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Working Therapeutically Between Sessions: Experiential Exercise

You already know that breathing is fundamental to human life. Humans can survive weeks without food, days without water, but only minutes without air. Breathing is one of the many miracles that sustain our lives moment to moment.

Breathing is both consciously and unconsciously controlled. And that means we can use it in the service of calming the body and slowing the brain's activity, things that are essential to soothing us when distressed and helping us to feel better. As an introduction to utilizing your breathing to regulate your emotional experiences, why not experiment a bit with the exercises below?

Abdominal Breathing

1. Position your body in a manner that is most comfortable for you. You may sit upright with your back firmly supported by the cushion of a chair or sofa, lie flat on the floor or on your bed, or even standing.
2. Place your dominant hand on your sternum and your non-dominant hand on your stomach, just below your ribs.
3. Inhale slowly through your nose, filling your lungs from bottom to top, and causing your abdomen to gently expand outward. Notice that your chest should remain relatively still and your shoulders completely still. If your shoulders are rising, you may be "chest breathing." If you detect this, focus on making your belly big with every in-breath and let your shoulders rest.
4. After you inhale, exhale slowly through gently pursed lips, like blowing a thin stream of air. You'll notice that the hand on your stomach below your ribs will follow your torso in slightly. The hand on your sternum should remain still.
5. Repeat the cycle three times for a beginning experiment. Pause, and notice any differences you experience either physically or emotionally. Try again for another three times, with another pause, and another check-in with your awareness.
6. Try this experiment of 3 cycles of 3 breaths 3 times throughout your day for 3 days. What do you notice?
7. As you become practiced, you may experiment with increasing your cycles to 4 cycles per practice, and so on, gaining in your skill and noticing the decrease in troubling emotional "peaks."

4-7-8 Breathing

This particular approach has been attributed to Dr. Andrew Weil and is based on a yoga practice called pranayama.

1. Inhale slowly through your nose for a four-second count.
You may use a metronome or a metronome app on your phone to keep the count regular, or you may simply count silently in your mind. One advantage of the metronome app is that you can set a pace that is comfortable for you and the exactness of the beating forms a structure that “contains” and maintains your practice.
2. Hold your breath for a seven-second count.
3. Exhale through your mouth, again with your lips gently pursed, for an eight second count.
4. Repeat the sequence 4, 7, 8 for three series, then experiment with four or five series, and so on.

Box Breathing

This exercise allegedly had its origins in U.S. military training, and has been known to assist with slowing breathing and increasing concentration. You may also see the separate link on the homework site for more specific instructions on this exercise.

1. Breathe in slowly through your nose for four seconds, gradually filling your lungs from the bottom to the top.
2. Hold your breath for four seconds.
3. Exhale gradually through your mouth, with or without pursed lips, for four seconds, completely emptying your lungs.
4. Wait four seconds, then take your next in-breath to start the cycle again.
5. As you perform the exercise, eyes open or eyes closed, visualize a square or rectangle with a dot moving around the square clockwise or counterclockwise as you move through each phase.
6. Repeat the cycle four times to start.

There are many variations of these practices, and you will certainly find ways to alter them and adapt them to suit your own preferences. I think of them like basic scales on the piano or guitar. Once they are learned, then enable the musician to improvise in an infinite number of ways.