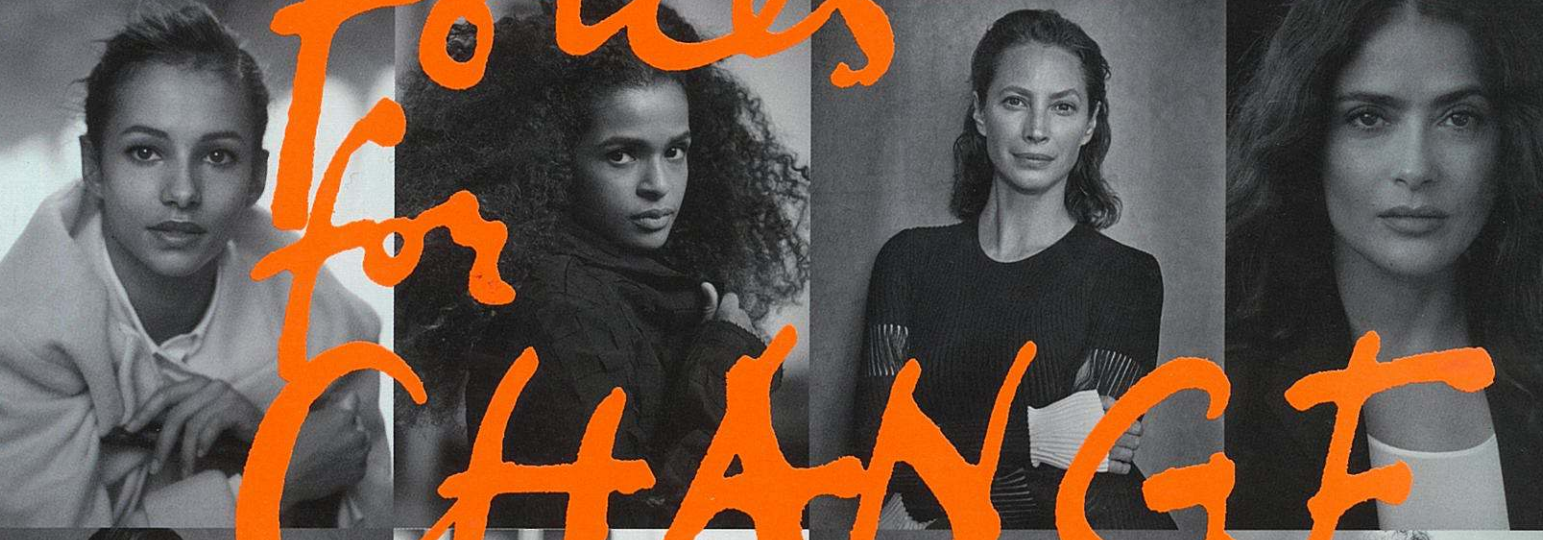
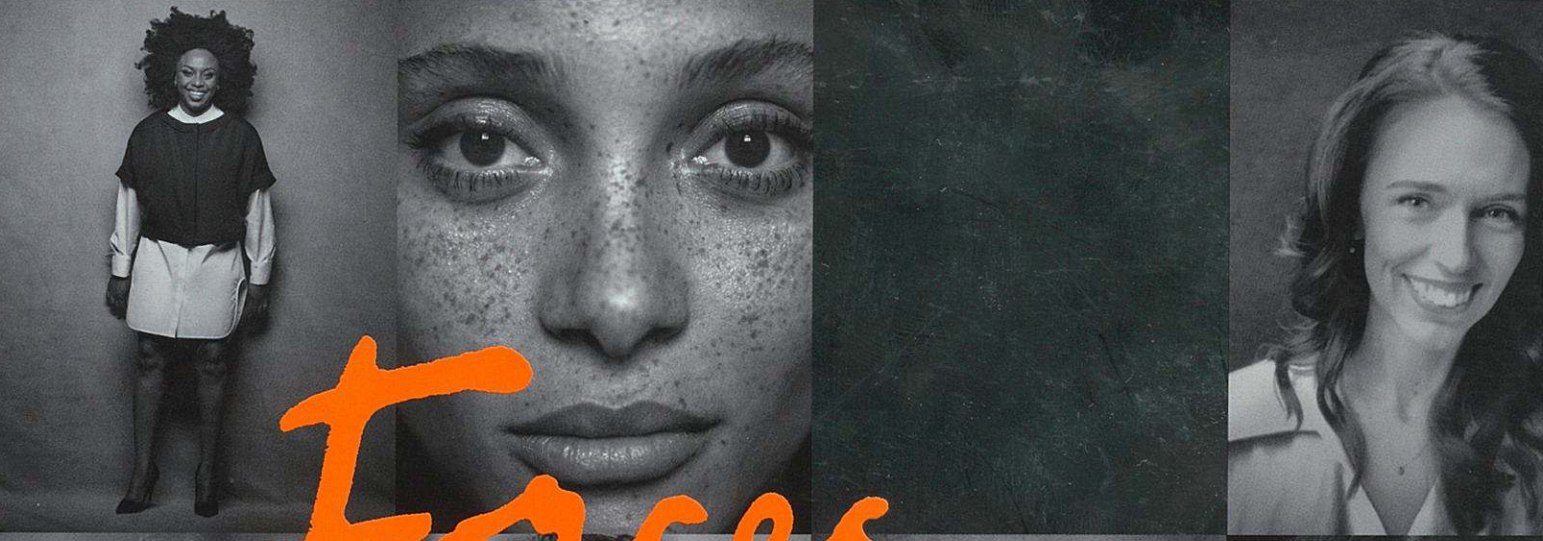


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As I live and breathe

Is how you inhale and exhale the key to wellbeing? Kathleen Baird-Murray tries to take it all in

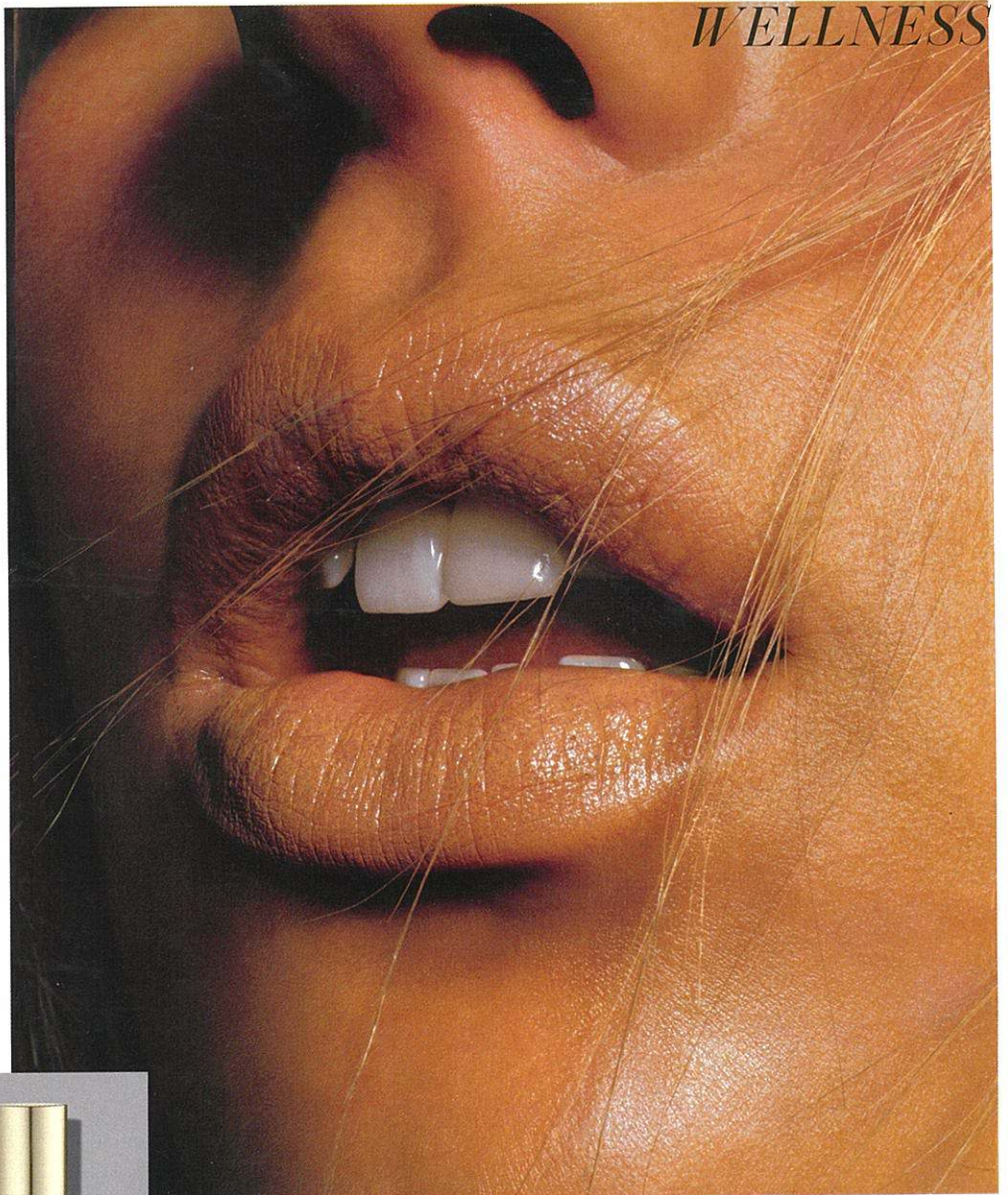
There are only two certainties in life: death and taxes, or so the saying goes. But recently, as I relaxed into a shavasana pose at the end of a yoga class, I was reminded of a third: breathing.

From our first exhalation to our last, our breath is what keeps us alive. Yet according to a whole wellness micro-industry, breathing is something we need to take more seriously.

From Boost Oxygen cans offering 98 per cent pure oxygen and claiming to increase mental alertness, enhance the immune system and even aid performance at sports, to apps such as *Happy Not Perfect*, which offers tips on how to breathe to benefit mental health, respiration is a hot topic. Whether it's because of an awareness of air quality (nine out of 10 people globally are breathing "unsafe" air, according to the World Health Organisation), or that we're realising that rushing through life 24/7 necessitates pausing from time to time, we're learning not to take this essential biological function for granted. And rightly so.

"Breathing too much or too little, in any situation, will limit performance and have negative effects on health," says Augusto Vegas, a breathing expert and the co-founder of Survival Apnea, which runs breathing sessions for stressed urbanites visiting the Nih Sumba spa in Indonesia. Vegas points out that we are all prone to "over-breathing" – the term he gives to a reliance on our ribs and chest muscles instead of the diaphragm. As a freediver and surfer, Vegas practised his breathing technique initially to improve stamina and resilience in the water, but quickly realised how much it positively affected his daily life.

The easiest way to improve breathing is to be more aware of it. Try holding your breath until it's uncomfortable, noting how long this takes. After



resting for a few seconds, take 20 deep, forceful breaths, as if hyperventilating. Then hold your breath again, paying attention to how it feels. "You'll probably notice that when you stopped breathing in the first exercise it took less than a minute to feel sensations of discomfort," says Vegas. "In the second exercise, you over-breathed, but again will feel bodily sensations." Both exercises demonstrate that how we breathe has a huge impact on how we feel. "It's a simple way to witness the powerful effect that breathing has on the body."

Our breathing can be enhanced by following three simple pointers. "Breathe through your nose most of the time," says Vegas. "When you need to relax, take two to three deep breaths, inhaling through the nose and exhaling for a longer time through the mouth while making an S sound. And when you're resting, make sure your diaphragm is the main breathing muscle helping you inhale."

And if, like me, you find your mind wandering during yoga instead of focusing on your breath, it's worth remembering the other name for shavasana – the corpse pose. A timely reminder of what happens when we stop breathing, perhaps. ■

Augusto Vegas holds breathing workshops at Nih Sumba from April to September. Inspiringtravelcompany.co.uk offers seven nights at the resort from £4,398 per person, including flights, transfers and meals

Left, from top: Aromatherapy Associates Support Breathe Roller Ball, £18. Apple Watch, plus free Breathe app, from £399. Boost Oxygen Beauty 98% Pure Oxygen, £22