



Breathe

By Jennifer Young, LMHC

"Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor." - Thich Nhat Hanh

Your breath is your life. It is the power that moves you. It is the energy that drives you. It is the fire that keeps you alive. Your breath keeps you focused on the task at hand. Your breath helps you slow down and relax. Your breath moves through your body like a river, creating life along its banks.

In pathological relationship recovery, all of these things are needed. The things that your breath provides are the things that will help you get better. You need power, energy, fire, focus, relaxation and to create life again. So, it makes sense that a big part of recovery is that you learn to breathe again.

It seems odd that you might need to learn to breathe again, but you do. You lost control of your breath the moment you were first traumatized in the pathological relationship. That first red flag that rose took your breath away. The first time he called you a nasty name, or showed up unannounced when you had said you were going to be busy, or anytime his masked slipped enough for you to see his pathology. These are moments when your breath became off balance for the first time. Your breath took over in a sense. You may have not felt it; but you sensed it.

When you experience a trauma your body leaps into survival mode. In order for you to survive, certain primary functions must lead the way. Your breath first stops and slows which signals a release of adrenaline. This process then tells your body to be on alert. Other physiological symptoms occur like sweating, confusion, a fast heart beat. Through the event your breath is moving in a pressured way...often making your chest feel heavy. As the perception of the trauma resolves you come back to yourself. But what happens in a pathological relationship is that you never really leave the exposure to the trauma. So, you never really come back to yourself. Your body and breath is always on alert, off balance, unsure of when the next moment of fear will occur.

After an extended exposure to psychological trauma, your breath is not even on your radar. When you live "in trauma" you stop being able to sense your breath and often miss the other physiological symptoms too. You are so busy "thinking" in circles that your body's warning signs and symptoms are "normalized". This is the epitome of losing yourself. Without this awareness and mindfulness you are not present. Your mind is taking you on a journey outside of the present moment, "What do I do next?", "What did I do wrong?", "What can I do to make this stop?" With these thoughts come the behavioral options - fight, flight or freeze.

There is another way through trauma and trauma recovery...breathe. Being able to regain the mindfulness of breathing can change everything. Whether you are still in the midst of trauma or working hard to recover from it; the focus on breathing is crucial. It is really the foundation for recovery.

You can begin by learning how to take good, deep breaths. In through your nose...count to three slowly as you inhale...and out through your mouth...count to three as you exhale. As you breathe listen to the sound of the breath moving in through your nose, and hear the breath leaving your mouth. Feel the coolness and the relaxing sensation of each breath. Stay present and focused with each breath.

After you learn to breathe again, add daily scheduled time to practice. It is recommended that you spend 15-20 minutes each night before bed practicing relaxation and mindful breathing. You can start with a shorter time frame and build up to the full 20 minutes. After you believe you have mastered the breathing, you can begin to add in mindfulness skills like turning your mind to thoughts on your immediate sensations. Turn your mind to take in the sights around you, the sounds you hear, the sensations you feel or the scents you smell. When your mind wanders, bring it back to the present and immediate moment. Focus on just what is within your own space.

So, now you can begin to catch your breath. You can begin the process of calming your body, your mind and your spirit. When you are breathing in a calm and measured way, you are at your best. With a steady breath, you will be able to think clearly, respond smartly and behave in a way that is safe.

It all begins with one slow, deep breath.