

The Mind/Body Connection: Deep Breathing and Simple Meditation

The Mind/Body Connection: What does it mean for you?

Your body responds to the way you think, feel, and act. This is the “mind/body connection.”

- When you are in good emotional health, you are aware of your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. You have learned healthy ways to cope with the stress and problems that are a normal part of life.
- If you find that you are always stressed, anxious or upset, you may not have learned how to handle some of the stresses in life. You may begin feeling ill and may have physical symptoms such as muscle spasms or ulcers. These changes could be your body trying to tell you that something is not right.

Stress Overview

Stress can be your response to the demands of everyday life. The right amount of stress motivates you to be alert and focused on your world. Too much stress can cause you to feel tense, anxious, irritable or overwhelmed. There are many factors contributing to your stress and these can build upon each other. Things that can cause stress may include financial difficulties, medical issues both your own and family, death of a loved one, and other similar life situations. Positive events such as a wedding or the birth of a new baby can also cause stress.

When the body senses danger, it releases a hormone that makes the heart beat faster and the body ready for action. Stress hormones raise the blood pressure and can cause the body to retain fluids; these effects place more stress on your heart. A continuous stress response is damaging to your heart, kidneys, circulatory system and even the bones. Unrelieved stress can also weaken your immune system.

Activity: What Stresses You Out?

Take a moment to think about how your body reacts to stressful situations. Does your heart rate increase? Do you clench your jaw muscles or make your hands into fists? Everybody reacts differently to stress. Recognizing what your stressors are will make it easier for you to control your stress level.

Reflect for a few minutes on the biggest stressors in your life. Write down 5 to 10 stressors. You will not be sharing these with anyone; this exercise is only for your benefit. Be specific. If finances

This publication is part of a four-part series on **The Mind/Body Connection**. Other publications in this series are:
 HSW-AP.002 The Mind/Body Connection: An Overview
 HSW-AP.003 The Mind/Body Connection: Introduction and Safe Exercise Practice for Adults
 HSW-AP.005 The Mind/Body Connection: Basic Standing and Seated Stretching Exercises
 HSW-AP.006 The Mind/Body Connection: Beginner Level Balance and Standing Stretches

are a big source of stress, narrow it down to “I get stressed out when I do not have money to buy groceries at the end of the month” instead of just writing “money problems.”

Now, look at your list and number the stressors with the one that causes you the highest amount of stress as # 1 and so on. Identifying the biggest stressors in your life is the first step in dealing with your stress more effectively.

There are medically proven, simple tools that you can learn to use to control your stress response. Meditation and/or deep breathing can be used as daily practice, anywhere and at anytime. These simple tools for stress release can be used on the spot, as soon as you notice your stress level growing, to prevent buildup of unhealthy stress.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing involves inhaling deeply and exhaling fully, taking even lengths of in breaths and out breaths. This exercise can be done almost anywhere and can be repeated several times during the day, whenever you feel stressed.

Uses of Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is widely recommended to help with the following conditions:

- symptoms of menopause including sleeplessness and hot flashes
- cancer treatment side effects
- pain control
- anxiety disorder symptoms
- stress management
- quitting smoking

Focused deep-breathing exercise such as exaggerating the way you naturally inhale and exhale, promotes relaxation, awareness and emotional release. Shallow breathing can be a symptom of stress or anxiety. The goal in deep breathing is to take long, deep breaths. These breaths are “cleansing”; they free the body and mind from restrictions and release toxins.

Possible Side Effects of Deep Breathing

Effects of deep breathing practice could include sleepiness, light-headedness, tingling in the hands, feet, or face or a sense of altered consciousness. Many people practice deep breathing daily, without experiencing any negative feelings. If you feel side effects that are unwanted, simply return to your normal breathing rate.

Breathing too deeply, too often, or too quickly, can cause hyperventilation, which has serious negative effects. An occasional deep breath or practicing a specific, slow deep breathing technique to relieve stress and tension is not likely to cause damage.

Three Simple Exercises for Developing Awareness of the Breath

Exercise 1

1. Notice your breathing throughout your day.
2. Let your breathing be easy, pleasurable and full.
3. Every now and then, take in several big, long, deep breaths.
4. After each in-breath, hold it for a few seconds.

"Practicing regular, mindful breathing can be calming and energizing and can even help with stress-related health problems ranging from panic attacks to digestive disorders."

Andrew Weil, M.D.

5. Then slowly let your breath out.
6. You may begin feeling relaxation and balance.

Exercise 2

1. Stand outdoors if possible (if not find a quiet indoor space).
2. Take in a full, slow, deep breath through your nose.
3. As you breathe in, slowly raise your arms up over your head.
4. At the same time gently but firmly tense all the muscles in your body.
5. Exhale through your mouth, softly making the sound Ahhh.
6. As you breathe out, lower your arms, and let your whole body relax.
7. Repeat 3 times.

Exercise 3

This exercise is easy, takes little time, requires no equipment and can be practiced anywhere. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise.

1. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound. (Pursing your lips may make this easier.)
2. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of **four**.
3. Hold your breath for a count of **seven**.
4. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of **eight**.
5. This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale around your tongue through your mouth. Exhaling should take twice as long as inhaling. Keeping the count of 4:7:8 for each step in the breath, is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, just count faster.

With practice, you can slow down the speed of the count for each phase and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply. Practice this exercise at least twice a day, for the best result. You cannot do it too frequently. **Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice, and then if you are ready for a longer practice you can extend it to eight breaths.** If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

Meditation

Meditation is a mind/body practice to help deal with stress. In meditation, you learn to focus attention. Some forms of meditation instruct you to become mindful of thoughts, feelings and sensations and to observe them without judgment. This kind of meditation can result in a state of greater calmness, physical relaxation and psychological balance. Practicing meditation can change how you relate to your flow of emotions and thoughts.

Most Types of Meditation Have Four Elements In Common

- **A quiet location.** Meditation is usually practiced in a quiet place with limited distractions. (Quiet your telephone; you can check voice mail when you finish meditation.) This can be particularly helpful for beginners.
- **A specific, comfortable posture.** Depending on the type of meditation being practiced, meditation can be done while sitting, lying down, standing, walking, or in other positions.
- **A focus of attention.** Focusing your attention is usually a part of meditation. For example, you may focus on a mantra (a specially chosen word or set of words), an object such as a candle, or the sensations of the breath.

- **An open attitude.** Having an open attitude during meditation means letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them. When you begin to have wandering thoughts, gently bring your attention back to the focus.

Uses of Meditation

People use meditation for help with various health problems, including anxiety, pain, depression, stress, insomnia, and physical or emotional symptoms that may be associated with chronic illnesses (such as heart disease, HIV/AIDS, and cancer) and their treatment.

The National Institutes of Health National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine reports that regular meditation can reduce chronic pain, anxiety, high blood pressure, cholesterol, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and blood cortisol levels that are increased by stress. Meditation has also been shown to reduce the use of health care services.

Examples of Meditation Exercises

Exercise 1

Mindful Check-In: A mindfulness based stress reduction meditation practice

This practice will take only three minutes to complete. It will allow you to see how you are feeling physically, mentally and emotionally and will help you to re-center yourself in the present moment. This practice can be incorporated into your daily routine and used as often as you like.

Find a relaxing space to do this practice without distractions such as the telephone (anyone can turn off their cell phone for three minutes). Find a comfortable position either sitting or laying down. Read the meditation's text below, pausing after each paragraph to close your eyes and reflect as directed:

Take a few moments to be still. Congratulate yourself for taking this time for meditation practice.

Begin this mindful check-in by feeling into your body and mind, allowing any waves of thought, emotion or physical sensation to just be. Perhaps this is the first break you have taken amidst your busy day. Close your eyes. As you begin to enter the world of being rather than doing, you may notice the trajectory of the feelings that you have been carrying within yourself. There is no need to judge, analyze, or figure things out. Just allow yourself to be in the here and now, amid everything that is present in this moment.

Spend about three minutes checking in with yourself in this way. As you come to the end of this mindful check-in, again congratulate yourself for doing this practice and directly contributing to your health and well-being. A mindfulness-based stress reduction workbook by Goldstein, Elisha — Copyright 2011 by NEW HARBINGER PUBLICATIONS. Reproduced with permission of NEW HARBINGER PUBLICATIONS in the format Presentation via Copyright Clearance Center.

Exercise 2

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

1. Starting at your head/face first tighten and then relax these muscles.
2. Move down to the neck, tighten and then relax these muscles.

3. Take in a very slow, deep breath and on the out breath, imagine all remaining tension that you are holding in the muscles of the head and face melting away, relaxing those muscles.
4. In conjunction with deep breathing, notice other places where you are holding tension. Are your shoulders hunched or hands clenched into fists?
5. Progressively tighten and then relax all body parts one at a time.
6. While deep breathing, notice if tension remains after the initial tensing and relaxing of that area, and release remaining tension through the breath.
7. Continue until you have worked from the head to the toes. This exercise can help to prepare you for sleep.

Possible Side Effects of Meditation

A small percentage of people who meditate have become disoriented or anxious and experience some negative feelings. People with certain types of mental illness may be more likely to have negative responses. Those with cancer and chronic conditions such as arthritis and heart disease should talk with their health care provider before starting any type of meditation that involves movement of joints and muscles, such as Tai Chi, yoga or any type of martial arts.

Additional Resources:

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