



In The MOMENT

*Learning to Embrace and Respond to
Life's Moments with Skill and Intention*

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

This beautiful book — the culmination of numerous community sessions, seminars, and workshops — is an offering to our beloved community from our fellow community members. What began as a conversation about the effects of the stress response in both the mind and body, has grown into a robust community dialogue around being more thoughtful and more present in our everyday lives and interactions. Leaders in our community are now tackling the topics of stress and well-being among their employees as well as the clients, customers, and neighbors in the organizations with whom they interact.

As these fine organizations embraced a few simple practices, inspirational stories emerged across our community of small but significant shifts in how people show up and how they interact at home, at work, and at play. In an attempt to capture those inspiring stories and to share a few of the techniques we have learned, the North Ottawa Wellness Foundation offers this collection of community stories along with helpful tools and strategies.

The people whose experiences are shared here represent a much larger group of community members: our neighbors, co-workers, family members, and friends. Each story reflects an individual journey, and all are leading to a greater sense of personal and professional well-being. They share a common theme: to be the best version of ourselves that we can be. They show us how to make dramatic changes using simple strategies. We have seen the ripple effects of those choices in our families, our work environments, our community, and the world.

Chapter Five includes specific skills and techniques that you can use should you choose to follow in the footsteps of your friends, co-workers, and neighbors on this path of increased self-reflection and self-awareness. They are simple and easy to practice. They are the strategies which most resonated with our fellow community members throughout the many seminars and workshops that were conducted.

I am deeply grateful to all who have shared their humble stories of being more present and more in the moment. Julie Hordyk has captured both the educational aspects offered by the North Ottawa Wellness Foundation and the individual stories of community members with grace and simplicity. The spectacular photography of Marc Hoeksema captures us and draws us into moments of peace. These two talented individuals have helped our dream come true. This beautiful book, with its simple tools, makes accessible something our community members are increasingly realizing: that simply pausing for a moment in our busy days, our busy lives, allows us to respond to life with both skill and intention rather than reacting with unskillful habits.

These personal stories and the beautiful photography serve as an invitation to everyone. We are invited to breathe — to **pause** and **process** all of the variables that might be at play in any given moment. Then we can **proceed** with skill and intention. In this way, we show up with kindness, dignity, and professionalism for everyone around us. This is the West Michigan way and the human way.

May this book continue to support our growth as individuals and as a community. May it also inspire us to reflect our honored titles as both the Healthiest County in Michigan and the Happiest Seaside Town in America.

With deep gratitude,

Monica Verplank

October 2018



Driftwood on Lake Michigan

Preface

Wellness is a trendy topic. Much is being written and discussed about how we can live more deeply and richly, with less stress and improved well-being. Sometimes, the concepts are well intended, but their implementation is difficult and demanding. We (sometimes) create more stress through our efforts to relieve it!

The North Ottawa Wellness Foundation is a council of community partners dedicated to facilitating sustainable wellness for our community. We're committed to sharing simple concepts around breathing, eating, sleep, and exercise that can contribute to a sense of personal well-being and calm. Each person's increased ability to cope and respond effectively will, in turn, cause a ripple effect of improved relationships with friends, family, coworkers, and community.

This book contains reflections from real people in our community who have applied these simple strategies in their daily lives. As we gathered information, we found that our community members are creating positive change in four aspects of their lives: in the workplace, in the ways they interact with family and friends, in their personal well-being, and in teaching their children. Thus our stories are organized in that same way.

We hope this book enriches and inspires you, and that you relate to the stories. The techniques are simple. Their impact is profound. We invite you to learn more through the reference section in Chapter Five, or by visiting NorthOttawaWellnessFoundation.org, where you can also find a digital version of this book. Feel free to share the link and spread the word!

Thank you for choosing wellness and well-being as a holistic approach to quality living.



Sunset in Grand Haven

Chapter 1: Creating a More Positive Work Environment

We spend a lot of our waking hours at work. Most adults age 21-64 work 35 hours or more per week to support themselves and/or their families. That means there's a lot of potential for fulfillment and reward from our work. There's also the potential for mental or physical illness. Depression, high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, and more can result from stress. Studies show that American job stress has escalated over the last few decades.

Business leaders can have a profound impact on their employees and the greater community by focusing on total wellness. The daily stresses and demands of life will always be there. Equipping employees to respond skillfully and with intention can be the difference between a positive working environment and a negative one.

"Shape Corp. has made a deliberate choice to invest in total wellness. It falls right in line with our culture and core values. And we see the results. Our workforce is more engaged and productive. They're happier at work and at home thanks to this emphasis. Employees learn important skills for creating work/life balance, coping with stress, and managing their health. This is important for two reasons. First, we work in the demanding global automotive market. Stress is not going away! Every employee must be able to handle those demands in appropriate and healthy ways. Second, our company is intertwined with the community. When our team members experience success and fulfillment, they are going to be happier. When they are happier, they will do excellent work for customers, relate better to friends and family, and be engaged in the broader community. It's all connected."

Mark White, President, Shape Corp.

Change Your Environment

Leaders at all levels need to meet with their team members. It's an important way to stay connected, provide direction, and offer coaching. But who wants to spend the day cooped up in a conference room or office having meetings?

Holly Severance, Wellness Manager at the Fitness Factory, has found a wonderful way to kill two birds with one meeting stone. She says, "I have a monthly one-on-one meeting with each of my team members. When the weather permits, we go for a walking meeting." Meaning, she and her associate head outside and walk while they talk through whatever needs to be discussed.

Why does Holly like this approach? "When we remove ourselves from our regular work environment by going outside, it somehow changes the dynamic," she says. "I find I'm less stressed. There's less pressure. It's easier to focus and listen. And we both get the benefit of walking outdoors."

Interacting with nature improves our mental and physical health. That's partly because being out in nature provides variation for your brain. Your brain likes that! It focuses on the sights and smells around you, and the ground under your feet. A 15-minute walk in nature decreases your stress hormone (called cortisol) by 16%. That's a huge benefit from something simple, free, and non-pharmaceutical!

Being outdoors engages the brain to focus on what is around it. This forces us out of our most primitive part of the brain (the amygdala) and into our pre-frontal cortex (which is the rational, thinking, executive-function part of the brain). We make smarter decisions and evaluate our situation more clearly when we are working in this part of the brain.

So the next time you need to talk something through with someone, head outdoors! It's a great way to refocus, re-energize, and escape the distractions of the office.



Cattails along the Grand River

Remind Yourself to Breathe

A computer or smart phone looks harmless when it's sitting quietly on your desk. Yet that little device can be the entry point for a lot of stress in your life!

Email is one of the big stress culprits. Christine Burns knows a thing or two about stressful emails. She's the Manager of the Village of Spring Lake, so she hears about all kinds of issues in the more than 200 emails that cross her desk daily. "Not too many people write me an email just to express thanks!" she observes. "I'm responsible for a huge variety of village activities. As a result, I get looped into a lot of situations that require tact and quality communication." That's why Christine has made a sign for her desk that says, "Five Deep Breaths."

"When one of 'those' emails comes through, I read my sign before I respond," she says. "Then I stop to actually take those deep breaths. I find that by taking time to breathe and interrupt my stress response, I can proceed more calmly and thoughtfully to address the issue at hand."

She continues, "It's easy to misread an email, overreact to it, or start a chain of communication that's damaging and hard to stop. Taking those deep breaths before I respond helps me avoid a reactionary response. I think it makes my communication more constructive and short-circuits a lot of potential problems."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

Diagnose Your Stress Response

Have you ever heard of the “flight or fight” response? This is an instinctive mechanism triggered by our brains when we feel threatened. In biological terms, the amygdala takes over the brain. That’s the primitive function geared towards self-preservation. When we are calm and unthreatened, we use the pre-frontal cortex, which is the executive level “thinking” part of the brain.

That “fight or flight” response is not limited to dangerous situations. Bonnie Suchecki realized that she was experiencing it at work. “I am the Human Resources Manager, and I deal with many different people who are experiencing various emotions related to their jobs. I noticed that some people set off my emotional triggers and sent my brain directly into a ‘fight or flight’ response. For example, I can handle anger. I can handle people who get loud. But someone who is both loud and angry frightens me. Someone who is condescending and arrogant makes me angry.”

Bonnie learned to visualize her emotional response as though it was something on a tray. “I looked at each relationship that triggered this response, and analyzed it. Why did I respond this way? By putting it on the tray and looking at it, I could actually force my brain back into a calm, rational, executive-thinking mode. I would stop feeling afraid or inadequate and call on the skills that I have learned. Then, I could provide constructive coaching to this person.”

Bonnie says that understanding the two parts of her brain was tremendously helpful. “I realized that I have control over who I am and how I respond to the world around me. When I feel a stress trigger coming on, I get out of the part of my head that is not constructive and move to the part that is. Then I am more effective and can get to where I want to be.”



Learn more about the theory and practice of putting things on The Tray on page 37.



Eagle on Mona Lake

Chapter 2: Responding Skillfully with Family and Friends

It is often said that we have a tendency to hurt those we love. This is sad but true. It's easy to lash out when we are frustrated, hurt, scared, stressed, or insecure.

What's interesting is that the social support found in those close relationships is essential to our well-being. People who have strong relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances have a healthier hormone balance than those who do not. The hormone oxytocin stimulates our desire to seek out social contact and increases our sense of attachment to people who are important to us. Stressed people who have adequate levels of social support receive an oxytocin boost. This helps them feel less anxious, more confident in their ability to cope, and more drawn to other people.¹

Thus, we have an interesting push-pull situation. When we are stressed, our tendency can be to lash out at the people around us. Yet, those very people and relationships are the ones we need to help us rebalance our mental energy and work through our stress!

Recognizing, acknowledging, and coping with stress in a less damaging way helps us nourish long-term positive relationships.

"There are so many things in our lives that can cause stress: work, finances, health, and watching the news, just to name a few. That is why, when it comes to our relationships with friends and family, having as little stress as possible is extremely beneficial to our emotional well-being. We all need that "safe space" to relax and be ourselves. Fortunately, we can all learn simple techniques that help us be in the present and remind us what is truly important. This thoughtful approach will do more than almost anything else to safeguard our essential relationships."

Sarah Lewakowski, MA, LLP, Executive Director, TCM Counseling

¹ Harry Mills, Ph.D., Natalie Reiss, Ph.D. & Mark Dombeck, Ph.D. (June 30, 2008). Social Impact of Stress. Retrieved from www.mentalhealth.net.

Breathe While You Let the “Dust” Settle

We have all seen glitter globes. They're those round balls on a stand, filled with liquid, usually showcasing a scene that's specific to a location or event. They also contain glitter, often designed to imitate snowflakes or confetti. When you shake the globe, the glitter disperses through the water. It falls gently back to the bottom of the globe after a minute or two.

Amy Coletta thought glitter globes would be a helpful way to relieve stress among her friends and family. She labeled them “Breathe.” Breathing is a simple reminder that we are alive, which is a blessing in itself. Concentrating on our breathing is also one of the most important things we can do to calm our bodies and minds.

“When you feel stressed, all you need to do is shake the glitter globe,” Amy says. “As the glitter swirls and settles, you can focus on taking five deep breaths.” She recommends saying “breathe” as you inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. “By the time the glitter sinks back to the bottom of the globe, you have disrupted your stress response. You will be more mindful and better able to respond to whatever situation is at hand.”

These little gems are easy to make. Just search Pinterest for “DIY Glitter Globes.” You will find several options with complete instructions. You can also print a copy of the Five Deep Breaths card from the North Ottawa Wellness Foundation website and give it along with your globe if it is a gift.



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

See Life Differently

Are you familiar with the term “negative space?” Negative space, in art, is the space around and between the subject(s) of an image. Negative space may be most evident when the space around a subject, not the subject itself, forms an interesting or artistically relevant shape.

What's fascinating is that two people looking at the same image can see something completely different. Some might see the image itself. Others might perceive the shape in the negative space.

You can teach yourself to see both elements of a piece of art by looking at it differently. In the same way, you can also teach yourself to view stressful moments from a new perspective.

Taryn Kutches uses this idea to help reframe stressful or difficult situations. She says, “The other evening I became stressed because my husband was not home. My two-year old daughter was throwing a temper tantrum because she didn't want to go to bed. I was exhausted because I am almost 35 weeks pregnant. I noticed I was starting to get very aggravated! But I was able to calm myself down by realizing how lucky I am to have a healthy child. If the worst part of my day was my daughter fighting bedtime, then I am actually pretty lucky.”

Taryn has discovered how to reframe what she sees and feels. That perspective helps her dissipate stress and feel more positive about the moment. She can also respond from a place of gratitude rather than frustration.



Abstract waves on Lake Michigan

Create a Shared Language

Ted and Shirley Poulton, retired educator and banker respectively, have been married 50 years. They came from very different families, and have opposite personalities. "My fallback communication strategy was to retreat into my shell and not speak," Ted confesses. "Shirley, on the other hand, wanted to immediately talk about everything and try to fix every problem. You would think that, as opposites, we would balance each other and navigate well together. However, that wasn't always true."

They have come a long way from those early communication challenges. Ted and Shirley use several of the strategies in this book to help them manage stress and communicate in a positive rather than a negative way. "Staying In Your Lane" has been especially helpful for them. Their shared understanding of the vocabulary and the strategy allows them to gently challenge each other in stressful situations.

Shirley notes that they each apply the words a little differently. "Ted might see me taking on a problem that is not mine to solve. He will say to me, 'Are you staying in your own lane?' And I can ask him, 'Is it time to get out of your lane?' when I see him retreating from a situation. Or I can say, 'I'm going to stay in my lane and let you take care of this problem.'"

Ted adds, "The form of the words is important. Asking 'Are you staying in your lane?' instead of declaring, 'You are not in your lane' makes a difference. A question is non-confrontational. This linguistic shorthand helps us navigate in a positive way."

The two of them agree that having this shared language has changed their approach to communication. "Humans are a lot like roses," Shirley says. "We all have unique beauty. We also come with our own personality thorns. When you are trying to discuss a problem, your thorns tangle. Now we have different ways to approach the discussion. We are getting better at having a conversation without the thorns."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Staying In Your Lane on page 40.*



Swans on Harbor Island pond

Chapter 3: Improving Personal Wellness

The United States is one of the richest countries in the world, yet our citizens live with a tremendous amount of stress, and that stress is not good for us.

Stress seems to worsen or increase the risk of conditions like:

- obesity
- heart disease
- diabetes
- depression

Why do we allow ourselves to experience so much stress? We can say things are out of our control. We can blame work. We can say we have too much to do, and not enough time to do it. But the fact is, we all make our own choices. That means we can choose to take responsibility for our own wellness. We can adopt smart strategies to lower our risk. People need to start owning their own health, but they also need the knowledge to do so.

"Each member of our community health system team has a personal commitment to the family, friends, and neighbors we serve. We have seen troubling trends in our Emergency Room, on our hospital floor, and in our physician offices that compel us to look at things differently. For too long, the health care industry has focused on treating disease and illness instead of preventing it. This has created a costly and unsustainable situation for communities across the country. We want to put the focus back on prevention and put it back in the hands of patients. That combination is a powerful tool in fighting chronic disease, as well as fostering healing and longevity. NOCHS and our local physicians are proud to bring this idea to the forefront through practices that integrate physical and emotional health."

Shelleye Yaklin, President & CEO, North Ottawa Community Health System

Interrupt Your Stress Response

How many times have you been behind someone in a line or on the road who doesn't share your sense of urgency? You feel yourself getting antsy and stressed and sometimes downright angry if things don't move fast enough!

Fortunately, there's something very simple you can do to relieve your stress. It works whether you're in a car at a red light or in line at the grocery store. The technique is called "pattern interrupt breathing," and, according to Amey Horning, it's the best 16-second way to change your emotional energy around a situation.

"When I feel myself getting irritated with the person in front of me, I use this technique," Amey says. "I breathe in for four seconds. Then I hold it for four seconds, let it out for four seconds, and then hold once more for four seconds. In those 16 seconds, I feel myself calm right down. I'm no longer so caught up in the urgency of whatever I'm trying to get done."

We often create our own "deadline stress." Sometimes we impose artificial deadlines on our activities. Maybe we try to cram too much into a day and then blame others for being in our way. When you find yourself doing something like this, try pattern interrupt breathing. It will help you reduce the stress and put the situation back into perspective.

Remember the Good

It's an unfortunate human tendency to focus on the difficult things that happen to us. Perhaps that's because they are often more traumatic, or have long-lasting consequences. Regardless, it's easy for us to focus on the bad while forgetting the many good things that happen every day.

For over a decade, Daryl Fischer has emphasized good memories by using a gratitude journal. She says, "I would sit down every night and write a paragraph in my gratitude journal about something good that happened that day. Then around New Year's Day, I would go back and reflect on the year. I would never have remembered all those good things if I didn't have them written down!"

In the last year, Daryl has updated her gratitude practice a bit. Like many people, she regularly pulls out her smart phone to take photos of things that she and her family do each day. Now she looks back at the day's photographs and chooses at least one good thing she wants to remember, and writes a sentence or two about it. She finds this easier and faster than purely written reflections.

Daryl also recalls the best parts of her day using the practice Dr. Martin Seligman calls "Three Good Things." When she shared this practice with her husband he was eager to give it a try. Now they both spend a few minutes before they go to sleep each night sharing good things that have happened.

"It helps to share the good," Daryl notes. "So often we end up sharing only the complications of our lives, and many days have plenty of those. But ending each day on a positive, grateful note is a wonderful way to stay close as a couple and to prepare for a good night's sleep."

It's easy to start a gratitude journal with a smart phone or notebook. If you would like to capture your grateful moments visually, visit your favorite app store and search for "photo journal" tools.



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Three Good Things on page 41.*



Shores of Spring Lake

Leverage Technology for Wellness

There are many people who will say that technology is bad for our health. However, it's good to step back and remind ourselves that technology, like anything else, has the potential to benefit as well as to harm. Its impact depends on our personal usage choices.

Maureen (name changed for privacy) has made a seemingly easy, yet profound, choice about how to use her technology for personal well-being. The technique is simple, and it involves a timer.

"I find myself feeling fatigued in the afternoon," Maureen admits. "I'm running all morning, and by the time 2:00 or so rolls around, I need a pick-me-up. It's easy to turn to something like coffee or chocolate. As much as those are wonderful on occasion, I can't rely on them all the time. Instead, I choose to spend a few minutes on deep breathing. Since it's all too easy to forget this important task, I have programmed my watch to remind me!"

Breathing has a huge impact on Maureen's day. "I find that taking five deep breaths resets my temperament, especially if I am feeling stressed with family or with work," she says. "As a result, I am more focused, patient, and present. That helps my problem-solving skills, and allows me to go through the rest of my day with more focus and energy."

You can set reminders with any electronic device, including your smart watch, smart phone, or computer. In a pinch, you can go online to set a web-based timer, or even search out a handheld timer or alarm. Add a quick stroll to your deep breathing to multiply its impact.



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

Decrease Reliance on Prescription Medications

Modern medicine is able to do amazing things. Yet, sometimes, we find ourselves relying on prescriptions because we (and our physicians) don't know about other options.

Cindy Anderson is a good example. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1993 and suffered serious inflammation and joint pain from the chemo and radiation. Her body also slammed into full menopause with intense and relentless hot flashes. All of this made it impossible for her to sleep. Her doctor pointed out that sleep is essential to recovery. He prescribed a modest dose of Ambien to help her get the necessary rest. As she says, "The results were dramatic. I slept, I healed, and I began to get my life back."

Fast forward 24 years and Cindy was still taking Ambien every night. She says, "I had a nagging concern that I shouldn't rely on medication for sleep. But any night when I didn't take the medication meant a night of fitful sleep and renewed commitment to the drug. My doctor agreed that rest was the most important part of the equation and continued the prescription."

Cindy first learned about meditation and breathing techniques in 2017. Coincidentally, her insurance company limited her Ambien prescription to 180 doses at about the same time. "I decided to start rationing the pills and take them only when I absolutely could not go another night without sleep," she says. "Instead of taking Ambien the first night, I used some breathing and meditation techniques that I had learned. Lo and behold, I went to sleep and slept until morning. I am sleeping better every night. And I haven't taken an Ambien since I gave them up that first night!"



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

Choose Your Thoughts

Most of us spend a lot of time comparing ourselves to other people. We chew on critical comments and internalize them. We take on other people's problems and find ourselves living their lives instead of ours.

There's a solution for this and it's called "Staying In Your Lane." Meghan Heritage has deliberately adopted this practice to keep her healthy and happy. She says, "We are in control of our thoughts and our actions. When we have a thought that makes us unhappy or uncertain, we can choose to release it. Then we can select another one."

Meghan says this is a practice, not a one-and-done thing. Contrary to public opinion, you can, in fact, take ownership of your thoughts. You may not be able to prevent the negative thought from occurring, but you can look at it calmly and say, "Why is that bothering me?" Then you can choose to think something else.

"We allow ourselves to go down the rabbit holes," Meghan notes. "Why do we assume that the criticisms are true? Why do we take other people's problems on as our own? Why do we want to fix everything? We need to understand what is in our control and what is not. Then we need to let go of what is not, and fill our minds with the positive. That's staying in your lane."

If you want a visual on this skill, search out competitive photos of Michael Phelps. You won't see him gazing into the adjacent lanes, wondering how his competitors are doing. He's not drifting into other lanes to check out the water there or swimming in someone's backwash. He is confident in himself and he stays in his lane. "That's a great illustration," Meghan notes. "You can have empathy with others, but you don't have to climb in the hamster wheel with them! You can wait outside with love and compassion, ready to support them when they choose a different path."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Staying In Your Lane on page 40.*



Beach at Hoffmaster State park

Chapter 4: Equipping Our Children

School stress is a serious issue, starting as early as kindergarten. It turns play into competitive sport. It turns the joy of learning into a struggle to excel. It turns friends into social connections and charitable acts into a line on a resume.²

Studies show that teens routinely report higher stress levels than adults³. What can we do about it? On one hand, we can't do much to eliminate the stress. Our children live in a pressure cooker of our mutual making. Modern society can't put the social media genie back in the bottle. The angst and drama of school now follows kids 24/7 via their phones. We probably don't want to put the kibosh on traveling sports or competitive arts. We can't instantly undo the expectation that every child must follow a college prep curriculum in order to graduate.

What we can and must do, however, is help kids learn coping mechanisms. Stress is like smoking — it's deadly and we know it. We owe it to our children to teach them simple ways to manage their stress and relax a little bit.

"Coping skills are desperately needed in our high schools. I think it's one of the most important things we teach. Kids are not developmentally ready to handle all the stress of being a modern teenager. They can't be under pressure all the time or they will crack. They need to learn to slow down and breathe. I see kids intentionally practice what we are teaching them, and I see the improvement in their hearts as well as their heads. We are giving kids permission to be kids."

Paul Kunde, Principal, Central High School, Grand Haven Area Public Schools

² Daniel J. DeNoon. (March 1, 2007) Your Child and Anxiety: School Stress Starts Early. Retrieved from www.webmd.com.

³ American Psychological Association. (February 11, 2014). Stress in America™: Are Teens Adopting Adults' Stress Habits? Retrieved from www.apa.org.

Improve Sibling Relationships

We all know kids fight occasionally. (So do adults, for that matter!) Differences between people are healthy and should be expressed. But kids need to learn methods other than physical violence or verbal cruelty to resolve arguments.

It's one thing to tell our kids, "Stop fighting." It's another thing entirely to show them techniques that can actually influence the biology of the fight response. Teaching kids to take a few deep breaths before launching into an argument is a powerful step towards family harmony. When we take five deep breaths, we interrupt our "fight or flight" response and are able to make decisions from the more rational, thinking part of our brain.

If you're looking for proof, talk to kids who have learned about Five Deep Breaths. When asked if this practice helped them at home, kids in Grand Haven area middle schools gave survey responses such as:

- "Yes. I got really mad at my brother and felt like hitting him. I know that wasn't a good choice to do that, so I walked away and took a few breaths."
- "Yes, when I get mad at friends and people and I try not to lose it."
- "When I get home, if my brothers are being annoying, I use it to calm down."
- "It helps me to calm down and not panic or be mean when someone is mean to me."
- "Yes, when I am at my house, my siblings are mean and annoying, but I take a second to breathe and it really helps me not snap at them."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

Banish Nightmares

We all know how terrifying it can be to wake up tangled in the sweaty sheets, heart pounding, as we try to escape the clutches of a vivid nightmare. Sometimes we even fight the desire to go back to sleep. We're afraid of re-entering the dream and experiencing more terror. That can lead to a downward spiral of sleep deprivation, exhaustion, and perhaps even prescription pills to keep the nightmares at bay.

Did you know that the most common triggers for teen nightmares are stress and anxiety? Local teenager Hayley Vincent struggled with nightmares for a long time.

"I didn't want to go to sleep at night," she confesses. "My mind would race over all kinds of personal things. I would be so restless, and so physically tired, but I was afraid to fall asleep." Hayley's doctor prescribed medication, but, as she notes, "The drug only lasts a certain time, then the nightmares come back."

So Hayley tried a different approach, one that she learned in school. "We learned about the Body Scan in class, so I started that practice every night when I laid down in bed. I would think about every part of my body, starting from my head and going all the way down to my toes. By focusing just on my body and nothing else, I could clear my head. Then when I fell asleep, I found I wasn't having nightmares anymore!"

Haley says, "Prescribed medications can potentially have negative effects. It's better to do something positive, healthy, and natural with your body when you're trying to address a problem like nightmares."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of the Body Scan on page 39.*



Ice formation at Lake Michigan

Cope with Loss

Grief and loss are part of the human experience. We can't protect our kids from them, nor can we pretend they don't exist. The grief of losing a beloved pet can be just as devastating as the pain of losing a friend or family member.

Unfortunately, grief can worm itself into the mind and heart, especially if it does not get released. That can bring about serious health issues such as ulcers, eating disorders, insomnia, depression, and more.

Local student Mackenzie Leslie has firsthand experience with the impact of grief. "I lost my grandfather recently," she shares. "I would find myself becoming confused, tense, and upset the longer I thought about it. I would feel the pain and tension throughout my body, but I didn't know what to do about it."

Fortunately, Mackenzie learned about something called "Five Deep Breaths." Now when she starts to feel sad or stressed, she uses this breathing technique to calm her anxiety. "I didn't believe it would work," she confesses. "After all, it's just breathing. Why is that such a big deal?" And yet, for Mackenzie, this breathing technique has become a very big deal indeed. "When I start to feel myself getting upset or stressed, I focus on my breathing," she notes. "It doesn't change the fact that my grandfather is gone, but it does help me reset my mind. Then I can remember that he's in a better place, and I can get to one, too. I actually feel my muscles and nerves relax."

Mackenzie notes, "When I first started, it was hard to focus and I didn't believe it would work. Now that I've had a few classes, I can see the difference. I can stay focused and feel my body respond."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

Walk the Walk

How many times have you said to your kids, "Will you please listen to me?" Or, "Calm down. Relax." Those are really easy words to say. They roll right off our tongues without conscious thought.

However, as Pete Klahorst realized, they are a little shallow if you're not modeling them. Pete is a busy, married executive with three teenagers. Like many of us, he had allowed work to gradually invade all facets of his life. "I was the classic driven career person," he admits. "My wife and kids knew very well that I was not mentally present, even when I was physically at home. I was a bad listener. I would check email during family time. My phone was always on."

Pete's epiphany came when he realized two things. First, he was alienating his coworkers. "I thought that I had to be tough and driven to be a leader. When I started relaxing and being smarter about my work/life boundaries, I actually related better to my team." Pete has learned the power of deep breathing and uses it regularly to control his responses to work-related stress. "There's no downside," Pete says with a bit of amazement. "I am still productive. I'm just more relaxed about it."

Second, Pete realized he was sending his kids the wrong message. "It's easy for kids to think that being busy is a badge of honor," he observes. "That is so wrong! I needed to stop teaching my kids that it was okay to let work take over my life."

Pete now keeps his phone off the dinner table. He takes walks with his kids. He and his wife have a better, more relaxed relationship as well. He notes, "My kids haven't come right out and said anything, but I can see that my relationship with them has improved. I cherish these moments when I can slow down and appreciate who they are."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*

Reduce Performance Anxiety

Have you noticed that your child is really quiet, doesn't eat much, or has a lot of nervous energy on certain days? Those could be signs of performance anxiety related to testing.

Performance anxiety is exactly what it sounds like: being concerned that you will not do well on something that is really important. Just about everyone — adults and kids — feels some anxiety before a test. In fact, a small dose of anxiety can be helpful, keeping you sharp and focused. But when your symptoms take over so that you can't function, or when you're so anxious that you feel sick, you might not be able to do your best.

One of the simple yet highly effective remedies for test-day stress is deep breathing. Five Deep Breaths can bring kids out of their stress response and help them focus on the task at hand.

Teachers have found this technique to be highly effective. One of them says, "I now have my kids do deep breathing before we start a tough lesson or a test. Curiously enough, I find that this simple technique calms the kids right down. They can focus on the lesson or test, and they do much better."

One local high school student noted, "I got an E on my first Earth Science test. Then we started talking about how to use breathing to focus on things and I got a C+ on my last test."



*Learn more about the theory and practice
of Five Deep Breaths on page 36.*



Sunset at Grand Haven State Park

Chapter 5: Simple Techniques and Resources

As you read through the vignettes in this book, you probably noticed that many of them referenced a specific technique, such as Five Deep Breaths.

We thought it would be helpful to include the basics on these techniques so that you can start using them yourself. As you will see, they are very simple. Each one can be explained in one page. You will be ready to implement them in five minutes or less.

How can you get started? Just pick your favorite! There's no particular order, so find what speaks to you and begin there. This chapter includes:

- Five Deep Breaths
- The Tray
- Body Scan
- Stay in Your Lane
- Three Good Things

If you would like to learn more and go deeper, we invite you to visit www.NorthOttawaWellnessFoundation.org. There you will find rich resources for both work and home to help you navigate life's moments with skill and intent.



Learn more at
www.NorthOttawaWellnessFoundation.org.

Five Deep Breaths

What happens to your body when you are stressed? The sympathetic nervous system (also known as the "fight or flight" response) kicks into gear. Digestion slows down and blood pressure goes up. Even the brain gets involved. The most primitive part of the brain (the amygdala) takes over from the pre-frontal cortex (which is the rational, thinking, executive-function part of the brain). We respond as though in a life-or-death situation. This, however, is not always our most skillful response mode.

We can bring control back to the pre-frontal cortex through something as simple as deep breathing. Here's one way to do it:

- Inhale deeply. Feel the cool air rushing across your nostrils. Remember that your lungs operate like bellows. Draw your diaphragm down, allowing your belly to expand as if it were filling with air.
- Once you have filled your lungs/belly to capacity, pause.
- Then exhale, pressing your belly button back toward your spine.
- Pause for a moment, then repeat four more times.

What is happening when you breathe this way? First, your long, deep exhalation activates your parasympathetic nervous system (the "rest and digest" response). You're telling the fight-or-flight mechanism to take a back seat. This allows your body to regain its normal hormonal state. Second, you are giving your mind something else to think about. By the time you have completed your five deep breaths, you will have a much better view of your response options. You can respond in a manner aligned with a kind heart, compassion, and goodness rather than an overcharged amygdala response bent on assuming negativity, fear, and anger in those around you.

The Tray

Imagine you are holding a lovely serving tray. It may be wood, hammered copper, gilded gold — whatever you can most readily picture in your mind. When fear, irritation, uncertainty, or anxiety arises within you, imagine you are observing it on this lovely tray. Cultivate your curiosity about it. Think “Hmmm, isn’t this interesting? I am feeling quite frustrated right now.” Or “Wow, look at that anxiety arising within me. Isn’t that interesting?” By cultivating curiosity, we can negate the physiological effects of strong emotions.

This simple strategy allows us to examine the issue more rationally and perhaps identify its root cause. Rather than drowning in the emotion of the moment, we can observe it and begin to notice patterns around that emotion. We are not burying it within, nor are we allowing unskillful responses to assert themselves via our body language or our words.

Increased self-awareness empowers us. So observe yourself! Then giggle kindly and gently at your own perfectly imperfect reactions as you place your issues on the tray. This will help you learn to respond more skillfully from your executive brain rather than from your emotional core.



Popcorn clouds over Lake Michigan

Body Scan

A Body Scan can help you de-stress, calm your mind, and get ready to sleep at night.

It sounds very simple, but you need to practice in order to develop focus and become good at clearing your mind. The steps are easy.

- First, sit in a comfortable chair or lie down in your bed.
- Close your eyes and begin to find a sense of stillness in your body.
- Then, starting at the top of your head and slowly working down to your toes, notice sensations in each area of the body as you focus on it. Just be curious and aware — don't judge.
- Each time your attention wanders beyond your body, remind yourself to come back to what you were doing and be in the moment.

This technique clears the clutter from your mind. You are focusing on one thing and one thing only. Through this focus, you are allowing your mind to slow down and get ready for sleep.

Stay in Your Lane

This beautiful practice is inspired by the Dutch fable of two contented owls. The owls live near a barnyard of wild, restless, and often ridiculous animals. The other animals can't understand how the owls remain content during the bitterly cold winter, so they ask the owls about their secret to happiness. The owls teach them of the peace and power available from simply enjoying the beauty of each season. This explanation does not convince the rowdy barnyard animals. In the end, they fall back on their wild, restless, and ridiculous behaviors. The owls keep a bemused watch. They stay in the tree, allowing their neighbors to live out their lives as they please. The owls have learned an important lesson. They are only responsible for their own responses to the ups and downs of life. Their contentment is not determined by the wild, unruly choices of their barnyard neighbors.

Stay in Your Lane helps us remember that we have control over our own choices and responses. We are not responsible for the actions or reactions of others. For a time, some of us may be parents or guardians of young children, and then yes, we do have responsibility. Beyond that, however, we must let the people in our lives be free to learn the lessons they are meant to learn, in their own time and way. We have responsibilities to the people in our lives, but we are not responsible for them.

The practice of staying in our own lane allows us to take responsibility for our actions. It also helps us regulate how we respond to the actions of others. The more we stay in our own lane, the more contentment we will cultivate in our own lives.

Three Good Things

Your brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones⁴. Don't believe it? Think about what keeps you awake at night. It's probably not the amazing, wonderful people you met and the incredible experiences you had. You're dwelling on the hurt, anger, frustration, unfairness, and unhappiness that your day brought.

Acquiring a big mental pile of negative experiences makes a person more anxious, irritable, and blue. Plus, it makes it harder to be patient and giving toward others. And if all that was not enough, dwelling on the negative makes it harder to fall asleep and stay asleep. Your brain will keep twisting and turning on the last thought you had before sleep. If it was negative, there's a good chance you'll be up during the night!

You can rebalance your mental scale through the practice of Three Good Things⁵. Keep a notebook by your bed or at your desk. As each day comes to a close, write down (or simply bring to mind) three good things that happened in the day. They can be things you did or something others did for you. They can represent circumstances that went your way or just a serendipitous thing that happened in the world (like a beautiful sunset).

You might even want to share what you've observed with a close friend or family member via conversation or a simple text. Verbalizing your positive thoughts helps you be more aware of them.

After just two weeks of reflecting on the positive before you go to sleep, you will find that you sleep better. You will also see a shift in your attitude. You will be happier, more resilient, and better able to put life into perspective.

⁴ This analogy is adapted from the writings of Rick Hanson, Ph.D. Learn more at www.rickhanson.net.

⁵ Seligman, M. E. P. (February 2012). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.



Japanese Maple in Ottawa County

Julie Hordyk (Author)

It has been an honor and journey of joy to put this book together. So many fascinating people, so many high-impact stories. Many times I have found myself thinking, "I wish I had known this when I was younger!" I might have saved myself from a lot of stress and the side effects thereof.

We all have a responsibility to steward our own health and well-being. Some pieces of that task can be accomplished with relative ease like with breathing. Other parts of it require us to prioritize activities that may elicit puzzled head shakes from our friends and family, like putting the phone away during dinner or choosing to exercise rather than work late. The takeaway is simple: I am accountable for my choices. I am the only person who can make time for what keeps me well.

I hope you find inspiration in these pages. More than that, I hope you implement some of these strategies to minimize stress and maximize well-being in all aspects of your life.

Julie is a marketing consultant who lives and works in Grand Haven, Michigan. Learn more about her work at www.mindovermarketing.net.



Sunset wave on Lake Michigan

Marc Hoeksema (Photographer)

I have always loved the lakes and landscapes of this beautiful state. Photography gives me a way to share my surroundings, capturing both the blissfully ordinary as well as the strikingly unusual.

I envisioned each of the photos in this book to evoke a sense of tranquility and peace. Some are iconic views that never grow old. Others are fresh interpretations of the wonders around us, captured with time-lapse photography or unique perspectives. All of them represent the beauty that can awaken and inspire all of us if we simply find time to seek it out.

Marc is a professional photographer who lives and works in Muskegon, Michigan. You can see more of his work at www.hoeksemaphoto.com.



Dunes of Lake Michigan



We offer special thanks to our partners of the North Ottawa Wellness Foundation for their vision and ongoing efforts to bring our community stakeholders together around these critical components of a healthy lifestyle. With their leadership and participation we are increasing the vitality and well-being of our organizations and community members alike. Learn more at www.NorthOttawaWellnessFoundation.org.

- The Chamber of Grand Haven, Spring Lake, Ferrysburg
- Grand Haven Area Community Foundation
- Grand Haven Area Public Schools
- North Ottawa Community Health System
- Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission
- Shape Corp. Fitness Factory
- Ottawa County United Way
- Tri-Cities Family YMCA





Bike path in Rycenga Park



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