



Cathy Holway, PT, DPT and the Neurovascular Institute, Inc. present:

Stress Relief Strategies!

Stress Relief Now!

This information will make a lot more sense if we take a few moments to exhale and land.

So, first, let it all out! Go on! I can't hear you yet! Big exhale, get that jaw bone buzzing with the outgoing breath!

Now that you've exhaled, let's inhale, all the way to your belly-button. When you inhale, your belly button expands out (let the gut roll, girls, no one is watching!).

When you exhale, your belly button softens back towards your waist.

That's it. Keep going.

Nose or mouth breathing? Doesn't matter. What matters is that when you inhale, your belly button expands outward.

Follow your breath down to your belly. From inside this belly breath, notice how your butt is sitting on the chair, are you shifted onto one hip more than the other? Are you clenched through your bottom?

Let the deep belly breath help those tissues unclench and soften. All you have to do is focus on the belly and then observe what changes.

Now follow that belly breath up the body. When you inhale and the belly button expands, it pushes your ribcage up and open. Your lungs and heart get more room, your spine undulates with relief as it lengthens.

Your neck rolls and fidgets with your shoulders, then gets longer. Follow that belly breath all the way to your eyeballs, and imagine they get squishy and soft. Feel the belly breath soften your jaw. It's all good.

If you get lost or distracted, just go back to the belly. Your body knows what to do with that invitation.

Ok. Now are we all here?

You know what you just did?

You woke up your peaceful nervous system, made some new brain neurons, and made a great connection from breath to brain to body. Now let's make it real.

- 1. Breathe it.** Go ahead, every breath counts as great practice.
- 2. Feel it.** From the inside, really. Belly moving? Butt unclenched? Ribcage opening? Neck longer? Eyeballs softer? Feel whatever you notice.

Feel what your breath is illuminating within your own body.

- 3. NAME IT.** “good” “juicy” “peaceful” “quiet” “UH huh” “yeah” “oh!” “ugh” “big sigh”

*** Breathe It * Feel It * Name It***

Your breathing body shows your brain it is safe and calm, your brain acknowledges that input and decides to make a nice output, which means that your hands get warm and your jaw gets soft and maybe you even stretch or move instinctually.

*** Breathe It * Feel It * Name It ***

And

Move It!

Excellent!

“Naming It” is important, it kicks up the happy juice in your brain, that lets you grow stronger wiring to this new pattern of safe relaxation.

*** Breathe It * Feel It * Name It ***

You just grew some new brain cells.

Your memory and learning centers just woke up.

Your digestive hormones just reconnected to your gut.

Your cardiovascular system just rebooted and can run on slow and easy again.

Your sleep hormones will sing you lullabies tonight.

All because you took a good few belly breaths!

How can it be that easy, you wonder? Do just a few breaths count?

Yes, it IS that easy. Let’s go explore why and how and keep breathing while we learn!

Our Stress Regulatory Systems

From our earliest embryonic development, we are programmed to detect stress within our own bodies and out in our environment, and somehow find balance between inner and outer self. Our nervous system works to keep digestion and heartbeat and breathing going, while it makes sure we can identify external danger, run from it, and relax when danger has passed.

So our stress regulatory system dances between rev-ing us up to get out of danger, and then calming us down when it's safe again.

Let's look at the two main components of the nervous system that handle these survival programs: the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and the HPA axis, which makes a wide range of hormones.

The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) connects to every tissue within us, to regulate our body function without us even thinking about it (heartbeat, breath, hormones, etc). It has three kinds of connection "branches:"

1. Sympathetic = STRESSFUL!

This is the "Foot on the gas" that jolts us into "fight or flight" responses when we think we are in danger.

It makes our heart race and floods blood sugar to our muscles, so we can run away or stay and fight.

If we get overwhelmed and locked into this stressful drive, it will take over many body functions, causing disease or dysfunction, unless we re-train it.

2. Parasympathetic = PEACEFUL!

This is the "foot on the brake" when we are out of danger and can get smoothed out.

It is built to run our cardiovascular, respiratory and digestive systems.

The peaceful system is designed to work faster than the stressful system!

Our survival depends on not just getting out of danger, but on restoring internal calmness so our organ systems can function appropriately

3. Gastroenteric = peaceful, with the parasympathetics

Designed to run your gut and digestion peacefully, but gets thrown out of whack when the stressful system kicks on.

We are wired to have agility between these three branches. Our health depends on our internal ability to restore juicy flow and function once danger has passed. When we are under prolonged stress, these protective systems lose their agility and internal dysfunction follows.

The HPA Axis is the hormone regulating system. It responds to incoming signals from body or environment and signals the hormones that will rev us up or calm us down. H – P – A stands for three different brain and body parts:

1. Hypothalamus

Part of your brainstem that controls your organs, your internal thermostat, sends signals to the pituitary gland to make many different hormones

2. Pituitary Gland

Master gland, makes many important hormones

3. Adrenal Glands

Tucked on top of your kidneys, they make **cortisol** in the stress response and many other hormones for normal function.

Cortisol is the “gas in the tank” that fuels our action in the Stress Response.

Cortisol is meant to “turn off” once the danger has passed.

When it doesn’t turn OFF, cortisol overflow blocks other hormones from functioning, impairing our

- * sleep
- * digestion
- * insulin response
- * thyroid activity
- * learning and memory

Cortisol overflow kills stem cells in the brain, decreasing our capacity to learn new things and remember past events!

The good news is that when we choose to breathe, we re-set the stress cycle so our hormones can function properly, we can grow new brain cells and our radar can protect us better.

Our stress regulatory system is a cognitive system that has trained itself to recognize danger and trigger protective responses, all without our conscious directions!

Think about it. How many of us carry irrational childhood fears and behaviors (about snakes, barking dogs, yelling parents, etc) and can’t figure out why they persist into adulthood? Well, your unconscious alarm system identified something as dangerous, triggered a protective response from you, and hasn’t changed since.

Good thing we can change it now, with a little detective work and behavior modification!

**Where we have unconsciously been imprinting stress signals and responses,
we can now decide to consciously “re-wire” the system
to acknowledge calming signals and responses.**

First let’s reconnect to our breathing:

*** Breathe It * Feel It * Name It ***

Now let’s explore the four simple steps of the rewiring process:

1. IDENTIFY

What situations, interactions or *thoughts, memories, beliefs, stories...* get you stressed?
Even in that quiet, clenched, queasy way?

At first you might only identify them after they’ve gotten you all wound up.

Observing the patterns is an important start, and will give you a chance to slow down...
...the next time... so you can

2. ASSESS

When you are aware of the triggers, you can start to slow things down a little with some breathing.

Decide if you are really safe and ok *right this moment*, and if so, can you breathe through it a little?

Can you learn to breathe through something that used to make you uncomfortable?

3. DECIDE

When you can catch the triggers or the patterns before they start (“recognition”) you can decide to respond differently.

4. RESPOND

When you decide you are safe right now, and choose to breathe and feel your calmness, you are retraining your stress systems to protect you better.

How does calming down and strengthening your “peaceful” nervous system protect you better?

* Your “radar” recalibrates and you can more accurately assess a dangerous or SAFE situation.

* When your peaceful nervous system is secure and agile, your health improves, especially your cardiovascular, metabolic, digestive and hormonal systems.

* IT FEELS GOOD!! And when we feel good, it’s contagious!

* When you feel safe in your body, you can feel safe in the world.

* When you are purring smoothly in your peaceful nervous system, you navigate the world in your own true flow. You may find that you are not over-reacting to drama around you!

So go ahead and...

*** Breathe It * Feel It * Name It * Move It * Share It * ENJOY IT!***

Some final thoughts.

* **At first, practice when you are in a safe or quiet place.** As your peaceful nervous system gets stronger, it will be easier to continue breathing during more hectic times. I tell my patients to take a few breaths at every red light, or when they sit down to eat, or as they go to bed at night.

* **Every breath counts!** The principles of neural plasticity show us that we can re-wire our brains for better health and function, and with every belly breath we are doing just that.

* **You can't force someone else to relax** 😊 but you can MODEL that behavior and resonance takes over from there. If you have rocked a baby to sleep, you know how this works already.

* **Simply learning new coping skills** decreases cortisol and increases your brain cell growth.

* **There are many health benefits** to focused breathing skills like this (upcoming discussions!) but of course, these strategies are not a substitute for proper medical attention for specific conditions.

So go ahead and...

*** Breathe It * Feel It * Name It * Move It * Share It * ENJOY IT!***

If you have any particular questions, please feel free to contact me at drcahyholway@gmail.com. And visit our website, www.drcahyholway.com, for more stories and strategies.

Thanks for being here! Enjoy your juicy breath and flow!

Dr. Cathy