***Stress Management Training***

Session Three: Lecture Script

**Stress and Faulty Breathing Patterns**

Breathing is a natural human function; we breathe in order to live. However, breathing is not just an exchange of new air for old, it is also a way of life. Your whole attitude to life can be seen in the way you breathe.

If you are suddenly surprised or frightened, you will find that you immediately suck in air and hold on to it. This is a spontaneous reaction; your body is preparing for Fight or Flight. However, if your body is reacting to worries and fears that you cannot fight or run from, then you will continue to hold onto the air. This holding onto a breath leads to a habit of shallow breathing in which air is taken into the upper chest only. This can keep you in a permanent state of stress and tension.

Your level of stress is reflected directly in the way you breathe. The more stressed you are, the shallower your breathing is likely to be. There may be a feeling of tightness around the chest so that it may seem impossible to breathe more deeply into the diaphragm. *Stress produces shallow breathing, and shallow breathing, in turn, produces more stress. Shallow breathing limits the amount of oxygen available to the body, causing the whole system to work less efficiently and is a great contributor to the chronic fatigue that so often accompanies stress.*

*Hyperventilation is a further faulty breathing habit brought on by stress*. It is yet another way in which the body may respond to threat. Extra oxygen is taken in for emergency use, if it is not really needed, because the situation is one of stress rather than emergency, the balance of gases in the lungs become upset. This causes tingling in the fingers, arms and around the mouth. It also causes dizziness, faintness, sweating, numbness and chest pains. *These feelings are the result of too little carbon dioxide in the lungs. However, Hyperventilators often feel that what they need is more oxygen, and mistakenly, try to take in more air, when the most helpful thing to do in this situation is to breathe out.*

Faulty breathing habits have their origin in muscle tension, which hinders the movement of the diaphragm and inhibits breathing. The feeling of tightness in the chest, induced by muscle tension and shallow breathing, will sooner or later lead to a burst of deeper breathing, in order to get enough oxygen into the body. This sighing pattern of breathing is then reinforced by the temporary feeling of relief that it brings, thereby creating a vicious circle of cause and effect. It is possible to test how far your stress is reflected in your own breathing pattern. Let us regard the breath as a breathing cycle. This breathing cycle begins when we start to breathe in and ends when we have finished breathing out. The healthy average number of breathing cycles per minute is between six and ten. People who are stressed tend to breathe at a faster rate than this.

Take a moment now to test the rate of your own breathing. If you count your breathing cycles for 30 seconds and multiply the result by two you can measure your breathing cycles per minute.

Set your watch or clock.

Begin counting NOW.

(Time 30 seconds exactly).

NOW stop counting.

Does your breathing pattern reflect high levels of stress?

Learning breath control and deep breathing techniques can minimise stress and will also directly attack the ‘fear of fear’ that many stresses individuals suffer from. You will need to develop a greater consciousness of your breathing in order to change faulty breathing habits. Daily practise is essential. Try too, to use the breathing exercises to reduce stress in your daily life. *Remember, these exercises are designed to be used as coping skills to help you to control your stress response to difficult situations.*