**Stress Reduction ~ Breath by Breath**

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**Noticing how the breath is moving… deep shallow, shaky, smooth, cool, warm**

Becoming aware of the movement and quality of the breath is a great tool for assessing the tension levels of the body. When we are under stress, either physical, mental or emotional, the breath will be altered. By learning to track the breath more closely, we can become aware of rising tension levels earlier and earlier so we can more efficiently utilize stress reduction methods.

**Three-part breath …Inhale ~ soften the belly, expand the ribs, broaden the chest, Exhale ~ let go**

By intentionally working with the musculature of the torso, we can take fuller and more effective breaths. When the body is stressed, very often the secondary respiratory muscles take over – the breathing muscles of the neck and upper chest. These muscles are meant for short, quick bursts of breath support, but not prolonged use. Many of us, leading stressful and demanding lives very often begin to habitually use these secondary respiratory muscles, depriving the body of the fuller and relaxed breath that primarily uses the diaphragm. This three-part breath is intended to re-train our breath to the relaxed pattern we had when we were newborns.

**Postural awareness ~ sitting with a neutral spine ~ perching on the sitting bones**

Many aspects of contemporary lifestyle encourage a non-neutral spine (e.g., soft furniture, steering wheels, computer keyboards). When the body spends many or most of the waking hours slumped, it is very hard for the organs of respiration and circulation to work efficiently. By bringing conscious attention to how we sit, and choosing to sit with a neutral spine, we make it easier for our lungs and heart to do their job.

**Movements for facilitating efficient breath**

Figure 8 shoulder rotations ~ noticing where the movement is free and where it is restricted

Single arm raise with head rotation to opposite side ~ integrating breath

Spine arch ~ Inhale, role pubic bone forward, lift sternum towards ceiling, Exhale ~neutral spine

These movement practices are designed to help release tension in the secondary respiratory muscles. Not surprisingly, the areas of the neck, shoulders and upper back and chest, are also the areas where we often are tight and/or sore. By choosing to integrate these simple movements into your daily routine, you not only can facilitate more easeful breathing, but also create more relaxation in the musculature and more comfort in the body.

**Breath awareness meditation**

Simply watching the breath, as it is without changing it, is a powerful tool for calming the body. Much of the physiological arousal we have in our body is related to how we use our attention. For example, if we often focus on stressful habits in our mind (e.g., worry, second guessing, anticipating, judgments, catastrophizing) our body will experience more arousal. Likewise, if we cultivate emotional habits of anger, irritation, hostility, or sadness, our bodies will be more stressed. By building the capacity to focus your attention in an open, and non-judgmental way, the body/mind has an opportunity to begin to become more steady, more at ease, and more insightful.