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Just Breathe

Everyone perceives stress differently, and everyone reacts to stressful situations very differently. The difference we witness in each other is something to keep in mind as we navigate these next months. Some people hold it all in and withdraw from social connections. Some individuals lash out in anger. Others react with physical problems like headaches or upset stomachs. Many suffer from sleep deprivation as stress builds, resulting in fuzzy thinking or difficulty concentrating.

Just for a minute, try dropping all judgments of someone and consider this: If he or she is exhibiting a behavior or physical change, perhaps it is just a result of added stressors or a way of dealing with stress.

We have all heard the motto “Nebraska Strong”, and the assumption of that translation is “Because we are Nebraskans, we should be able to handle anything that comes our way.” The Wellness in Tough Times Team at Nebraska Extension interprets that motto very differently. Being Nebraska Strong can also mean that we have the strength to reach out for and accept help in times that are stressful. It takes strength to muster up courage for acknowledging that stress is making life too difficult to manage. It takes even more strength to face that stress head-on, and gather all defenses possible to conquer it.

Self-care is an underrated, immensely important defense against stress. Adequate sleep, nutritious foods, activity, and social connections rank at the top of the list for mental well-being.

There is one more incredibly easy self-care regimen that is often overlooked: Just breathe, and control that breathing. When so many things are out of control in our lives, research has shown that controlling our breath reduces stress.

A growing number of scientific studies reveal evidence that controlled breathing reduces cortisol levels in the bloodstream. Cortisol is the fight-or-flight hormone released in stressful situations. It is helpful in addressing urgent needs, but when it hangs around because of ongoing stress, excess cortisol threatens our physical and mental health.

We all breathe. Why not try an easy controlled version for stress reduction? To do box breathing, simply picture a box or square with equal sides, where one side represents the inhale, the next side is holding of the breath, and exhale/holding breath again are each four more counts (approximately four seconds represented on each side of an imaginary box). Breathing in through the nose and expanding the belly, visualize movement up one side of the square. Then imagine going across the top of the square while holding that breath for four counts. Follow that to the third side, exhaling while moving down, and again hold the breath while visualizing the bottom of the square on the way back to the starting point. Each repetition of imagining that box while controlling breath is a purposeful diversion of attention away from stress. Simple, yet effective!

For a variety of resources to help lower your stress levels, visit ruralwellness.unl.edu or contact Susan Harris at susan.harris@unl.edu.