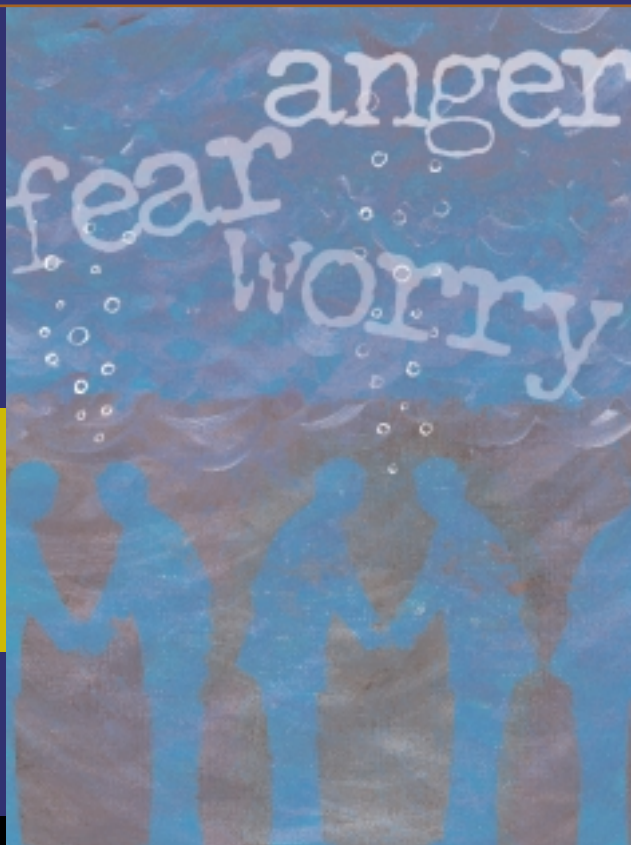


Breath-watching:



By Jim Force

It is no secret that stress in the workplace is an ever-increasing problem for individuals as well as for organizations. Over 45 per cent of Canadian workers find their jobs moderately to highly stressful,¹ while over 40 per cent of American workers experience their jobs to be very to extremely stressful.² For employees, this translates into decreased physical and mental health, increased use of on-the-job drugs and alcohol, and reduced job satisfaction. For organizations, it means reduced productivity, higher turnover, increased worker conflict, and increased health care costs. The American Institute of Stress estimates that job stress and its associated effects cost American organizations over \$200 billion annually.³

Many factors contribute to workplace stress: increased workloads and responsibilities, lack of job security, constant technological change, and organizational change and restructuring, to name a few. However, the number one source of stress is "poor interpersonal interactions and relationships."⁴ As well, poor supervisor-worker relations is one of the top four reasons for job dissatisfaction among Canadian workers.⁵

While these statistics appear grim, there is a good news side to them. Of all the factors contributing to workplace stress, the one that leaders and managers have the most direct control over is their relationships with others, which is the essence of their work. The key to reducing the amount of stress Canadian leaders and managers experience lies in developing in-the-moment strategies for short-circuiting the day-to-day stress created by unproductive work relationships.

The Spiral of Stress

The "spiral of stress" is a useful model for understanding the mechanisms at play in generating stress. Audrey Pihulyk observes that "stress-prone people develop worrisome, fearful, and disgruntled thoughts, which cause them to become easily agitated, anxious, angry, and annoyed."⁶ Thus in situations that challenge our ability to cope, the amount of stress we experience is directly influenced by the kinds of thoughts we have. The more we respond to a situation with negative thoughts, the more negative our feelings become. In turn, these negative feelings feed our negative thoughts, further increasing our negative feelings, which increases our stress. If left unchecked, this process spirals out of control, leading us to respond inappropriately and ineffectively, leaving us unduly stressed. The way out of this downward spiral of stress is to break the pattern of our thoughts by paying attention to our breathing.

Breath-watching

In stressful situations the pattern of our attention tends to be on memories of the past – what went wrong before – and fantasies of the future – what will go wrong next. We judge, we criticize, we complain, we fret over what should or shouldn't be, we are filled with self-doubt. These

The one-minute stress buster

focus of attention

patterns of thought foster anxiety, frustration and other stress-producing feelings that keep us from being able to focus on the present and respond with clarity and insight. Breath-watching, which is “one of the most vital elements in all stress-reduction techniques,”⁷ breaks these patterns by shifting our attention from our thoughts to the natural process of breathing. It literally calms the mind and stills our inner voice by reducing beta brain waves.⁸

Breath-watching is relatively easy to learn: it begins by relaxing your tongue. Allow your lower jaw to go slack and your tongue relax. It should feel as if it is floating in your mouth. In this way you make it more difficult to subvocalize and hence to talk to yourself.⁹ Once your tongue is relaxed, shift your attention to your breathing. Allow each breath to come and go naturally; there is no need to try to control it. As you inhale, notice the flow of air through your nostrils and the swelling of your abdomen and chest. As you exhale, notice the movement of your abdomen and chest as well as the breath exiting the nose. Notice the slight pause before inhaling. Be careful to maintain your focus on “feeling” your breath as opposed to “thinking” about it. It may take a few breaths to shift out of your head and into your body, but with patience it will come – generally within a minute or so. If you find yourself re-engaged in negative thoughts or feelings, merely return your focus to your breath while keeping your tongue relaxed. Continue breath-watching for as long as it takes to relax and become focused and centred. Once in the flow of breath-watching, you will discover that “you can no longer manufacture turmoil with the same conviction,”¹⁰ and that stress and tension are reduced.

Additional Benefits

In addition to reducing in-the-moment stress, breath-watching can be used to enhance our listening ability, particularly when what we are hearing is either unpleasant, different from what we think, or of no interest. In these situations we often find ourselves engaged in unproductive self-talk rather than actually listening. This self-talk can range from jumping to conclusions or discounting what is being said to planning a rebuttal or mindless day dreaming. Whatever form it takes, self-talk distracts us from listening. By relaxing our tongue and focusing our attention on our breath, we disrupt the pattern of self-talk and create a space for listening. The power of this is hard to over-estimate because “as we learn to lift ourselves out of the net of thought. . . we discover that there is another world of possibility for listening. We can listen from silence within ourselves.”¹¹

Regular practice of breath-watching in non-stressful situations will develop your ability to focus your attention in other aspects of your life.

Before engaging in a difficult conversation or attending an important meeting, take five to 10 minutes to focus on your breath. This will clear your mind and allow you to notice what is going on in your internal environment – your thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions. With the clarity gained from this practice you will be better able to respond in an efficient and resourceful manner to whatever occurs. As Tim Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Work*, tells us, “there is no general skill more important to learning and the achievement of excellence than focus of attention.”¹²

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