

The Art of Enough  
Episode 3  
Exhaling the Subconscious

- Speaker 1: [00:06](#) The Art of Enough with artist Jay Sullivan. Episode three, Exhaling the Subconscious.
- Jay Sullivan: [00:23](#) The man climbed over the mountain, the man climbed over the mountain, the man climbed over the mountain, and what do you think he saw? Ba-bum, ba-bum-ba-bum, bum, bum, ba-bum, ba-bum-bum-
- Jay Sullivan: [00:36](#) Welcome to The Art of Enough, a podcast series that can help you understand the causes of not feeling enough, and provides some guidance on how psychology, neuroscience and creative process can help you transcend this and other problematic emotions.
- Jay Sullivan: [00:53](#) Hi, I'm artist Jay Sullivan. In the first podcast we explored how my adult feelings of not being enough started in childhood. I explained that when I was a young child my father had a series of bipolar episodes that forced him to leave the house. The five-year-old me thought it was my fault, and it caused me to adopt a pattern of behavior that I naively thought would keep it from happening again, namely my drive to be better, to do more, to be perfect, to climb the highest mountains. In podcast two, I explained how I became aware of the childhood experiences and emotions that became the focus of The Art of Enough. I detailed three techniques that I used, meditation, psychotherapy and art making, to help me gain access to the subconscious and understand how these childhood experiences were impacting my adult emotions and behaviors.
- Jay Sullivan: [01:49](#) In this podcast, I will detail another technique for accessing the subconscious and the wealth of memories and emotions that reside there. Breathing. Yes, breathing. Proper breathing is the foundation of meditation, a tool of psychotherapy, an integral part of the performing art, and is a valuable technique for accessing the subconscious and enhancing creativity.
- Jay Sullivan: [02:26](#) The subconscious is an important part of my artistic and psychological practice, because the conscious brain can only hold six or seven pieces of information at one time, whereas your subconscious brain holds a lifetime of memories, emotions

and behaviors. Accessing the subconscious increases my self knowledge and gives me more options for solving any given challenge, which I believe makes me more creative. Ba-bum, ba-bum-ba-bum, bum, bum, ba-bum-ba-bum-

Jay Sullivan: [02:55](#) Now, reaching the subconscious is difficult if you're always climbing the highest mountains. Generally, if you're obsessed with climbing the highest mountains, your life is driven by anxiety, the anxiety that comes with the fear that if you don't do more, if you're not better, if you're not perfect, something bad will happen. The good news is that proper breathing can one, reduce our anxiety, two, help us access the subconscious, and three, increase our creativity.

Jay Sullivan: [03:28](#) Let's start by looking at anxiety and how it works in the mind and body. The part of your brain that controls your feelings of anxiety is called the amygdala. This is the fear center of your brain, and it controls your fight-or-flight response. It produces anxiety when it's activated. It's a good thing we have an amygdala. It helps us sense and respond to threats. However, in many people the amygdala is overly dominant, and it senses threats in situations where there really are none. This is understandable, since during cave people times, if we were surrounded by constant threats to our survival. In modern times, the threats are not so pervasive, but our brain is still on the constant lookout for them, and it causes us unnecessary anxiety. This tendency is increased if we had traumatic experiences in our childhood.

Jay Sullivan: [04:21](#) The prefrontal cortex is designed to moderate the amygdala. It's the rational part of our brain, analyzing different situations and determining what actions might be best in any given situation. The problem occurs when your amygdala is overly dominant and it overwhelms the prefrontal cortex. This triggers your fight-or-flight response and results in anxiety in your nervous system. Dr. John Arden, psychologist and author, or co-author of 13 books on psychotherapy and neuroscience, spoke to me from his home outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. He explains the relationship between your amygdala and your nervous system.

Dr John Arden: [05:02](#) You have a autonomic nervous system, or just think of it as automatic nervous system. You have two branches, and people with anxiety, generally speaking, have the, um, the activating branch on most of the time. It happens to be called the sympathetic. It's because if you're just sympathetic-driven, meaning you activated, you know, the, and the extreme is fight or flight, then you're, you just see extremes. It's either, I'm charged up or I'm not. So what happens if you're kind of too

much on the sympathetic branch, your amygdala hijacks your prefrontal cortex.

- Jay Sullivan: [05:39](#) When your amygdala hijacks your prefrontal cortex, you can be in a constant state of anxiety because you lose your ability to gauge which threats are significant and which ones are not. For people in the arts, it can result in things like writer's block or stage fright. Reducing anxiety and gaining back control of the prefrontal cortex requires activating the parasympathetic, or common branch of your nervous system, which has a braking effect on anxiety. There are some tried and true techniques. Again, Dr. John Arden.
- Dr John Arden: [06:14](#) [inaudible 00:06:14] mindfulness and self-hypnosis and relaxation training and all those different types of yoga have been practices, uh, that uh, people have been using for roughly, you know, 2500 years or so. And in fact, what it, they're all about is activating the parasympathetic nervous system.
- Jay Sullivan: [06:33](#) Because of my adverse childhood experiences, I was too much on the sympathetic branch of my nervous system, always on the lookout for threats and problems. 99% of the things I worried about never happened. It caused me to be over-prepared for these imaginary perceived threats, taken a lot of my time, and adding a lot to my stress. So during The Art of Enough, I looked to integrate activities into my art making and my life that could help activate the parasympathetic system. The goal was to slow me down and stop me from always climbing the highest mountains. Om.
- Jay Sullivan: [07:17](#) Dr. Arden mentioned yoga. Yoga is a great tool for reducing anxiety. Studies have shown that two one-hour yoga sessions a week have the same impact as taking anti-anxiety medications. Exercise has a similar effect. Singing is a favorite of mine. It reduces stress and boosts your immune system. Of course, in the previous podcast we mentioned meditation. All these activate your parasympathetic nervous system and reduce anxiety.
- Jay Sullivan: [08:00](#) Breathing properly is one of the easiest ways to activate your parasympathetic nervous system and reduce your anxiety. I use the term breathing properly because most of us, as adults, do not breathe properly, the way the body was intended to breathe. So let's start there. Jean McClelland, New York-based teacher of voice, breathing and the Alexander Technique, explains.

Jean McClelland: [08:28](#) There's only one way the body was designed to breathe, and we do this quite well until we're maybe two years old. What happens is that we are socialized. We have stress and anxiety even if it's the most minimal, uh, type, but we tend to become shallow breathers.

Jay Sullivan: [08:50](#) The problem is that shallow, upper chest breathing activates your sympathetic nervous system, your fight-or-flight system. So you get nervous, start breathing in the upper chest, and that makes you even more anxious. So, if not shallow upper chest breathing, what is the correct way to breathe? What is the natural way to breathe? Well, you would think it was about taking in oxygen. The lungs take in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. You've undoubtedly have heard the advice, take a deep breath when you're stressed. But the taking in or inhaling is not the part to focus on. Proper breathing is all about the exhalation. It's about getting rid of the carbon dioxide using the diaphragm, so your lungs can automatically take in the oxygen. Again, Jean McClelland.

Jean McClelland: [09:47](#) The diaphragm is the breathing muscle of the body. Above the diaphragm are the heart and lungs. Below the diaphragm are the abdominal organs. [inaudible 00:09:55] trying to get that diaphragm to move up, to push on the lungs to get rid of carbon dioxide so then when the body needs oxygen, a trigger's sent down to the diaphragm telling it to contract, and it pulls oxygen into the lung. People say, you know, they're holding their breath. What they're doing is they're, they're stopping their exhalation. Why we take those grabbing for upper chest breathing is that there is still so much carbon dioxide left in the lung. So everything in breathing is based, the way our body works, is based on exhalation.

Jay Sullivan: [10:34](#) The exhalation is important to reducing anxiety because A, it releases the carbon dioxide, but B, it is also during the exhalation part of the breathing that the body sends a signal to the brain for the nervous system to relax. With this signal comes a reduced heart rate and lower blood pressure. One common mistake, however, is that many people assume that part of deep exhalation is putting the body in a downward slumping posture when actually, proper exhalation is an upward movement in the body. Again, Jean McClelland.

Jean McClelland: [11:10](#) We tend to [inaudible 00:11:11], we tend naturally to pull into ourselves and down, and we start to feel anxious and we think, ah yes, well, I should try to relax myself. And so we go down even more trying to, quote unquote, relax. But the very opposite is true. The reason we feel anxiety is because we go

down and in. And we collapse. The diaphragm cannot move upwards, getting rid of carbon dioxide, which tenses nerves and muscles.

Jay Sullivan: [11:41](#) When Jean McClelland works with her students, which range from singers to dancers to business executives, she is working to help them exhale better. And to do that, the students have to strengthen their diaphragm.

Jean McClelland: [11:54](#) The-the basic thing to have people remember is that exhalation is up. So you want to encourage the up. A, a sigh is up. It's not down. You know, a hiss is up. It's not down. S-, breath for song is all and up, and you'll see that sometimes in great singers. Their hands inadvertently move up, because it just, it's nature in the body to go up.

Jay Sullivan: [12:25](#) When we strengthen our diaphragm and exhale in an upward direction, we use the full potential of the breath to activate our parasympathetic nervous system, which relaxes our bodies and our minds. But you may say, okay, that sounds great, but what does this have to do with accessing the subconscious and increasing creativity?

Jay Sullivan: [12:47](#) First, let's define creativity. My definition is that creativity is the ability to see multiple options for solving any given problem, whether you are a writer, an artist, a computer programmer or an office administrator. As we discussed earlier, the conscious mind can only hold six or seven pieces of information at one time. So, to be more creative, we need to be able to access the subconscious and bring the wealth of experiences and emotions from the subconscious into the conscious mind. Proper breathing is a bridge to the subconscious.

Jay Sullivan: [13:28](#) When we breathe properly, we have the ability to enter a relaxed daydreaming state, one that is free from anxiety. Scientists refer to this as eupnea, a relaxed form of breathing in all mammal, where we don't sense any threats. Brain activity shifts from being in the rational conscious brain to the subconscious. In addition, the part of the brain that is responsible for self-criticism and impulse control goes quiet, allowing us to see things in new and unique ways, allowing us to be more creative. Artists, especially performance artists, use the term, being on impulse. Again, Jean McClelland.

Jean McClelland: [14:17](#) So when you are on impulse, I always say it's like the inner artist, when you are working from that place, it instantaneously ignites the diaphragm. And everything that you are, everything that you are experiencing, is moving up through that breath

stream and vibrating the vocal cords. I mean it's a miracle. If you are in the state of exhalation, that's movement. That's flow. And things come up into mind. It's just the way it is. It's improvisational mind.

Jay Sullivan: [14:53](#) I believe impulse, the improvisational mind, the inner artist, are all about gaining access to the subconscious, and allowing the thoughts and the emotions of the subconscious to rise into the conscious mind. And it allows these thoughts and emotions to become part of the art making and or psychological change process. This is the core of my work. Using meditation, psychotherapy, art making, the breath and other tools, I seek to access the self knowledge that's hidden in the subconscious. I believe that it makes me a better and happier person, and I hope it improves the lives of those around me.

Jay Sullivan: [15:40](#) In podcast two, I described how my feelings of not being enough, and understanding my obsession with climbing the highest mountains, had risen out of my subconscious into my conscious brain over the course of many years, during meditations, psychotherapy sessions and while creating art. This flow of childhood insights from the subconscious continued during the making of The Art of Enough. Om.

Jay Sullivan: [16:11](#) I had entered a regular morning routine of meditation, breathing, mindfulness, singing and writing. In the afternoons, I was working in the studio, primarily creating collages with a group of objects. This collage technique with objects is known as assemblages in the art world. The objects were various items I associated with my parents and with my childhood. A black wallet, a belt, an alarm clock, red lipstick and a red clown's nose. A baseball, and rolls and rolls and rolls of brown jute twine. Working with these objects over the course of several weeks, primarily moving them around into various compositions, helped to take me into the subconscious mind to reveal new associations, new connections, and a significant new narrative.

Jay Sullivan: [17:05](#) The main narrative, or story, no longer was about my father and I, and how I believed his problems were my fault. It was about my father and my mother, two people in a broken relationship, two people forever in conflict with each other and with my father's bipolar disorder. I had never recognized this part of my childhood before, and I could see my mother's pain and suffering in the art works. 28 years old, with three small children, and suddenly dealing with the chaos created by my father's bipolar disorder.

- Jay Sullivan: [17:49](#) I was part of the story, playing the role as fixer, represented in the art works as a series of companion self portraits, my body entangled in the brown jute twine. The role of fixer is something children will often inhabit in these types of situations. I can imagine the many strategies I probably employed to try to keep everyone happy. And it was a skill that paid off later in my business career. But as a small child I didn't realize that what I was trying to do was impossible. I could never do enough to make them a happy couple again, to make us a happy family again. Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty back together again. The series became to be called All the King's Horses and All the King's Men, a representation of me trying to fix what was broken, of me trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.
- Jay Sullivan: [18:59](#) It was a major emotional turning point in the project for me. I could now see that I had spent a large part of my life trying to first, keep Humpty Dumpty from falling, and then second, trying to fix him when he crashed to the ground. And again, it made me a good video and film producer, but that's another life now, and I want to change.
- Jay Sullivan: [19:25](#) But I realized that I needed, in the future, to recognize Humpty Dumpty situations when they appeared, those situations where I was predisposed to try to make the impossible possible, and I had to give myself an opportunity to say no, to say I have done enough. And this became one of my process guidelines. Process guidelines are simple phrases I've developed to remind me of simple insights that I've discovered while creating The Art of Enough. This is one. Be on the lookout for Humpty Dumpty.
- Jay Sullivan: [20:02](#) After completing the main body of work contained in The Art of Enough, I went through several months of trying to be aware of the Humpty Dumpties in my life, and then changing my response. It was enjoyable, it was productive, and it was a stress-free time. Ultimately, I developed a series of questions that would replace my automatic urge to fix Humpty Dumpty when he appeared. Now, before I make a significant commitment, I ask these three questions. One, will I enjoy the experience? Two, will I be effective? Number three, how will this choice affect my relationships with the people closest to me? These three questions allowed me to be open to new experiences, but at the same time, helped ensure that these experiences were filled with enjoyment, achievement, close relationships, and ultimately, the feeling that I have done enough.

Jay Sullivan: [21:14](#) Before we close this podcast, I wanna provide you with a few more process guidelines, both related to the topics we explored in this podcast. The first, keep uncertainty alive as long as possible. I heard this piece of advice while watching a documentary about video artist William Kentridge. He argues that once things become certain, they become hardened and inflexible. The idea of creating assemblages came to me very late in the art making process after I had taken a collage making workshop. I had already invested a year and a half developing various videos and photographic works. Could I really throw that all away and start again with something else? But I was working with the process guideline, keep uncertainty alive as long as possible, so I decided to take the plunge. And I'm glad I did. It helped reveal a whole new layer of my inner self, and it helped me achieve greater emotional and psychological change.

Jay Sullivan: [22:22](#) Two, experiment, experiment, experiment. This goes hand in hand with keep uncertainty alive as long as possible. I used to ruminate over a lot of different approaches in my mind before I set out on a specific direction when creating a body of work. I only started making work when I felt I had a solid idea of what I was doing artistically. During The Art of Enough, I created many different experiments, videos, video installations, photographs, collages, assemblages. I think the most important thing about this approach is that I am continually stretching myself and learning new things, but in a context that does not have major emotional risk for me. If an experiment fails, it's not the end of the world. I just start another one. Also, I've learned how not to be attached to the big goal. So if things take time, and I run into a deadline, I default to a process guideline I mentioned in an earlier podcast. When feeling stressed, simplify the deliverable or change the delivery date. The man climbed over the mountain, the man climbed-

Jay Sullivan: [23:35](#) In the first three podcasts of The Art of Enough, we have highlighted various aspects of an art making and creative process that I use to understand limiting beliefs and emotions. In the next podcast, I'm going to take a look at two other areas for transcending these limiting beliefs and emotions, making tea with the demons, or in psychological terms, desensitizing myself to the emotional power of limiting beliefs and emotions, and then second, we'll look at how to create new beliefs that are far more empowering than the old ones.

Jay Sullivan: [24:08](#) Ba-bum, ba-bum-ba-bum, bum, bum, ba-bum-ba-bum-ba-bum. Ba-bum, ba-bum-ba-bum, bum-

Jay Sullivan: [24:14](#) I'm Jay Sullivan, and this has been The Art of Enough. And remember, keep breathing.

Jay Sullivan: [24:20](#) Ba-bum, ba-bum, bum-bum.