

# “Take a Deep Breath”— How Counseling Ministry Addresses the Body



by TODD STRYD

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Picture this scenario: one afternoon as Kate, a young woman in her 30's, enters her apartment, her roommate immediately confronts her. She accuses Kate of purposefully upstaging her in order to sabotage her relationship with her boyfriend. The accusation comes out of nowhere. Kate is taken aback and dumbfounded by the allegation. She is visibly troubled and upset.

This is a threatening encounter for Kate. She feels an array of emotions: surprise, embarrassment, anger, fear, confusion. She cycles through a diverse litany of thoughts: “How can she think that of me? I’m not that type of person. This is so unfair. How dare she talk to me that way? I should give her a piece of my mind. I should just punch her in the face. She deserves to be upstaged!” Though she doesn’t realize it, Kate’s body is also reacting. It is ramping up, preparing her to respond to the situation.

We have all had moments of intense emotion like this. Fear. Panic. Anxiety. Anger. Heart racing. Adrenaline pumping. But then we take a deep breath. Suddenly, we feel just a bit better. It slows us down a little and we are able to regain some control of ourselves, and better respond to what we are facing. But not everyone has this response. Kate didn’t. Her reactions spiraled out of control. She began to yell. She called her roommate names. She threatened to move out. The conversation ended with Kate storming out of the room and slamming the door behind her.

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Kate's reactions reveal that many profound spiritual issues are in play within her. There are ways she will need to grow in knowing herself and her God. But one seemingly small thing that might have helped her in this tense encounter is knowing how to intervene and slow her body's response by using a breathing exercise. "Take a deep breath." We're all familiar with this common-sense wisdom when we are anxious or angry. Counting to 10, slowing down, or taking a deep breath might seem like simple advice—but it helps. An intentional breathing exercise works along the same lines. Having a proper understanding of how such breathing techniques work and what their benefits are can give us something helpful to offer those we minister to.

For some, the very thought of calming techniques or breathing exercises sets off theological alarms. After all, intentional breathing is a key part of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality, as well as third generation behavioral psychotherapies. This article is an attempt to honor those theological alarm bells. They are there for a reason. They make us careful and thorough. They slow us down, encouraging us to ask questions and do the necessary theological and pastoral work. Thus, the aim here is to give due attention to our bodies because they *are* relevant to thoughtful Christian living, and to locate breathing interventions within a biblical-theological framework. This task requires us to navigate extra-biblical information while remaining faithful to the core tenets of our Christian commitments.

### **What Role Does the Body Play in Counseling Issues?**

Where do we begin when thinking about the place of the body in general, and breathing in particular, as a part of counseling ministry?

For one, God made our bodies, and our physicality must always factor into a biblical understanding of the person. Counseling ministry should not operate as a super-spiritual, hyper-cognitive way of meeting with and helping strugglers. Good sleep, healthy eating, physical activity, a reprieve from stimuli, a quiet walk in a beautiful place, and thoughtful breathing all have a part to play.

Therefore, it's important for us to understand how the body connects to counseling issues. One such area of knowledge concerns the relationship between breathing and the body's "fight or flight" response. Emotions like fear, anger, and anxiety are whole-person reactions—a composite of thoughts,

words, actions, motives, and our physical bodies. As we consider the bodily contribution to these types of emotions, changes in breathing play an important role. It speeds up and becomes shallow, altering the proportion of oxygen to carbon dioxide in the blood.<sup>1</sup> This prompts the release of stimulating hormones, which divert blood and resources from less necessary systems (e.g., digesting food) to more necessary systems (e.g., running!), and enhances our ability to respond well to danger and risk. Breathing is an intrinsic part of a complex system of protection and readiness.

The fight or flight response is a tremendous asset that God gave us. If you are in a burning building, the fight or flight response provides the strength and stamina to help you escape. But a challenge comes when the body fails to operate in tandem with our faith and reason. When someone experiences

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intense reactions to situations that do not warrant it, it becomes problematic. This was a struggle for Kate. Though we can't excuse her reaction to her roommate, we can understand why the accusation upset her. But Kate has also had similar reactions to situations at work. For example, at her annual review, her boss gave her a fair-minded, constructive critique of her job performance. She responded with intense anger and defensiveness. Not surprisingly, this damaged the quality of relationship with her supervisor, and limited her opportunities to grow and advance in her job responsibilities.

When unhinged from biblically-wise faith and intellect, the body's instinctive response for self-preservation simply cannot navigate the give-and-take and self-denial of personal relationships. Like a high-speed train that ignores its designated stops while racing at breakneck speed, the panicked,

<sup>1</sup> Shallow, rapid breathing quickly increases the amount of oxygen in the blood creating a temporary surplus for the body to use in order to fight or run. The presence of extra oxygen in the blood also serves to maintain the other physiological changes associated with the fight or flight response: sweating, increased heart rate, dilated pupils, tensed muscles, and the secretion of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol.

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