



LEGAL HIGHS

Emma Freud’s legal highs: neurodynamic breathwork

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The Czech psychiatrist Stan Grof is known for his innovative work in psychedelic therapy, in which patients are given regulated amounts of drugs such as LSD. Grof claimed that the drugs created an expanded state of awareness that meant he could get further in addressing his patient’s problems in a single session than in a year of normal therapy. When the practice was banned in the Sixties, he looked at what traditional societies had done to access different states of consciousness and found that “breathing” was the drug of choice. He developed “holotropic breathing” as a tool to access what he called his patient’s “universal unconscious, which already has all the answers”.

I joined Michael Stone, one of Grof’s disciples, as one of 240 students from more than 20 countries in a mass two-hour Zoom breathwork session — his own creation, known as Neurodynamic Breathwork Online. We lay on our backs, with a mask over our eyes and accessed our “inner consciousness” by taking deep breaths while listening to music on headphones. We were encouraged to add an audible moan or sigh on the out breath (tricky for someone who had a convent education) and to allow our bodies to move in any way we wanted (also tough for someone with three brothers who have laughed me off the dance floor since I was 13).

Despite my inhibitions, after a few minutes of hardcore respiration, everything started to tingle and then glow and it did indeed get distinctly trippy. My body melted into the mat; my worries turned into colours. A few minutes after this, the lovely druggy feeling began to subside, but when I hit the inhale/exhale a bit harder it came gloriously flooding back.



ALAMY

In all honesty, I’m not sure I was the right candidate for this experiment. I did the class the day after co-producing Red Nose Day and would have paid £20 for a nap.

As it turns out, I did. Ten minutes into the class I checked into the un-psychedelic Land of Nod, but awoke at the end in time for the “sharing” section - and it was startling. “I’m Leroy and I haven’t cried this much in years,” said Leroy, who was still crying. A radiant Brooklyn breather declared: “I will make it my life’s purpose to teach people that they can process their pain in this way to leave it behind”.

Using breathing to get high clearly works, but the interesting bit is where you take the experience once you have accessed it - and what you do with it. My classmates had laughed, cried, danced, relaxed, emoted, regretted, rethought, reframed or simply connected with something mighty inside their own brains. And in fairness, I did have a lovely nap.

Stone is offering one free session to anyone intrigued by the process; breathworkonline.com/try-a-free-breathwork-session