Proper breathing reduces stress

Terrie McArthur, FYI   *2:48 p.m. MDT July 10, 2015*

(Photo: DVT)

So, you think you know how to breathe since you've been doing it all your life?

Stop a minute and pay attention to how you are breathing. I'd venture a guess that most of you are chest breathing in short breaths without pausing in between. Is this how you were built to breathe?

The short answer: no. When you were born, the doctor or nurse slapped you on the rear to get you to gasp and breathe in. That was your first introduction to wrong breathing and it became a habit. When you breathe only with the upper chest, you elicit a fight or flight response from the body because that's what happens when your survival is at stake. This causes an imbalance in CO_2 in your body, which causes more stress. Your body is being improperly oxygenated.

Instead, we have a diaphragm to pull air into our lungs completely filling them. On the exhale, CO_2 and impurities are released from the lungs, and if done properly, this includes the very bottom of the lungs.

Do you breathe through your mouth or your nose? Yogis teach that the nose is for breathing and the mouth for eating and there are only a few yogic breathing exercises that allow for an open mouth.

What is proper breathing and how can it help? Let's start with the basics. You can live without water for awhile, you can live without food even longer, but you can't live without breathing.

Let's look at what breathing really is. It is the body's attempt to normalize CO_2 in the blood, not an attempt to pull in oxygen, although that is what it feels like.

Don't misunderstand, you must oxygenate your muscles and internal organs. If done correctly it will help lower your blood pressure, reduce stress and anxiety and boost feel-good hormones, balance your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, improve athletic performance and improve mental focus and brain health.

So, the proper way to breathe is through your nose by using your diaphragm. It's easy to tell if you are doing this properly. Do your shoulders rise when you breathe? Then you are not breathing with your diaphragm.

Put your hands on your tummy and concentrate on expanding it to pull air into your lungs as you breathe in through your nostrils. That's how to breathe properly. If you played a woodwind instrument in band, you already know how to do this.

You may not know is there is nitric oxide in your nose, and when you breathe through your nose you bring a little bit of that nitric oxide into your lungs. That's a good thing. Nitric oxide is a bronchodilator and vasodilator and it has antibacterial properties.

As it turns out, most of us over breathe, but if you breathe through your nose, you are more likely to breathe less often. That's a good thing.

When you breathe too much, you lose carbon dioxide, which you actually need. Everything in balance! When you eliminate too much carbon dioxide, your blood vessels constrict which can make you dizzy and even bring on a heart attack.

Now you have the facts, what's next. Pay attention to how you breathe. Mindfulness in everything. Then concentrate on using your diaphragm to pull air into the body through the nose. Breathe lightly. That's it. You will find a pause between in and out breaths, which is good. This slows down your respiration and calms the body.

In fact, I teach a technique that I learned from yoga. It helps balance the body's ph and reduces stress. It's really quite simple.

Inhale through the nose to the silent count of six, hold the breath for six counts and exhale through the nose for six counts. Three of these breaths should be enough to calm you right down. I know from experience it reduces the acid in my stomach when I am feeling anxious.

Terrie McArthur is a free-lance writer, artist and interior designer. Contact her at 702-345-8714.