

Exercise that's a breath of fresh air

By Jennifer E. O'Brien
Albany Times Union

What's the fitness/mental health secret that won't cost you a cent and doesn't require any fancy equipment or awkward poses? Breathing.

OK, we know you already do that. But we're talking about meditative breathing, which involves thinking about and focusing on your breath. It's harder than you think, but the results are well worth it.

In the short term, it can help you to de-stress in a moment and clear your head. An extended practice can help lower your blood pressure and stress levels.

Cathy Prescott, a registered yoga teacher who teaches adult, prenatal, and mom and baby classes, finds that meditative breathing can definitely be challenging for new students.

"It's hard to just stop—it goes against the nature of our society," she said.

For home practice, Prescott recommends students find a quiet spot where they can sit and just concentrate on their breath and try to clear out distracting thoughts for five minutes. For some students, counting their breaths—"Inhale 1, Exhale 1"—helps to keep them focused on their breathing.

"Set a timer," she said, "because five minutes will seem much longer to you."

Although sitting still and just breathing might seem incredibly tedious, the health benefits are numerous, Prescott says.

In taking deep breaths, also known as "belly breathing," you

can slow your breath, which will in turn slow down your heart rate. When breathing deep into the diaphragm, Prescott explains, you can massage the vagus nerve, which will stimulate relaxation.

Harriett Rubinstein, a licensed clinical social worker who practices in upstate New York, often recommends the technique to clients who are dealing with anxiety or stress, and she makes it a daily personal habit as well.

"I haven't met anyone who said that it wasn't helpful," Rubinstein said.

For clients who are experiencing severe anxiety and find it hard to just sit "in the moment," Rubinstein recommends they use guided meditation CDs. Rubinstein finds that there are both short- and long-term benefits of the practice.

In the short term, meditative breathing can help you to de-stress. In continuing with her practice, Rubinstein has found that the long-term benefits are that she is better able to focus and be relaxed through the day.

"It takes yoga off the mat," said Megan Fulwiler, a professor at the College of St. Rose in Albany, N.Y., who has been practicing yoga "on and off" for seven years. Fulwiler has also found that her meditative breathing has given her tools to use throughout her day.

Now she is more conscious of her breathing and will often take a few deep breaths before a meeting or a class.

"The deep breath is one of the best tools we have. It returns you to the present."

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