



ACTIVITY: Turn Off Stress

Facilitator's Notes

Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to :

- Increase awareness of the negative health effects of prolonged stress.
- Learn an easy method for turning off stress and turning on the "relaxation response" with a simple breathing activity.

ESTIMATED TIME

10 minutes

MATERIALS

Required:

Pen and paper

Background

One of the important skills of resiliency (and emotional intelligence) is learning how to manage strong emotions and stay calm under stress. Our bodies are wired to react to perceived danger by activating our "fight or flight", or acute stress, response. When this happens, our sympathetic nervous system kicks into high gear and our heart rate and blood pressure increase, muscles tense up, and the body releases stress hormones. This can happen when we perceive physical danger but also when we experience "emotional danger"--when we are angry, hurt, overwhelmed, etc.

To avoid the harmful physical effects of a prolonged or frequent stress response (as well as the damage that can be done to our relationships when we can't manage our emotions), we need to be able to "turn off" the acute stress response when it's unnecessary. We can do this by activating our parasympathetic nervous system (our "rest and digest" system), which helps bring our bodies back to a state of equilibrium. One of the easiest ways we can do this is to practice slow, controlled breathing.

Activity

- 1) Make sure everyone in the group is sitting in a comfortable position. Tell the group you are going to walk them through a simple relaxation exercise that will take a few minutes.
- 2) Explain that the directions state to breathe through their nose but if they have difficulty with this they can breathe through their mouth.
- 3) Slowly read the following directions to the group
 - Take a moment to look around at your surroundings and then close your eyes.
 - Rest your hand on your abdomen.
 - Breathe in slowly through your nose and feel your abdomen rise. As you breathe in, count slowly to 4. Breathe out slowly through your nose to the count of four and feel your abdomen fall.
 - Continue breathing slowly, counting to 4 on the inhale and to 4 on the exhale, and feeling your abdomen rise with each breath. In a couple of minutes I'll let you know to open your eyes.
- 4) After 2-3 minutes, ask everyone to take one last slow, deep breath and open their eyes.

Discussion Questions/ Key Points

Ask the group how they feel after the activity.

Does anyone currently practice breathing relaxation or meditation?

Could they imagine doing this for a few minutes everyday or when they feel stress?

Let them know that with time and practice, it becomes easier to calm yourself quickly. You can start out practicing this at home or in a quiet room, and eventually you can use this technique anytime you are stressed or experiencing strong emotions.

Let's Try This!

Invite the team to take a 30 day challenge: Practice the breathing exercise for 5 minutes a day for 30 days.

Follow-up

After the 30 day challenge, have the team discuss how it went. Did they stick to it? How did it make them feel?

The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles.
Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte. 2002.

Dr. Herbert Benson's Relaxation Response: Learn to counteract the physiological effects of stress.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/heart-and-soul-healing/201303/dr-herbert-benson-s-relaxation-response>