

Deep Breathing

During times of trauma, our bodies are flooded with stress related hormones that may linger well after the traumatic event. Subsequent post-traumatic triggersⁱ will also release stress hormones into the body. These stress hormones cause a number of physical reactions that impact breathing. The muscles of the chest become contracted making deep breathing more difficult. Shallow, rapid breaths can lead to hyperventilation or dizziness.

Deep, slow diaphragmatic breathing is a quick, safe, and effective way to decrease a stress response. Just a few slow, diaphragmatic breaths often settle intense physiological arousal. Deep breathing should be practiced prior to a stressful situation so that it is a more natural thing to do.

Here is one way to practice that can be used with both adults and children:

- Sit comfortably in a chair, rest your feet firmly on the ground, and place your hand(s) on your stomach. (You can also practice deep breathing standing up or lying down.)
- Breathe in slowly through your nose for about 3 seconds, imagining air flowing into the lower part of your abdomen. Hold the air for a brief moment.
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for about 5 seconds. Pause for a moment until you need to take the next breath.
- Take several deep breaths like this and notice the changes in your body. Once practiced, deep breathing can be used in any circumstance when you feel stress.
- As an additional help, you may silently say something to yourself that is calming and reassuring as you are breathing in and breathing out. An example would be to silently say, “The Lord is my strength” as you are breathing in and “I cast my fear on Him” as you are breathing out.

Tip: When assisting somebody in acute distress, try breathing deeply together. Crisis is not a time for detailed instructions, but being a companion and instructing a person in deep breathing will lend great support.

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

ⁱ Post-Trauma Triggers (8.13)