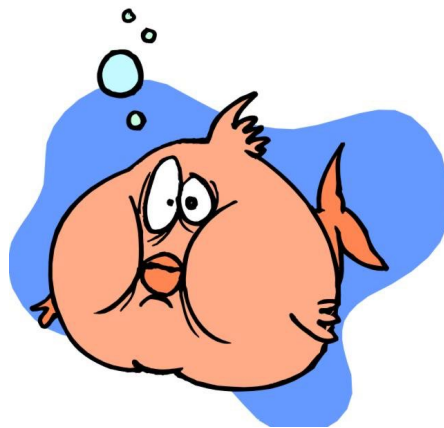


Don't Hold Your Breath

11/17/2020

Sarah here. Right now, there's a lot that's in flux. It's been a couple of weeks since the election. Thanksgiving is around the corner. Flu season is underway. And around the world, there are new COVID-19 related restrictions in place. Even concrete events feel less stable as there is an ongoing sense of uncertainty in 2020. Exactly when and how things will transpire feels more up in the air than usual. Many of us aren't experiencing the sense of relief that we normally feel after major decisions are settled or stressful events have passed. This apprehension has left us with a fairly constant tension in our minds and bodies. So, what do we do about it? We need to follow the advice of that old expression "don't hold your breath."



"Don't hold your breath" means don't count on something because it's unlikely to happen or won't happen for a very long time. The idea behind this phrase is that it will take longer for the event to transpire than you could possibly hold your breath. You may or may not realize it, but people often hold their breath when they are anticipating something. That phrase "waiting with bated breath" may seem a bit melodramatic but it rings true for a reason. When we're eagerly awaiting something, we hold our breath. People also hold their breath when they're stressed, anxious, excited, upset, frustrated...there are a lot of times when we inadvertently hold our breath without even realizing it.



So, why does holding your breath matter? When we're relaxed, our muscles are working while we inhale, but are relaxed as we exhale. When we are physically and emotionally tense, both inhaling *and* exhaling are restricted due to muscle contraction. This means breathing is more labor intensive *and* less productive- it feels "harder to breathe" and leads us to feel like we aren't getting enough oxygen, which is just downright uncomfortable. Tension also shortens or eliminates the natural "expiratory pause" (i.e., the cessation in movement of our breathing muscles) we experience after exhaling. Without this pause, we may feel an increased sense of threat.

Let's get back to 2020. A lot of things that we normally take for granted haven't gone as planned, including major stuff like our kids being able to go to school or us being able to go to work. At the same time, there's a continued sense of uncertainty as we face unprecedented situations left and right and we haven't necessarily experienced the relief we'd normally experience after stress has passed. So...now does it make sense why I said not to hold your breath? It wasn't eye-rolling sarcasm. I wasn't being snarky or a smart aleck about 2020. It was me looking out for you. *Your body's natural response to this year of uncertainty may very well be to hold your breath and that response could be making you feel worse.* You may be wondering what prompted this post. This morning, I felt a strong sense of pressure in my body before realizing that I had been holding my breath while thinking about the coming weeks. 😊 So, trust me when I say we are in this together.

What can you do if your natural response to anticipation and/or stress is to hold your breath?

1. Be aware that holding your breath is something that you may do when you're anticipating something and/or are stressed.
2. Be mindful of how your body feels when you're stressed. I noticed a sense of pressure that accompanied anxious future-oriented thoughts. You may notice your stomach lurching, your heart racing, feeling short of breath or any number of other physical sensations.
3. Notice your breathing pattern *or lack thereof*. This morning, I realized I wasn't breathing—not even shallow breaths. I had taken a deep breath in but as my mind spiraled, I didn't exhale. I subsequently took shallow, effortful breaths (i.e., I never fully exhaled before starting to breathe again so wasn't breathing normally).
4. Adjust your breathing pattern as needed. When I realized I was holding my breath and taking effortful breaths, I stopped what I was doing for a moment, closed my eyes, put my hand on my chest and took a slow, deep breath in and out. I repeated this several times until I felt like I had caught my breath. After that, I focused on breathing normally.



Increase your awareness of your inner experience. Be mindful not just of the thoughts or emotions you're experiencing when stressed but also pay attention to your physical sensations. Sometimes, resolving those somatic symptoms can quickly and painlessly resolve our distress. So, breathe and stretch out your tense muscles. Breathing may not decrease your uncertainty



about the future, but it may help you feel more in-control physically. And feeling a little more in control of your body may be just the boost you need to take charge mentally.