



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

relax

I am thinking about you, wondering who you are, what you might be thinking about, what the stresses are in your life. I wonder where you are as you pick up this issue of *Health&Healing*. Perhaps you are in a physician's office waiting for an appointment. Perhaps you have just a few minutes to read a bit before you rush off on an errand. I think all of us associated with *Health&Healing* really want to give you something, something that might make your day go smoother, your life better.

I cannot be there in person to offer a cup of hot tea or a hug, but I would like to ask you to use the five minutes it might take to read this article to give yourself a break. We are all stressed, the sources of our stress may be different, but the effects can be devastating.

One of the hardest aspects of dealing with stress is recognizing when we are getting stressed out and doing something right then, to relax and give our bodies and minds a break. See if right now you can take a bit of time to be aware of your present state and to do a simple exercise that might be helpful in making you more comfortable.

The first thing I would like you to do is to examine your surroundings. Who is there? What is the noise level? What is the space like? What is the temperature? What do you smell? Are there windows? What is the day like?

Next pay attention to your breathing. Are you breathing shallow and fast or deep and slow or somewhere in between? How does it feel when you breathe in? When you breathe out? If you can, try to very gently slow your breath down, breathing more deeply and fully, filling your lungs with air, allowing your abdomen to expand slightly as you breathe in and contract slightly as you breathe out. You may think about breathing in what is good and life giving and breathing out tension and toxins. You may want to take the time to take five slow breaths.

Finally pay attention to your posture. How are you sitting? Are you comfortable? Are your legs crossed? Can you uncross them and sit comfortably with your body fully supported by your chair or sofa?

If you would like to try to feel more relaxed, you might do a body scan for tension. Starting with your toes slowly scan your body, feeling whether or not your muscles are tight, holding tension, or soft and relaxed. Pay attention to your feet first, toes, arches, heels and then slowly move upwards to your ankles, calves, knees, thighs.

If you notice tension, try to imagine a warm, soothing light enveloping and surrounding them, allowing them to soften and let go of the tension. Continue upwards to your hips, and lower back and abdomen and stomach. Do you notice that there are particular places where you are storing tension?

Next let your awareness go to your chest and upper back, then into your arms, elbows and hands. Take your time and stop for a moment whenever you notice tightness to send that soothing light to that area of your body allowing it to relax. Be aware of your shoulders, neck, head, your scalp and forehead, eyes, mouth. Slowly allow the tension in your muscles to fade away. Pay attention once more to your breath, has it slowed and deepened? Does your body feel more comfortable and at ease? If you still feel tension in parts of your body you may sit and quietly focus on those areas. As you feel like it, you may return your awareness to the room and all of the activities going on around you.

As you go through the rest of your day, you might try to note when your body begins to feel tense and take time to breathe and relax rather than allowing tension to take hold. Stress can come from actual physical events or our thoughts and worries. Both sources are real to our bodies.

If you are concerned about the amount of stress in your life, I hope you will take time to examine your commitments and worries and take steps to reduce the stress. If you do not feel able to reduce the amount of stress, I hope you will find ways of soothing and nurturing yourself so that your health is not damaged from overload.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by the stress in your life, please ask for help. I hope that you are feeling relaxed and refreshed by taking this brief break and that the rest of your day is delightful. ❧❧

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