

LIVING STEP BY STEP™

THE ART & SCIENCE OF LIVING

Breathing and Your Brain

The most basic part of the human brain, called the brain stem, is located at the base of the skull. Sometimes people refer to this as the hindbrain or “reptilian” brain, as it is essentially the same as the brains of reptiles. Scientists tell us that this brain evolved before the other main parts of the human brain— before the limbic system, or mammalian brain, that is the root of our emotions and feelings, and before the neocortex, which manages our ability to think, speak, and solve problems.

This first brain registers danger and prepares your body to defend itself in the fastest way possible. The body releases hormones that help your heartbeat, blood pressure, and breathing rate increase to supply power to your muscles. Your immune system and digestion slow down, and other bodily systems are suppressed or enlisted in ensuring that you, as an organism, survive.

The functions of the other two main parts of the brain are of little use when we are under immediate stress. In this primitive survival mode, the body reacts simply as an organism, and conscious thought is not part of its “fight or flight” instinct. The immediate reaction is based purely on stimulus and response, and the lower brain area automatically takes charge.

You can learn to identify the feelings and sensations of these physiological changes in your body. With practice, you can learn to recognize the early signals of when you are going into “alert” mode. Notice if you feel tension or pain in your shoulders and neck, if your stomach hurts, your jaw is clenching, fingers are twitching, hands are in a fist, or you are getting a headache. You can discover your personal stress indicators.

Why are these indicators so important? Well, when you become aware of your personal clues, you have the ability to manage your behavior during stress. You are now in charge. You can help yourself to progress from using your primitive brain to using the more evolved areas of your brain. You will no longer have to feel helpless about the pressures life tosses your way.

Now keep reading, because I am about to tell you the secret, the magic key to unlock the mystery of getting from your reptilian brain to your “higher” brain. Are you ready? The fastest and most effective thing you can do is to exhale...simply exhale. As soon as you notice any pressure symptoms, just exhale— the longer and more slowly the better.

Slowly releasing your breath and maintaining a regular, steady breathing rhythm is the fastest and most effective way to communicate to your brain that your body is safe. When the brain stem registers that conditions are within a specific range, new orders are sent to relax tension in your muscles, provide fresh oxygen to your brain, and enable all body systems to resume optimum function. Your brain will stop its defense protocol and reset the body for normal functioning conditions.

As your reptilian brain withdraws from its position of command, you can assume more ability to respond using the other parts of your brain, with opportunities for more choices. You can check whether the stress is a true life-or-death survival situation, or that you are in no physical danger. As you learn to check, you can engage the other parts of your brain in alternative responses to “flight or fight”. The limbic system can help you sort through the feelings and emotions you have about the event. Your neocortex is at your service in talking with others, and in finding solutions to the situation.

Here is an easy way to add feelings of calmness in your daily life:

- Lower your shoulders.
- Inhale slowly and deeply.
- Exhale more slowly than you inhale.

You can do this every time you remember—at your computer, in the car, while standing in line, when solving problems, before eating, and before going to bed.

Each time you exhale, you will help yourself and your brain make a new neurological connection, between living in survival mode and living in a creative and collaborative space with more and more options.

Save Your Reptilian Brain To Keep You Safe.

<http://www.livingstepbystep.com>