

Marriage and Family Corner: Breathe and Do Your Work

Mary McKinney | Posted: Monday, March 30, 2015 3:57 pm

When consulted about reducing and managing stress and anxiety, I usually provide variations of the theme “Breathe and do your work.”

Relaxation breathing promotes physiological, emotional and cognitive readiness to do the “work.”

Figurative breathing, by taking time for self-care, also advances overall readiness.

It is important to note that the stress response is automatic, while the relaxation response is a result of intentional action.

Reducing and managing anxiety through intentional action is usually more effective than medication, particularly in the long term. Intentional breath and work facilitates the relaxation response.

General readiness to reduce and manage stress and difficult emotions allows this work, which happens when breathing is practiced, and by continually and purposefully renewing a commitment to goals, values and decisions.

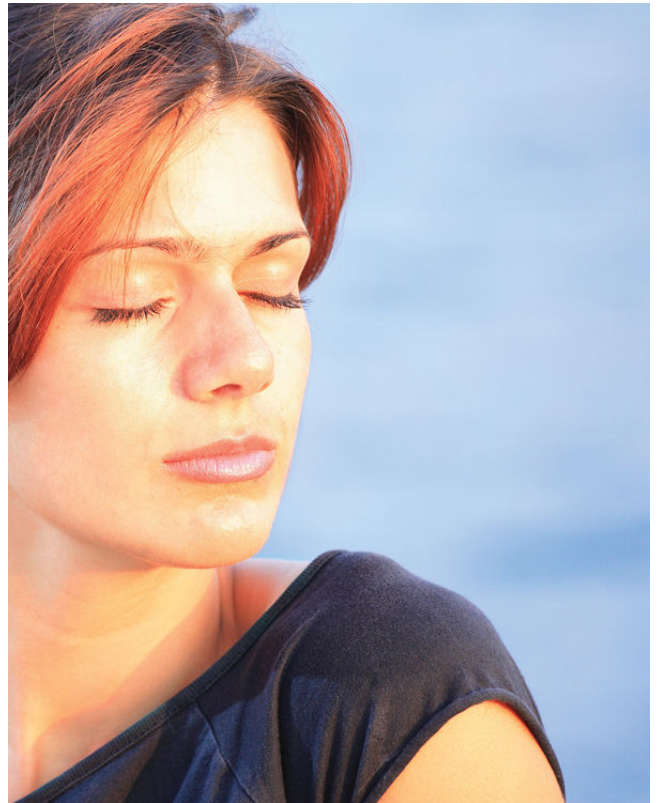
In addition to the literal practice of breathing, “breathing” means regularly taking time for reflection, maintaining a regular sleep schedule and good nutrition and practices — such as meditation, yoga and prayer.

Practicing specific relaxation breathing is a simple, but powerful, way to boost readiness, such as through the use of diaphragmatic breathing and repetitive prayer.

All of these practices increase our body’s ability to handle stress and anxiety and to prevent escalation of anxiety disorder symptoms.

Adequate exercise is one of the best ways to manage stress and anxiety. Research shows that as little as five minutes of movement positively impacts mood and anxiety.

“The exercise effect” yields longer-term improvement from at least 20 minutes per day of exercise.



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Decisions that directly impact physical or emotional safety are critical to readiness to reduce and manage stress and anxiety.

For example, if you live in fear of someone — or worry about your health — it is vital to make decisions and take actions to change those circumstances.

Emotional safety depends upon your ability and willingness to maintain healthy boundaries with your time and in interactions with other people.

General readiness is reduced or eliminated by behaviors that actually increase the body's anxiety responses, such as use of nicotine, consuming too much caffeine, using marijuana or many other illegal substances, abusing prescriptions, or drinking more than a moderate amount of alcohol.

If any of these habits are difficult for you to stop or reduce, seek help from a qualified psychotherapist.

Breathing and working during a crisis are also critical. People frequently make the mistake of thinking they will breathe after a crisis has passed.

However, even when a crisis is managed without breathing, overall readiness to effectively reduce and manage stress is decreased, or overall anxiety increases.

A panic or anxiety attack is one form of crisis. These attacks usually build intensively and frequency when inadequately managed.

Remember that exercise quickly reduces the physiological stress response and increases the relaxation response, and relaxation breathing does this almost immediately.

Anxiety and worry are normal emotions. Overall health and wellbeing are promoted by considering the full range of normal emotions, including both the comfortable and uncomfortable.

Emotions provide information that is important for our ability to respond to our circumstances and needs. Anxiety might alert you to a need to protect your physical or emotional safety and that of your loved ones.

It might also alert you to a need to make changes to your behavior, choices and circumstances.

In addition to these alerts, anxiety often contributes to the energy that is necessary for the action required for these protections and changes.

However, for people who experience anxiety disorders, this information may prove overwhelming and stunt productive energy. Self awareness skills enhance ability for the work of effectively learning from and managing the full range of anxiety, from normal to anxiety disorders.

While anxiety is normal, anxiety disorders can profoundly disrupt overall health and wellbeing.

According to The Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the USA, affecting about 18 percent of the population.

Although anxiety disorders are highly treatable, only about one-third of people impacted seek treatment.

Furthermore, symptoms of anxiety disorders often mimic those of physical illnesses. The distinction between mental health and physical health is largely arbitrary.

That is, mental health and physical health are pieces of overall health and are intertwined. Therefore, both must be properly managed for true overall health.

When this work is hard for you and anxiety diminishes your wellbeing and happiness, seek support from a psychotherapist who can help plan and achieve your goals by identifying useful changes that will decrease stress and anxiety.

A therapist can also guide you in learning about and practicing relaxation-breathing techniques.

Even with significant or severe anxiety, these efforts can be very effective in the work for peace.

So, breathe and do your work — including the work of asking for help when it becomes necessary.

For comments on this article or suggestions for future articles, contact:

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