

Week 16

Riding the Emotional Anxieties of the New School Year: Taking One Breath at a Time - Lisa Nathan

I'm taking the title of this podcast, one breath at a time, very literally. When you think about it, when we want to take better care of ourselves, of our health, what do we reach for? Exercise. Eating better. Drinking more water.

But what about our breathing? Most of us can survive 3 weeks without food, 3 days without water but only about 3 minutes without breathing. But how much do we consciously think about breathing? After all, it is part of our autonomous nervous system like blinking our eyes, our heartbeat and digesting our food. And as long as we're breathing we're okay...or are we?

In fact, even though we're born naturally knowing how to breathe correctly, over time many of us develop sub-optimal breathing patterns, breathing only from our chest instead of breathing like babies, from our abdomen.

Imagine walking down the street, lost in thought when from someone's house, a big dog comes running at you barking and snarling. Our automatic stress response, fight or flight is triggered. We start breathing rapidly from the chest. Similar breathing if you've ever experienced a panic attack or extreme pain. Eventually, the body will naturally settle into a regular breathing pattern again.

But when you're lying on a beach, floating in a pool, you're relaxed and in your rest and digest mode of breathing. Breathing in a relaxed state like this maximizes oxygen intake into your body - your lungs, heart, blood, brain, organs and cells. It

reduces your stress and it even strengthens your immune system.

There are two ways we can take in oxygen into our bodies. Either through our nose or through our mouths. Lots of studies have shown the benefits of nose breathing yet so many of us are mouth breathers. We kind of take our nose for granted but in truth our nose functions as a perfect device for filtering oxygen into our bodies. Mouth breathing does not have the benefits of nose breathing and can even negatively effect our health - think sleep problems and snoring. So when you're taking those nourishing belly breaths, breathe in through your nose!

And then I'd like to offer two ways in which to use your breath to enhance the natural relaxation state, again, creating lots of health benefits and reducing stress and anxiety. One is by creating a stable, rhythmic breathing pattern. And you do this by inhaling for a count of between 4-6 seconds and exhaling for the same. Remember you're inhaling and exhaling through your nose. It may feel unfamiliar at first but you can just practice this for 4 rounds at a time periodically throughout your day. The other breathing practice is one I've mentioned before which is inhaling through your nose and lengthening your exhale through your mouth like you're blowing out a candle. Let's try that for a count of 4 inhale and a count of 7 exhale. This is a great way to trigger the relaxation response in your body.

Goodness knows, we can't control everything in our lives. Things are going to happen whether we're worried about them or not. But we do have control over how we react to situations out of our control. We take approximately 23,00 breaths a day. Bringing awareness and healthy breathing techniques into our life is one more way to bring a little more calm, reduce our stress and better able to handle whatever life throws our way.

