

*Take*



*And Breathe*

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**W**hen working with clients, I often ask them how their breathing changes when they are stressed. The response is almost always the same: breathing becomes faster and more noticeable. I then ask the client to take a deep breath, to which they respond with a quick breath, often through the mouth, and with obvious movement from the upper chest. Finally, I ask them how they would feel if they continued to breathe that way. Invariably, the response is that they would begin to feel light headed or dizzy. Stress causes us to breathe more, so taking a deep breath to calm yourself down just doesn't make any sense, and only serves to keep you in a continued state of stress. Instead, the opposite is needed - slow, quiet, calm breathing that allows blood gases and operating systems to restore to normal.

The following five responses will give you an idea of the correct way to deal with symptoms of stress:

Stress Activation .....	Relaxation Activation
Breathing becomes faster .....	Slow down breathing
More frequent sighing.....	Suppress sighs if possible
Breathing from the upper chest.....	Breathe from the tummy
Breathing through the mouth.....	Breathe through the nose
Breathing becomes more noticeable.....	Quieten and silence breathing

## Breathe Light to Breathe Right

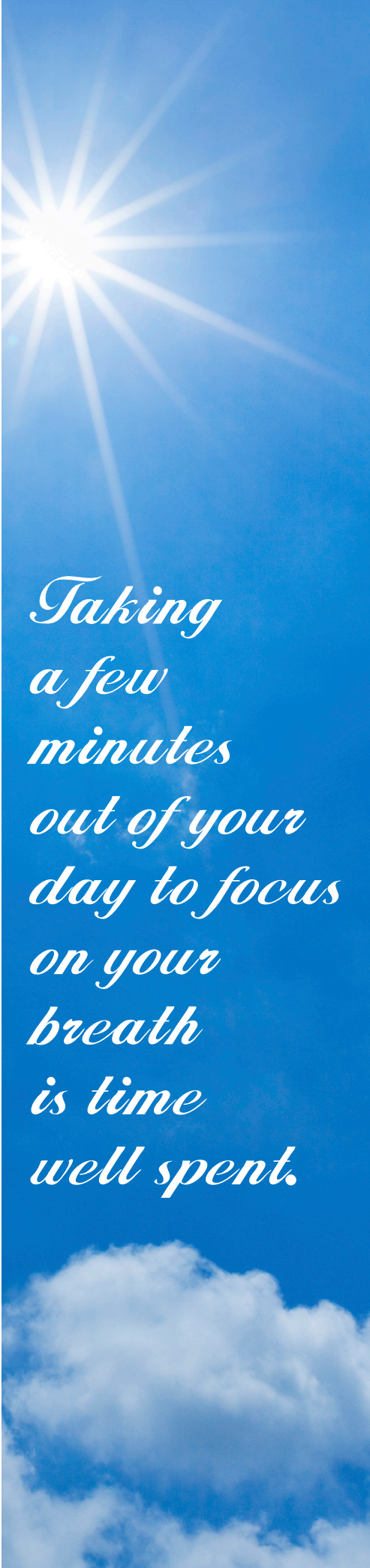
You are activating the body's relaxation state when you slow down and reduce your breathing sufficiently to create a tolerable need for air. Try to maintain the need for air for the duration of the 4 to 5 minutes. During the exercise, check if you feel warmer or have increased watery saliva, the former indicating improved blood circulation, the latter indicating activation of the relaxation state.

- Sit up straight.
- Place one hand on your chest and one hand just above your navel.
- As you breathe, exert gentle pressure with your hands against your abdomen and chest. This should create resistance to your breathing.
- With each breath, take in less air than you would like to. Make the in-breath smaller or shorter.
- Breathe out with a relaxed exhalation.
- When the in-breath becomes smaller and the out-breath is relaxed, visible breathing movements will be reduced. You may be able to notice this in a mirror.

Many vital functions of the human body operate on an unconscious level; you don't need to tell your heart to beat or your lungs to take in air, your body takes care of it for you. These basic functions are the responsibility of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) which controls heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, salivation, perspiration, pupillary dilation, urination, and sexual arousal. Most autonomous functions are involuntary, but some are also under some degree of conscious control, such as breathing, swallowing and sexual arousal.

The ANS is classically divided into two subsystems, known as the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS), which is responsible for rest and relaxation, and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which is responsible for stress responses.

Throughout human evolution, we have relied on our immediate bodily responses whenever we are confronted with danger - whether it's fleeing from a charging elephant, panicking about an interview, or being dragged up by your friends to sing karaoke in public. Known as the fight or flight response, this automatic reaction of the sympathetic nervous system was first described by American doctor Walter Bradford Cannon, who lived from 1871 to 1945. Cannon noted that a perceived threat aroused the SNS and resulted in certain physical reactions, including an increase in blood pressure and rate of breathing, and a release of adrenaline to help us run faster or fight harder.



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A symptom of long term stress is habitual over-breathing. Increased breathing is a perfectly normal response to temporary stress as a rise in heart rate and breathing rate are necessary to prepare the body for a potentially sudden burst of action. But this natural response becomes abnormal when stress is sustained over the long term and breathing volume does not have an opportunity to normalize. As a result, the habit of breathing a volume of air greater than the body requires is developed, causing levels of carbon dioxide in the blood to lower. Too little carbon dioxide in the blood limits blood flow, reducing oxygenation of the heart and brain. It's somewhat ironic that the brain receives less oxygen during the very time when alertness and mental concentration are acutely required, but this is exactly why it's so difficult to think clearly under stress - how can a brain that is deprived of oxygen be expected to work properly?

From time to time, everyone encounters high perceived stress. Taking a few minutes out of your day to focus on your breath is time well spent. Breathing through the nose and practicing breathing exercises to slow down and reduce the volume of air inhaled is an efficacious way to counteract stress.

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*“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others.”*

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

