Quick ’n Easy Program

Just Breathe
Stress Management: Part 2

Write it all down:
If you’ve been recording stressful events, your reactions to stress, and your coping mechanisms in your stress journal, you’re starting to get a good idea of what types of situations trigger your stressful thoughts and feelings. You’ve probably recorded physical symptoms like muscle pain, headaches, or upset stomachs, and you may have recorded coping mechanisms like eating a chocolate bar or a bag of potato chips, yelling at the family, or feeling depressed.

Since we are all unique, we all have different life experiences, different personalities and different priorities, so it’s no surprise that we react differently to stress. What remains the same, though – regardless of the stressor or our reactions – is that living in a consistent state of stress, or constantly feeling like you have to fight or run, decreases the quality of your life. Therefore, you should try your best to minimize the impacts of stress on your daily life. One significant way to do this is simply by improving the way you breathe.

Breathing 101:
Did you know that improper breathing contributes to anxiety, depression, muscle tension, headaches and fatigue? If you’re already stressed out, improper breathing will make you feel even more stressed. Who wants that?

With each inhale we receive oxygen and with each exhale we release carbon dioxide. If we take long, deep breaths, this results in less secretion of stress hormones and more secretion of nitric oxide, which, by opening up blood vessels, reduces blood pressure. Short and shallow breaths, or poor breathing habits, diminish the flow of these gases to and from our bodies, making it harder for us to physically cope with stressful events.

Advanced Breathing:
The experts say that proper breathing takes place in the diaphragm – a sheet-like muscle that separates our lungs from our abdomen. This is known as diaphragmatic breathing and is the natural breathing form of newborn babies and sleeping adults. The other type of breathing is called chest or thoracic breathing, and this type is associated with anxiety, emotional distress, or sedentary lifestyles. If you compare a peaceful, sleeping baby with an upset toddler who is having a temper tantrum, you will see the difference between these two breathing methods. Unfortunately, many of us breathe with short and shallow breaths all the time.

Breathing Lessons:
It may seem strange to have a program on proper breathing, as it’s something that we all do, and at which we all think we’re a “natural.” The reality is that, if we breathe using our chests with short and shallow breaths, we are getting insufficient air and consequently our blood will not be properly oxygenated, our heart rate and muscle tension will increase, and our stress response will be turned on. Breathing in this shallow way can also lead to fatigue and panic attacks.

You can tell how you breathe by being aware of the movement of your body. If your chest and shoulders rise when you inhale, you are breathing using your chest; and if your abdomen rises when you inhale, you are using your diaphragm.
What to do this week:
This week, continue recording any stressful events in your stress journal, but now start to pay attention to how you’re breathing during these situations. When you are in a stressful environment, using your diaphragm to breathe slowly and deeply can shut down the stress response in seconds, helping you to deal with the situation at hand. Breathing shallowly can make you panic and, in some cases, hyperventilate or pass out. When this happens, you are not very useful in a stressful situation. It’s your choice – do you want to be clear-headed and able to make decisions, or do you want to faint? I know which one I would choose!

Breathe Right:
It’s beneficial to be able to breathe using your diaphragm all the time, so you can learn how to “breathe right” by practicing. All you need to do is breathe, keeping your hands on your abdomen, and relax, making a conscious effort to shift from shallow chest breathing to deeper, abdominal breathing, feeling your success with the rising of your hands on your abdomen. You can learn how to breathe appropriately in a short time, but benefits occur after months of practice. Soon, breathing deeply using your diaphragm will be your natural style, and when you are stressed, you’ll naturally decrease the impact of stress.

Tip:
Regardless of whether or not you have mastered breathing with your diaphragm, the first thing you should do when faced with a stressful situation is to take a long, deep breath. Experts recommend actually making a long exhale first, clearing out your lungs so that your first deep breath is as deep and full as it can be.

Follow up:
While keeping a stress journal is valuable in many ways, you will not want to be writing in one forever. The first step in recognizing the impact of stress on your life is to become aware of what stressing you and how you react to stressors. Your stress journal provides you with this information and you can use it to make positive changes in your life. You may realize that your life is out of balance because you are doing too many things, and not able to say “no.” You may also learn that you have to delegate more activities or that you need to put yourself first and give yourself the rest and care that you need. You will certainly realize that you are competent, capable and able to do many things, so the stress journal experience will also demonstrate to you what a strong survivor you really are!

Share your experiences with the stress journal and with practicing breathing techniques with members at next week’s meeting.

Soon, breathing deeply using your diaphragm will be your natural style, and when you are stressed, you’ll naturally decrease the impact of stress.