Facilitator Tip: Cultivating Calm

Can you recall a time when you felt flustered, or like a deer in the headlights after listening to someone's story of loss? Maybe you've felt like running away in the face of amped up teens, or been extra irritated with a child struggling to follow the group guidelines. If you haven't had an experience like that in group, perhaps you can think of one from your own life. Traffic, airport travel, and tense family interactions are scenarios often fraught with opportunity for stress and agitation.

Our emotional and physical responses to stressful situations are driven by the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS has two components: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). The SNS is traditionally associated with "fight, flight, freeze, or submit" responses - think of being in a fender bender or getting an unexpected late night phone call - that include increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure. The PNS is known as the "rest and digest" side of things. When activated, our blood pressure and heart rate go down, leaving us with a sense of calm and well-being. Think of watching the sunset on a warm summer day with no place to be or anything to accomplish.

Our breath is the one nervous system response that we can actually control in order to create a greater sense of calm and well-being. Creating a routine with breathwork can help with everyday stress, as well as during moments of a heightened stress response. With breath work, there are a variety of different practices, three of which are listed below. They might feel awkward at first, but give them a go and see what you notice. Before you dive in though, start with simply becoming aware of your breath. Observe both the inhale and exhale, without trying to change them. Cultivating this awareness is a great foundation from which to try other ways of working with the breath.

1) Diaphragmatic breathing. Ongoing stress and tension often lead to short, shallow chest breathing. Just by bringing attention to your breath, you might automatically begin to breathe more deeply, but those overdeveloped chest breathing muscles can restrict us from fully using the diaphragm. One way to counteract this is to put your hands behind your back while taking deep, slow breaths. This is an easy one to do at any point during group. You can subtly put your hands behind your back while seated or standing.

2) Lengthen the exhale. While both inhalation and exhalation happen automatically, our breath cycle tends to be stronger on the inhale (thanks to those chest muscles again!). Consciously lengthening the exhale helps to slow the entire breath cycle down, bringing calm and ease to your nervous system. For an extra bonus, consciously hold the breath in for a count or two before beginning the slow exhale.

3) Resistance Breathing. There are many ways to do resistance breathing. One of the easiest, Ujjayi breath, comes from the yogic tradition. Start by inhaling and exhaling through your nose. On the exhale try making a “HHHAAA” noise with your mouth closed. This helps you to breathe from your throat on the exhale. In some yoga classes it gets nicknamed the “Darth Vader” breath, but when it’s done well, it’s not much louder than a regular exhale. This is a great one to do on a restroom break or during your commute to and from volunteering.

Now that you know a little more about how physiology affects our emotional states, play with the suggestions in this tip to see what happens when you work to influence your nervous system response.