

New Year, Fresh Start by Betsy Polatin

[Huff Post Healthy Living Blog](#) on 17th January, 2014

Looking for a fresh start this year? Did things last year not go quite the way you envisioned them? Do you still have goals that seem just out of your grasp?

A new year brings new beginnings, but how can we expect to have altered outcomes when we continue to behave in the same old habitual patterns?

This year, if you're looking for that longed-for promotion, or that second date, try a few techniques I've developed in my new book, *The Actor's Secret*. In addition to being a practical guide for actors and performers, as Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage." People around us judge us and make assumptions about who we are by how we carry ourselves, forming opinions based on how we act in public. My book offers everyday tips for personal growth and self-improvement by teaching you to change habitual patterns so that you can present the version of yourself that you intend. It will also help you ward off stress and embody the confidence you already have so that you can get the results you want.

As a movement specialist for more than 40 years, I show actors every day how to change their habitual patterns and learn to breathe properly, effectively express emotion, improve their posture and much more. Having access to these techniques allows them to express a specific character, and can help you change your habits to present the version of yourself that you choose to, and to have access to the full potential of your body, mind and spirit. Based on my knowledge of the Alexander Technique and on my movement and breathing specialties, below are a few simple ways to harness your inner actor for a better new year.

1. A new way to use your body effectively: Actors perform their best when they use their body -- their instrument -- effectively, including having their weight and energy evenly distributed. For everyone else, this coordinated balance can release everyday habitual tendencies like tightly held muscles, or favoring leaning on one leg over the other. Becoming aware and altering these habits can even improve workouts and reduce the risk of injury.

How: Lean forward over your toes, then lean back over your heels. Then lean less forward and less back a few more times until you have even contact on the floor with the front and back of your foot. With this new, balanced stance you can be lighter on your feet, and hold your head high to approach any situation with a fresh perspective.

2. A new way to release tension: One of the most common places to hold tension is the shoulder and neck area. The neck is a passageway that allows messages to pass from the brain to the body and back. **When the muscles in the neck are held tight**, blood pressure increases and can limit this passageway for messages. **Relaxing these muscles** can lower blood pressure, reducing risk of cardiovascular disease, not to mention make you feel calmer and more relaxed. When you're relaxed and at ease you're able to be flexible in the moment and more accurately assess circumstances to address them accordingly.

How: Most people release tension by just relaxing their muscles. This cures the result, but doesn't address the habit of tensing in the first place. Feel the tension in your shoulder and

neck area, and rather than immediately release it, focus on that area of tension and become aware of what it feels like. Observe what it makes the rest of your body feel like, becoming aware of the consequences of your tension. Sense any muscle contractions or heat you might feel. Combining the information of the awareness and the sensation, your brain actually reprograms the muscles to gradually let down your shoulders and release the neck tension. While you allow this shift to happen, maintain awareness of how the release makes your entire body feel. Notice the increased level of comfort in your body, and the peace of mind that follows letting the tension release itself with awareness. Re-wiring letting go of tension in this way is much more effective in the long term reducing the habit of holding tension.

3. A new way to breathe -- three-dimensional breathing: When actors hold their breath, whether from anxiety or concentration, they limit communication, availability, and their capacity to express genuine emotions. We all want to communicate more effectively. What I call "three-dimensional breathing" helps us take a fuller breath, allowing more oxygen to flow to the brain helping us think more clearly, so we can translate our thoughts into saying what we want to say.

How: Sit or stand in a comfortable location. Place your hands on either side of your ribs and sense the sideways movement of your torso as you exhale and then inhale. Continue to feel the back-and-forth movement as you remove your hands. Next, place one hand on your collarbone and one on your stomach, under your ribs. Again, breathe and feel the movement up and down, then remove your hands and sense the movement. Place one hand on your back and one in front on your torso. Sense the movement front to back, then remove your hands. Continue breathing fully and sensing each dimension of the breath -- side to side, up and down, and front to back. Practice this three-dimensional breathing this way before you have a stressful conference call, or walk in to ask for that promotion!

Each of these simple exercises can increase your presence and awareness, relax your mind and body, and build your confidence. Being in a more attentive, relaxed state gives you the calmness to change your habits of moving and thinking, which allows you to be present in each moment. Then you are able to face anything life brings you and respond appropriately -- giving yourself that fresh start.

Check out my book, [The Actor's Secret](#), for many more of these exercises for personal and professional well-being and growth.