

Stress relief: That elusive breath of fresh air

Stress has become a pervasive “lifestyle disease”

In an increasingly busy world moving at a dizzying pace, new research shows almost half of Americans now suffer adverse health effects from stress. These health problems include hypertension, anxiety or depression (two sides of a single coin), insomnia, and obesity.

To relieve stress, Americans often engage in unhealthy behaviors. Surveys, such as one conducted in 2006 by American Psychological Association in partnership with the National Women’s Health Resource Center and iVillage.com, show that the most common ways people try to combat stress are comfort eating (eating when not hungry, making poor diet choices), smoking, excessive alcohol and caffeine intake, and inactivity.

This unhealthy coping behavior may alleviate symptoms of stress in the short term, but creates significant health problems in the long run. And the health problems themselves are a new and deeper source of stress.

A closer look at what we are looking for

What do we feel when we experience stress? A sense of compression. A sense of pressure, of overwhelming demand that we feel we cannot meet, and a lack of control over our lives.

When we seek to alleviate stress, what we seek is the opposite: a sense of expansion, of freedom, of boundlessness, of inner power. It should come as no surprise that caffeine and food loaded with fat, cholesterol, and empty calories aren’t going to get us there. Likewise, inactivity, smoking, and excessive alcohol cannot give us a sense of power and control, weightlessness, and enterprise.

It makes a lot more sense to turn to the one thing we do effortlessly, which is in itself the most restorative and grounding thing we do: breathing. Its expanding inhales, its relaxing exhales, its sheer routine and dependability are a comfort and a sensuous restorative like no other.

Everybody experiences stress. People who turn to comfort food or smoking are starting a vicious cycle. Their attempts to reduce stress lead to health problems that result in increased stress.

— Russ Newman, PhD, JD, executive director for professional practice, APA

How breathing and stress affect each other

A lot of attention is paid to heart rate, when it comes to stress. We correctly associate a fast and irregular heartbeat with stress and anxiety. In fact, the heartbeat doesn't respond to just the brain, but also to each breath you take: As you breathe in, your heart rate naturally speeds up. As you exhale, your heart rate naturally slows down. In a relaxed person, slow, easy breathing creates slow, smooth heart rate changes that create an inner sense of calm, of coherence.

A stress response to anything such as a difficult conversation with someone, driving in busy traffic, or nerves before public speaking changes your heart rate independently of the breathing-related variations, leading to irregular heart rate changes that create a feeling of panic, of unrest.

These "stressed" heart rate changes can cause ragged and irregular, forced or shallow breathing — which disrupts an optimal and even supply of oxygen to the brain. Likewise, steady and relaxed breathing can give the brain what it needs to function best and smooth the heart rate back into a regular, natural variation that is free of stress response.

Simply put: Breathing in a relaxed, effortless way relieves stress and creates a sense of balance and calm.

Stress reduction, one breath at a time

Whereas overeating, drinking and smoking for stress relief are costly, damaging and ineffective, breathing is free, easy, effective. Plus, it's something we already know how to do and can do anywhere!

Here are a few of quick breathing exercises that are easy to remember, developed by a physio-psychologist, for relaxation. You can do them anytime you are looking to combat stress with a sense of expansion, of freedom, of inner power:

PURSED LIP BREATHING

Breathe effortlessly, relaxing your abdomen muscles. (Don't try to slow down your breathing: Slowing down our exhalation is natural as we relax, as if we took a blown up balloon and let the air out slowly and gently.)

Purse your lips as if you were going to blow out a candle, or as if you were going to whistle. Relax your lips a little more than they if you really were whistling. You can also imagine yourself blowing soap bubbles. Breathe in...and breathe out slowly, gently, naturally.

Breathe with your lips gently pursed like this for a few minutes, feeling your exhalation naturally lengthening as you blow your candle...or bubbles.

ABDOMINAL BREATHING

Place one hand over your lower abdomen and one on your chest and breathe comfortably, through your nose if you can. Use your hands to help you notice where your body moves as the air flows in and out. Continue paying attention to your breathing for a few breathing cycles.

Now, try this. As you breathe in, imagine a balloon in your abdomen filling with air as you inhale. Then feel it deflating as you exhale. Imagine this for a few breaths. Notice the internal feelings as the balloon is expanding and contracting. Continue to breathe with the balloon for a few minutes. Now while you continue to breathe easily, take a moment to open your eyes and notice how your body feels and how your natural heart rate changes feel smooth.

MINDFUL BREATHING

Breathe naturally, sitting in your work area, at your home or any other place you choose. Pay close attention to your breathing without trying to change anything you notice. Notice yourself breathing in and out. After awhile, the rest of the world will recede, leaving you with just the observation of inhaling, then exhaling. Build your ability to observe your breathing gradually; at first try this only few minutes a day. If you find it difficult in the beginning to pay attention only to your breathing, try silently counting “one, two, three, four...” as you breathe in, “one, two, three, four...” as you breathe out. If you lose track, start over again.

These simple breathing exercises use your natural biology to relieve stress, and are effective in a long-term as well as short-term sense — creating balance by making relaxation as much of a lifestyle as the stress we experience each day as we go about our lives.

Bringing healthy stress reduction into the mainstream

Americans can blame themselves for all the unhealthy coping mechanisms they have come to depend on for stress relief, but the marketplace is just as much at fault. The average American is exposed to upwards of 3,000 advertising messages a day, and corporations worldwide spend over \$620 billion each year to market their products and boost revenue. With stress having become a universal and significant factor in everyone’s lives, you can bet that there isn’t any category of product that isn’t being sold as a “stress-buster” in some way.

We can't change how the marketplace works or protect ourselves from unwholesome or misleading messages. But a recent explosion of "green" products and initiatives and a growing awareness of healthy habits and attitudes means that some very effective and soundly health-based commercial stress-reduction products are joining the fray.

Breathing skills you can buy

One example of effective and healthy stress-reduction in product form is biofeedback games and software tools. Biofeedback is a discipline that first became popular in the 60s, by which people can see visual representations of their "automatic" body functions (breathing, heart rate, skin sweat, and brain waves), and then watch them achieve better balance and harmony as they practice simple and sound techniques to reduce stress. In recent years, biofeedback has been becoming more sophisticated and more widely available to consumers instead of just to clinicians and their patients.

Companies like Wild Divine and Somatic Vision, both based in San Diego, California have developed ways of bringing biofeedback to the mainstream through software that feels like the computer games people are used to. Both companies make software that features a breath pacer as well as heart rate graphing, combined with fun activities and environments. While Wild Divine extends its products offscreen with partnerships with prominent "natural health gurus" like Drs. Deepak Chopra and Andrew Weil, Somatic Vision provides products featuring intensive step-by-step breathing workshops and a full 8-week program that coaches people in breathing techniques for stress relief.

The next step for stressed-out Americans

Whether we go the consumer route and buy products that combat stress effectively without unhealthy behavior, or simply learn to slow down and use the simple, biological act of breathing to bring us back into balance and calm, the clear next step for Americans is to take a healthier, more long-term approach to stress reduction.

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