

PhysioBiz

Health newflashes

for bodies busy moving, working, playing, being.



Just breathe

Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Physiotherapy Society!

It's been a rather anxious 14 months, and with uncertainty around variants, third waves and 'family meetings', it's not going to let up soon.

Anxiety and stress affect us in ways we often don't fully comprehend. We know that the adrenalin rush when we experience acute stress – such as a near-accident in traffic or an unexpected encounter with an aggressive person. Within a nanosecond, your heart is pounding, your skin is prickling with sweat, you feel a bit light-headed and your breathing is shallow, hard and fast. It's like when you put your foot on the accelerator and the car goes from idle to rev.

The impact of chronic stress, stress that just goes on and on and on at a low level, is as if the car is poorly tuned and is idling far too fast. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland and the adrenal glands) keep doing a complex little dance which pump out 'stress hormones', keeping our bodies on high alert, as if we're expecting a hungry lion round every corner.

And our breathing is a critical part of that dance. "When the rate of our breathing increases and we over-breathe, stress chemicals flood our brain," says Jacqui Schewitz who serves on the Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Group (CPRG), a special interest group of the South African Society of Physiotherapy (SASP). "This prepares us for action – fight or flight. But in chronic stress, when there is a mismatch between activity and action, the person is left with tense muscles, prolonged breath-holding and negative perceived thoughts. So we need to learn tools to manage stress and focus on relaxation." Breathing is more than a way to transport oxygen and carbon dioxide in and out of our bodies, she adds. "It is our way to ground ourselves and give us mental calm and stability."

The CPRG offers some simple tips for using breath-work to calm ourselves and cope with the ongoing stress and anxiety we're all facing:

- Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down
- Stretch your body from head to toe
- Relax your tummy
- Loosen your shoulders
- Drop your jaw; now close your mouth softly

- Focus on your breath, quietly going in and out through the nose
- Breathe into the abdomen, not into the upper part of your lungs. Feel your waist expand gently and go back in, as you cycle your breath. Do not hold the breath on the inhale
- There should be a small pause at the exhale; feel it, then just let go
- To still your mind, concentrate on counting the breaths, saying the number at the end of each exhalation.

Do this at least once a day, and whenever you feel the tension or anxiety mount. "You can do it as often as you like – there are no side-effects except a lovely, relaxed feeling of calm!"

If you have any symptoms of stress, from breathing issues to muscles in spasm, consult your physiotherapist.

To find a physiotherapist, go to www.saphysio.co.za.