in our unique human bodies each moment" (p. 309). Then she returns to Siegel's inter and intraconnected relationships (previously discussed in the book) as part of a self and the concept that we are wired to experience love, value, and meaning, and seek it out, which felt grounding for me as I integrated her three transformational pathways (healing, development and essence, p. 195) with new data on her four orientations (aversion, judgment, attachment—in a clingy dependent way, and fear).



Positive Repatterning

As I was reading Jessica's book, I simultaneously started my online Iron Shirt Qigong class. The first video? A 16-minute lesson on breathing. We learned how to direct our breath and feel its chi in our being. The second video included a practice called packing chi. According to my teacher, breath is chi, and we can develop and increase our chi in our Dantian (the center of our lower belly, our vital energy center). We held our breath while pushing down on the diaphragm, pulling up our pelvic floor, and maintaining the squeeze for 5 to 10 seconds, then exhaling completely. After two regular breathing cycles, we started again. There's more to this, but for me, the thought of holding my breath and using it to energize and strengthen my core —the essence of my energy and being —offered a new light on an old survival pattern. And yes, Jessica discusses rewiring our neural systems using breathwork to alter our internal systems and engage more fully in the present moment (here and now), allowing life to flow through us, one breath at a time. Additionally, she discusses breathing and movement, breathing and touch, incorporating sound, and expanded states of consciousness and breathlessness.

Where to now?

This is not a one-and-done book. It needs to be marked up, highlighted, dog-eared, and pages photocopied for easier reference. There's a glossary of new terms, such as volitional breathing and quintessence breathing, that might cause a novice to pause. After reading and synthesizing both the data and physical sensations as I paid more attention to my breathing and tried some of the exercises, I realized that either taking her training course or working with a breathing support group led by a trained facilitator is a logical next step to enhance my personal breathing practices and bring the skills and tools into my professional life.

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