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— Health education —

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Four Simple, Safe & Effective Exercises for Better Breathing

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The symptoms that result from shallow breathing can include all or any of the following:

- Reduced pain thresholds
- A tendency towards becoming easily fatigued
- General sense of apprehension and tendency to anxiety
- Increased tension in accessory breathing muscles, leading to chest, neck and shoulder pain and/or stiffness
- A tendency to headaches
- Cramps and spasms
- Cold extremities
- IBS and bladder dysfunction (Ford et al 1995)

Remember that re-education of breathing patterns requires time and patience, so that old habits change, and new ones become comfortable. This means that the exercises you do regularly (daily for 5 to 10 minutes ideally) in order to reinforce better breathing, need to be pleasant and easy to perform. The 4 exercises outlined below meet those requirements, and are tried and tested. There is no reason to do them all – but also there is no reason not to! The first one should be performed every day.....along with one of the others, at a different time of day.

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Breathing Tip: Better breathing depends on how well you breathe out. It's impossible to inhale fully if you have only half exhaled. Focus on a slow out-breath, and the in-breath will take care of itself.

Breathing Exercise 1: Antiarousal ('pursed-lip') Breathing Pattern

- Place yourself in a comfortable (ideally seated/reclining) position, exhale FULLY through your partially open mouth, lips just barely separated.
- This outbreath should be slowly performed.
 - Imagine if that a candle flame is about 6 inches from your mouth and exhale (blowing a thin stream of air) in such a way as to not blow this out. As you exhale count silently to yourself to establish the length of the out-breath.
 - An effective method for counting one second at a time is to say (silently) 'onehundred, two-hundred, three-hundred etc. Each count then lasts about one second.
 - When you have exhaled fully, without causing any sense of strain to yourself in any way, allow the inhalation which follows to be full, free and uncontrolled.
 - The complete exhalation which preceded the inhalation will have created a 'coiled spring' which you do not have to control in order to inhale.
 - Once again count to yourself to establish how long your in-breath lasts.
 - The counting is necessary because the timing of the inhalation and exhalation phase of breathing is a major feature of this exercise.
 - Then, without pausing to hold the breath exhale FULLY, through the mouth, blowing the air in a thin stream (again you should count to yourself at the same speed).
 - Continue to repeat the inhalation and the exhalation for not less than 30 cycles of in and out.
 - The objective is that in time (some weeks of practicing this daily) you should achieve an inhalation phase which lasts for 2 to 3 seconds while the exhalation phase lasts from 6 to 7 seconds - without any strain at all.
 - Most importantly the exhalation should be slow and continuous. It is no use breathing the air out in two seconds and then simply waiting until the count reaches 6, 7 or 8 before inhaling again.
 - By the time you have completed fifteen or so cycles any sense of anxiety which you previously felt should be much reduced. Also if pain is a problem this should also have lessened.
 - Apart from ALWAYS practicing this once or twice daily, it is useful to repeat the exercise for a few minutes (about 5 cycles of inhalation/exhalation takes a minute) every hour if you are anxious or whenever stress seem to be increasing.

- At the very least it should be practiced on waking, and before bedtime, and if at all possible before meals.

Breathing Exercise 2: “Side-Bend and Breathe”

- Stand upright.
- Take a very slow breath, through your nose, as you bend slowly to the right, running your right hand down the outside of the leg while raising your left arm over your head, so that your body stretches to the right.
- As the movement continues, more breath should be slowly drawn in.
- When you have inhaled fully, and stretched to the right fully, start to bend slowly to the left, and allow the left hand to slide down the left leg, with the right arm to coming over your head, to take your body sideways over to the left.
- During this movement, breathe out slowly through the mouth, through pursed lips.
- Continue like this, breathing in as you bend to the right and out as you bend to the left, ten times.
- The sequence of breathing should then be changed: breathing in as you bend to the left, and out again when bending to the right.
- Do this ten times as well.
- This exercise is designed to bring about increased expansion of the sides of the rib-cage.

Breathing Exercise 3: “Bend and Breathe”

- Stand erect with your hands placed so that the thumbs point towards the spine, at the level of your waist, with your fingers pointing towards the front.
- Close your mouth and take in air, in small amounts, as if sniffing a flower.
- Continue to fill the lungs until no more can be taken.
- At the same time, as you are breathing in, bend gradually backward without straining yourself.
- When you feel you have breathed in fully, start to breathe out slowly through pursed lips (blowing the air in a thin steam), while at the same time bending slowly forwards without strain.
- When you have fully exhaled and bent forwards, repeat the process from the beginning, breathing in as you bend backwards, and out as you bend forwards.
- Repeat this a total of ten to fifteen times.
- Do this at least once a day.

Breathing exercise 4: “Controlled Breathing While Walking”

- The following “walking and breathing” exercise is a useful addition to the more static exercises described above.
- While walking breathe and try to establish a rhythm in which you breathe in through your nose as you take three or four steps.
- NOTE: The number of steps you take as you inhale will vary with the speed of walking, and your general condition. It may only be 2 or 3 steps at first - above all it must be a comfortable, unstrained, pattern.
- Hold your breath for one or two steps, and then exhale, still through the nose, as you take two or three more steps.
- This pattern of counting and breathing as you walk, should only be carried out for a minute or two at a time (that is around ten cycles of inhalation/exhalation) or until you find it difficult to maintain the rhythm.
- Repeat this several times during a walk.
- As your fitness increases, and your lung capacity improves, so you will be able to do more and more of this type of controlled breathing during exercise.
- There is strong evidence of the value of the breathing exercise patterns as described, in reducing stress levels.

The key to success when practicing any re-education/rehabilitation exercises lies in performing them regularly.

References

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