



## UNSTUCK: Breathwork Coach Ana Lilia Teaches Us How to Center Ourselves

Ana Lilia fell in love with breathing practices and affirmations as part of her own healing journey. Then she shared those gifts with others. Now she shares how to clear your mind, control your anxiety and rewrite your story—one breath at a time.

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Alicia Menendez:

We've been talking about getting unstuck and if you are like me, then when you approach a challenge like being stuck, you are really good at the doing and the thinking, and when it comes to the being, could use a little help. Well, Ana Lilia is a breathwork coach and intuitive guide. She is here to share her personal story of using breathwork, to return to herself and to teach us how connecting with our breath can transform our lives.

Ana, I'm so happy to be with you today.

Ana Lilia: Likewise, I'm excited to talk to you.

Menendez: Ana, can you tell me about a time in your own life when you felt stuck?

Lilia: Oh, I'm like, "Which time?" I've always been someone who has very clear goals. But then, there have been moments where I get comfortable, even though deep down inside, I'm not happy. But there's a part of me that's like, "Well, can it really get any better?" Like, when I've been in relationships that I've outgrown. But, it just feels so much more uncomfortable to end it. And then, start all over and going to the unknown, than to really trust myself and be like, "Even if there isn't anything better, I need to honor the fact that I'm not happy right now and I need to move on."

There have been times where I have felt stuck in relationships. Before I was doing breathwork, I was working as an actor. And that industry, you feel not in control at all. Like, you don't choose when you get an audition when you work or anything. Even though I was successful in that, there was a point in that career where I just did feel stuck and I'm like, "Okay, there has to be more. I want to be more in control of my life." That's where I was introduced while I was in therapy to different healing modalities. One of the later modalities that I came across was breathwork.

Menendez: What was it about breathwork that clicked for you?

Lilia: Breathwork got me into my body and therapy consciously talking about, "What's the problem." And being really heady, breathwork showed me in my body where the sadness is, where the pain was, where the fear, where the hesitation. When I say it showed me where in my body, physically my body contracted, my hands cramped up, my jaw got really tight. I started sobbing. My whole body was... Sometimes when you, the few times we let ourselves really fall apart and cry and let it go. That's what was happening in my body when I was doing breathwork for the very first time. I was like, "Whoa. Okay." Then afterwards, feeling like 10 pounds lighter, my body just feeling more relaxed. I felt like I knew it all.

Also, it was crazy to step outside of the studio I was in and feel like the colors were so bright. Almost to the point where I felt like I needed to put on sunglasses because everything just looked so much brighter. So, I was so intrigued that by doing this simple breathing exercise, I was able to become really connected with my body and my emotions, allow myself to feel them and express them and then feel so much lighter.

Menendez: What a gift. You teach people how to get reconnected with their breath. And the question that leads me to is, how do we become disconnected from our breath in the first place?

Lilia: Well, even though we breathe naturally, we take over 20,000 breaths a day, I think if we pulled those of you listening, how often or conscious you are of your breathing, it's probably going to be just 1%. We just take it for granted. And we don't really notice it unless you're having a panic attack. Then you notice the tightness in your chest, that you can't breathe. But what I help people do is first, before we go into the active breathing, yeah, notice what's going on in your body. What is your breath doing right now? Are you holding your breath? Does it feel constricted in your chest? Are you taking short, shallow breaths? Are you breathing from your chest? Are you breathing from your diaphragm? What are the length? The quality of the breath. And just by having that information, then for those who have been working with me for a little bit, we take it a step further and we notice our emotions.

Your breath also can give you information about how you're feeling emotionally. If you are overwhelmed, scared, freaked out, you are probably going to notice that your breaths are shorter, breath holding, infrequent. There's just not as much oxygen going into your body. Basically, you're in a paralyzed, frightened state. But if you notice when you're feeling happy and relaxed you might notice that your breathing is longer. You might even notice that you drop your breathing to your diaphragm, which is where we should be breathing on a day to day. But as we get older, we just stop breathing from our diaphragm. If you notice your baby, your baby's going to be breathing using the diaphragm. Your pets breathe using their diaphragm.

Menendez: Well, and I'm an old musical theater nerd. So as you're saying, and I'm like, "Oh yes, I remember my diaphragm now. I forgot all about it."

Lilia: Yes. For the singers out there and all of that. Yeah so when you dropped down to your belly, it just helps your body feel like you are safe and it doesn't have to be on high alert. Your parasympathetic nervous system is activated. So, you are in the "rest and digest." Even if there is a stressful situation like for me now, because I do so much breathing and I've been doing it for six years. When I am in a high stress situation, like for example, last year, my house got broken into and when I got the news, I noticed my breathing immediately changed to a deep, slow belly breath. I was so proud of my body that automatically it knew how to regulate instead of going into the panic. Being in that state allowed me to be more clear and be able to respond to the situation and give instructions to my dog sitter, who showed up to my house being broken into. Instead of freaking out as well and mirroring what she was giving me and just reacting.

So that, I teach my clients as well, using their breath to change it, to be in a position of power and in control.

Menendez: How long does it take to get there?

Lilia: It doesn't take that long. It just takes consistency. At the beginning, it might feel really uncomfortable. I always start my classes sharing like "breathwork can be uncomfortable. It can be activating and it can be confrontational." Because as a society, as a whole, we are so detached from our body and our emotions. We numb ourselves using a lot of different devices from TV, from medication, from being so busy and over-scheduled. That to actually slow down, to be present with yourself, with your thoughts, with your breath can be really uncomfortable. So, at the beginning, people do have their mind racing and wondering. Then they start to fixate on, am I breathing right? I think I'm doing it wrong. Like, what is this sensation? I'm starting to feel a vibration in my body and they start to freak out. That just shows that we have to do it a little bit more and more so that you start to feel comfortable being with yourself and feeling.

Menendez: Yes, I'm laughing, not at those people, but because I am one of those people. So, I appreciate the fight or flight instinct that kicks in there. How often would you say when someone comes to you, they're coming because in one way or another, even if these are not the words that they're using, they feel stuck in their own life?

Lilia: Almost all of them. Especially, how my private sessions and my group coaching is to help people get unstuck. They're feeling unsatisfied at work, in a relationship. They have a business idea, but they just don't even see how it's possible. Or, they have health issues. Their mind is stuck in that loop of just what's in front of them. It's hard for them to see anything different. What I do using their breath has created a disruption in the way that

they're thinking. I even have a self-guided program that teaches people how to do that. That's my breathwork for anxiety program. I start to help them see what the opposite is. Well, if you were to quit your job, what would happen? Like let's make a list of the positive things. We start to provide evidence for their brain to see not just the fear and the scarcity and the lack of control, but all of the good things that can also come out of it.

Breathwork allows you to do that because it quiets your analytical mind. Your amygdala who tells you, "Okay, we got to stay on high alert. Here's the fear," starts to decrease and we're able to just be more hopeful and think that anything is possible. When they're in that state of meditation, they do get creative inspiration. They start to see themselves, envision themselves in that new job or asking for the raise or calling in their romantic partner. So, by the end of the session they feel good. And then, from there, all right, let's set some action steps so that we can move towards those goals.

Menendez: I think a lot of people have this very wrong sense that we can engage in these healing practices, these healing modalities once and be "fixed," I'm putting fixed in quotation marks. Like, "I meditated once. Now I'm crystal clear. I did breath work and I'm completely centered." You talked about consistency, but what does it really take to utilize these modalities in a way that changes not just a moment, but really your life.

Lilia: Yeah. My one-on-one coaching program is six weeks. And in the six weeks, we are able to create a huge difference. I have some clients who start with me depressed. The first three weeks it's like helping to lift them out of the depression. Then they're in a place where they are feeling back like themselves. So, they're able to start to take action. The six weeks for me has been a sweet number and that we are able get them unstuck and start to have them feel like, "Okay, I'm back in control. I know what to do. These are the actions that I'm taking." I mean, that's the work. It's not curing ourselves because there's no such thing as a cure. It's just having tools to manage life.

Menendez: Do you want to talk a little bit about what set you on that healing journey?

Lilia: Yeah. At the time I was feeling really frustrated in my marriage and I also was feeling frustrated with work, with my acting. I was doing all this work, all this effort yet, nothing was going the way that I wanted to. So, I got really frustrated and depressed and anxious and physically my body was starting to exhibit stress symptoms. I was having IBS symptoms. My face was breaking out, at night I was clenching a lot. I even started to do sleep walking. Oh, and I was also very hypervigilant. I would leave the house, think that I left the stove on, drive back to my house to make sure that it was off. It was off. And then, go back. My nervous system was just on high alert constantly. So, everything that I was encountering just felt so much bigger than what it really was.

Menendez: Do you have a go-to breath exercise?

Lilia: My go-to breathwork, I like to keep it really simple because there're so many. Breathwork is just a general term for active breathing, manipulating your breath. So, there's things like the box breathing where you're counting to the four, right? You're inhaling to the count of four, holding your breath to the count of four slowly, exhale to the count of four, hold your breath. And then again, inhale. That's fine. It allows you to get really clear. You're building up the carbon dioxide in your body. So people like Navy seals and nurses use it. Police officers, who go on high alert when they're in a high stress situation. But for the average person, if you're feeling stressed out, that in itself, remembering the technique can feel overwhelming and stressed out.

So I always just suggest... and then there's also resistance because it's so simple, is first just notice what's going on with your body and your breath. Notice where your shoulders are. Are they close to your ears? Are you holding your breath? Then roll back your shoulders, drop your breathing down to your belly. You can place your hands on your belly and just practice pushing your hands out as you're taking a breath. That will tell you that you're breathing using your diaphragm. So, just doing a few breaths of that will start to activate your parasympathetic nervous system. And that will help you to start to relax. I do this breathing exercise before I'm going to fall asleep, if I'm feeling like stressed out or thinking about the next day. I do this breathing exercise when I'm working, when I'm driving, stuck on traffic.

If you're looking to energize yourself, because that's another thing that you can do with breathwork. Then, you would do a more fast breathing where it's the inhale exhale really quickly. It's like hyperventilating, but not quite. You'll start to feel a vibration and tingling. But, that also will get you really clear and boost your energy. So, I do that in between my sessions, in between my clients, if I'm starting to feel kind of drained and also to clear my space. I will do some quick breathing exercises to boost my energy.

Menendez: You're also a big believer in affirmations. Where do you see affirmations as fitting into this work?

Lilia: I use that with my clients when they're in the meditative state. Because, we are able to access the subconscious. So, we're starting to create some new beliefs for your subconscious to believe. A lot of times we're not able to get unstuck because there's a part of us that feels that we're not deserving or smart enough for that job. Or, we don't have the qualifications. In that meditative state, I like to say out loud so that my clients hear, the flip of it like, what it is that they want, that they are smart enough, that they are ready to take that leap, that they are deserving of getting a raise. So, that just starts to implement new programming. It takes practice and before we can even do that, or before it will be effective, we really have to get to the core on why that belief is there to begin with.

Menendez: You make me want to... I'm like, "This has been great, but I have to go do breathwork right now."

Lilia: Let's do it.

Menendez: You are incredibly persuasive. You argue that teaching people how to connect with their breath can change their lives. What does that look like for people that you've worked with?

Lilia: Physically, it has looked like, pain-free, migraines being gone. Being able to sleep. It looks like feeling happier, hopeful, clear, more confident. The breathwork just really helps to change the energy. One of the reasons that I also fell in love with breathwork is that, I was doing the work. You yourself would be doing the active breathing. So, you're the one experiencing the sensations, the release, the thoughts in your mind as well. That to me was so empowering as opposed to just going to a healer that's giving you a card reading or even a therapist. This is more embodied. That was powerful. I did that for myself. That's really cool. A lot of times people are stuck in their head at the beginning because, they're so caught up in the technique and the protective mechanisms that go off when they're trying something new. I always suggest, give it another shot now that you've experienced breathing, now that you know what to expect, and you're not anticipating, what's going to happen. What is she going to say next? That way you can be in a more relaxed state and have more of the benefits of the breathwork.

Menendez: I love all my fellow type A's who are showing up in your classes being like, "I got to do this right. I got to make sure I got this." It's like, "You're really not understanding the core assignment here."

Lilia: Yeah. But I have a lot of compassion because I'm the same way. I am a perfectionist and a straight A student. So, I totally get it. But, it's also been really cool to experience not being in control and seeing the magic that unfolds from that. Just creating a life for myself that I would have never been able to dream of because when you're so planned out, yeah, you're going to get something else. But, there's been so much abundance and just a different way that has come into my life because I have decided to let go of that control and that perfect plan. So, let me try to let go and see what happens and it's been incredible.

Menendez: I can't think of a better note to end on, Ana. Thank you so much.

Lilia: Thank you. Such a pleasure talking to you.

Menendez: Deep breath. Okay. Here is what I learned that I plan to use immediately. Check in on your breath. It is a powerful window into your state of mind. Breath exercises can be a great

way to just reconnect with yourself. It might be uncomfortable. That's a tell. Maybe even the point. Change, real change, comes with consistency so come back to this again and again. While Ana focuses on breathwork. I also really value her reminder to just get back into our bodies. We have talked a lot about thinking and plotting and planning and assessing our way out of being stuck. But sometimes, a walk outside, a solid stretch. A moment to notice how we're breathing, is as powerful as anything else we can do.

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