

Pausing

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Hello. What are you doing this very moment besides reading this paragraph? Or might I ask: How are you “being?” How are you sitting or standing? Where in your body are you noticing relaxation; where is there tension? How is your breath (slow, fast, deep, short, smooth, constricted)? Let us return to these questions later.

First, I would like to introduce myself. I am Brenda Wong, one of the Marriage and Family Therapists at California Counseling Institute. Recently, I was engaged in a conversation with a group of colleagues about clinical issues related to anxiety and anxiety disorders. This led me to some statistics. Though I often work with clients around a variety of anxiety concerns, I was still astounded. Research conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health has shown that anxiety disorders are the number one mental health problem among American women and are second only to alcohol and drug abuse among men. Approximately 15% of the U.S. population or nearly 40 million have suffered from some sort of anxiety disorder. (This was in 2001. I wonder about 2007!).

Why such prevalence? Some experts believe that anxiety disorders are an outcome of cumulative stress over time. People living in Western society are currently experiencing more stress than they have at any previous time in history. (Reasons for why this is the case will require a discussion for another time). My focus in this article is to assume that we do live in stressful times and to explore a possible antidote, the potential benefits of “pausing” and “breathing.”

Consider further statistics from organizations such as the American Institute of Stress, the American Psychological Association, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health:

- Disabling stress has doubled since 1990.
- Between 70% and 90% of employee hospital visits are linked to stress.
- Depression has doubled with every generation since the 1920's. (Depression and anxiety often coexist).
- The American Medical Association reports that 75% of physician visits are psychosomatic.

The holiday season is approaching, and we hear many references to the "holidays and stress." If we didn't have any stress before the holidays, this could be the time we can be most susceptible to "catching" it! It may sound simple or even clichéd: "just slow down, take a breath, be mindful, etc." Yet it can be challenging.

I have found that, for many of the people with whom I work, having that one weekly therapy hour offers a consistent, safe place to be able to "pause" and "Stop, Look, Listen" - take the time to sense themselves, look inside and listen to what their bodies and Spirits have to communicate (often our bodies and Spirits have been trying madly to get our attention anyway!). Pause and Breathe. For when we bring our attention back to our breaths, we come back to ourselves; AND sometimes we have to Pause first in order to notice our breath. Within the body-oriented psychotherapy (somatics) approach, which informs my therapy practice, clients can re-discover a great deal about themselves by learning some simple methods of working with their breath. The breath is the entry point into becoming more aware of what we are feeling and sensing in our bodies. From this place, we are all more able to access the deeper wisdom our body and spirit offer.

Of course, there are other ways besides psychotherapy. Whatever way we choose, it is important to engage in some type of regular practice where we can Pause. You don't have to come to a "grinding halt." Just a short pause. It does not have to be a specific type of "meditation." For example, some of us stop and pray sometime during the day or night. Perhaps during that time of prayer, notice your breath (Breath also means inspiration). Also, it can be an everyday activity like when you drive up to a STOP sign, you simply take notice of your breath. The red STOP sign is not only a safety signal, but a signal for you to take one nice, relaxing breath (or two or three) - a safety signal for your mental and physical health.

Pausing and breathing allow more moments of spaciousness in our being. Stress has less chance to take root in spaciousness. We have more chances to receive from our inner knowing more mental and emotional clarity, more creative and healthy solutions to life's challenges.

My wish is that we can all move through the holiday season and towards the close of 2007 with more pauses and spaciousness in our lives.