

Breathe More, Stress Less

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

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Sshh! Here are some hush-hush secrets for staying calm and keeping your wits about you when the puppy chews your new shoes or the roof springs a major leak. No, you can't order a 30-day supply of this magical aid in an infomercial. But if you can inhale, you've already got all the equipment you need.

The Original Stress-Buster

Don't let the silence scare you off. Meditation, the oldest stress-buster in the world, combats a constellation of bothersome ailments as well as reduces stress. When anxiety takes over like an unwelcome relative, revving up the heartbeat and siphoning off oxygen to our organs, we all recognize the symptoms.

Accumulative stress is the worst kind because it wears down the body and mind. It not only impedes our ability to focus and function physically, it is also the culprit in high blood pressure, heart disease, and depression. While your physician prescribes exercise or a pill to lower your blood pressure or combat stress, it's unlikely the best Scientific stress buster in the world will be prescribed - sit down, shut your eyes, breathe, and be quiet.

A 5000 Year-Old New Idea

Guess what? It's not a new concept, in fact it's at least five thousand years old. Contemporary Western medicine has been slow to embrace it, but that's changing, thanks to a gaggle of meditators who knocked on Dr. Herbert Benson's door at Harvard Medical School a number of years ago. They swore that meditating 20 minutes a day had a profound effect on the body, and they were ready to donate their bodies and minds to science to prove it. A skeptical Dr. Benson conducted an experiment on relaxation and stress. To his surprise, he discovered that the participants in the study did indeed evoke a bodily response.

He did another study on people who had never meditated and got the same result. Physiologically, Benson discovered that those who sat in silence and breathed for 20 minutes had a decrease in blood pressure, a decrease in heart rate, and a decrease in the metabolic rate. Benson called this "the relaxation response."

Benson, like you and I, understood that stress is not going to disappear any time soon from our hectic lives. It's a fact of life, but it doesn't have to ruin your life - or your health, for that matter. The secret of managing stress is carving out 10-20 minutes a day, three or four times a week, to sit.

Personal Practice Styles

The Botanical Practice

If your passion is cultivating radishes or roses, or you love gardening or live near a park, this meditative practice will delight you. Choose one flower in your garden and focus on it. Take five or six minutes and notice its color, texture, fragrance, and size. Reflect on the characteristics of the petals. Are they velvety, polished, delicate, scalloped, sensuous, or thorny? Is the flower perennial or annual? Does it bring back pleasant memories? Then sit down and close your eyes and breathe. Visually try to recall every detail of the flower with each breath.

The Artistic Practice

Perhaps your pleasure is meandering amid Impressionist paintings or stark modern art. The next time you are in a gallery, stop in front of a painting that you especially like. Mindfully reflect on the color, style, brush strokes, and physical characteristics of the piece of art. Pay attention to the sensations the painting evokes. Don't write anything down. Then, walk away from the painting, sit down, shut your eyes, take a few deep breaths and visually recall the details of the painting as you breathe.

Literary Practice

Did you ever catch yourself reading a page and not remembering what you read? When we read for work our eyes often work overtime and we literally lose sight of what we read. Try this. Take a book and read one page slowly and thoroughly. Don't turn the page. Close the book, take a few deep breaths and see if you can recall what you read on that page in significant detail. Can you recall the title of the book or the title of the chapter? What color the book cover was? Where was the page number located? How many paragraphs were on the page and were there any quotes on the page? Maintain steady breathing in this practice.

Peripatetic Practice

Walking is one of the best ways to mediate, and it's good exercise to boot. If you can walk in a quiet neighborhood, beach, or park all the better. If not, you can still do this practice walking in Manhattan. For twenty minutes, mindfully and deliberately walk while paying attention to your breathing. Try coordinating your walking with the pace of your breathing. Breathe in the color, the smells, the sounds and fragrances. Notice the color of the sky, the shape of the clouds and how the ground feels under your feet. Walk slowly, using your sense of sight and smell to guide you as you breathe.

Whatever you choose to do, you'll begin to notice subtle changes in your reactions to the stresses of daily life after a few weeks, and then, gradually and comfortably, a kind of internal letting go that seems to replace tension.

I'm interested in your experiments and experiences both. Feel free to email me at askstephanie@seniors.com.

Easy Does It! Share your experiences in meditation or ask about busting stress in Stephanie's **Ask The Expert Forum**.

Stephanie Levin-Gervasi, Seniors.com's Health Expert, is the author of *The Back Pain Sourcebook* (Lowell House) and *Smart Guide to Yoga* (Wiley & Sons). She is a prolific producer of articles for publications ranging from *The New York Daily News* and *Parenting*, to *Men's Fitness* and *Weight Watchers*. She is an authority on a wide range of health topics, including osteoarthritis, obesity, back pain, anxiety disorders, and the Brazilian martial art of capoeira. She will be concentrating on flexibility, fitness, and yoga here at Seniors.com.