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## Is stress making you less jolly? Follow these helpful exercises

By Markian Hawryluk / *The Bulletin* Published: December 24, 2009

The holiday season is ripe for feeling stressed because of the expectations we've learned over the years.

"We have this idea of what we should be able to do, how much we should be able to accomplish," said Allison Suran, a physical therapist with Health Bridge Physical Therapy in Bend. "And if we're not feeling the way we should feel, if we're not getting done what we think we should be getting done, it sets us up for stress."

Stress, she explained, results from the gap between our expectations and where we find ourselves. If you're feeling stressed, try these simple stress-buster exercises suggested by Suran to help you relax and cope.

### **Deep breathing**

Take a moment to close your eyes and sit comfortably with your feet on the floor. Inhale slowly and deeply five times, focusing on and counting each breath. For most people, it will take a mere 30 seconds to complete or just a couple of minutes in total. "Who doesn't have an extra 2½ minutes in their day?" Suran asked.

She suggests making a habit of turning off the radio in the car when you turn off the engine. Then, every time you get in the car, take your five deep breaths before turning on the music. Find other times to take deep breaths, such as while waiting in line or while washing your hands.

"If the only thing you did was pause five times a day to take five deep breaths, you'd go a long way to decreasing your stress levels," Suran said.

### **Clear your mind**

Rather than ruminating about the job or the list of things you need to complete for the holidays, learn to clear your mind and focus on something else. As you lie in bed at the end of the day, with each breath, press one of your fingers down as lightly as possible. Go through all five fingers on each hand.

"Taking the counting of sheep with a little bit of movement helps the brain focus," Suran said.

### **Avoid stressful situations**

If you know certain situations stress you out, try to avoid them. Don't go shopping on the busiest shopping days of the year and avoid the long lines at the post office during the lunch hour. If the situations are unavoidable, pre-plan how you will react.

### **Savor your food**

Take a piece of food, such as an almond or a small piece of chocolate and hold it in your hand. Imagine what it will be like when you put it in your mouth. How will it feel? How will it taste? Then put the object in your mouth and savor it. Experience it like you've never tasted it before.

When you sit down to a meal, take the time to really taste and really appreciate the first bite of your food.

"All of these practices fall under the heading of mindfulness, with being in the present moment," Suran said. "Anytime you're here, now, tasting your food, feeling your breaths, counting on your fingers, you can't be there (worrying about the past or the future).

### **Tell it three times**

When something stressful happens, let yourself retell the story only three times. "My brain doesn't know the difference between it happening," Suran said, "and me talking about the story of that happening." Constantly retelling the story is like reliving that stress over and over again. Pick your three people carefully: If you know you have to tell your spouse the story at the end of the day, only tell two people at work. After the third time, let it go.

### **Relax your muscles**

Stressed muscles get tight and tense. Take a few moments to stretch and release them. Begin with your toes. As you inhale, tighten your feet, curl your toes, then relax them as you exhale. Repeat that three times. Do the same for your entire body, one muscle group at a time: your legs, your buttocks, your arms and hands, your stomach, your shoulders and your face.

### **Focus on the positive**

When faced with stress events, think consciously about turning your attention to the positive. If the weather turns nasty, think about all the great snow they're getting on the ski hill or how pretty the landscape will look the next day. If you've already reacted negatively, take the time to think about how you could have turned the stressful event into a happy ending. "Take charge of your mind and thoughts," Suran said. "You can retell your brain the story."

### **Appreciate yourself and others**

Think about a person whose company you really enjoy. Imagine sending warm thoughts to that person. Do the same for a person for whom you have neutral feeling, and then for a person you find challenging. Finish by sending warm thoughts to a friendly soul and to yourself.

### **Count your blessings**

At the end of the day, when you put your head on the pillow, appreciate all the good things that happened that day: the beautiful sunrise, the compliment on your clothes, the smile from a stranger. Focus on the positives you might have passed over in that moment, and go back and appreciate them again.

### **Share a chuckle**

Find ways to laugh: Watch a funny movie, read the comics, share a joke. Seek out opportunities to laugh and share that laughter with other people.