

## ***Coping with College Series***

### **Feeling Stressed? Take a Breath**

**By Chris Dyszelski**

Is your stress level already beginning to rise? We know the end of the semester is stressful, but have you realized how stressful the beginning of the semester can be? Particularly for first year students, the beginning of the semester is full of transitions, adjustments and new routines. And for all students there can be many frustrations: long lines, closed classes, no parking. . . At those times it really helps to intentionally manage your stress.

How? One simple easy way to begin to reduce some of that stress is to remember to do something we all need to do -- take a breath. Not just a rushed inhale and exhale of air, or a heavy sigh before running off to the next task, but a nice, deep, slow, breath. This kind of breath is called diaphragmatic breathing and involves taking in a long slow inhale, allowing your diaphragm to expand and your lungs to fill with air and then slowly exhaling that breath, contracting your diaphragm to push the air out.

Also called "belly breathing" because of the way the abdomen expands and contracts, this type of breathing increases the amount of oxygen you take in thereby enhancing your body's functioning. This kind of breathing is central to many forms of relaxation and stress reduction exercises including yoga and tai chi. If you want to test it out, the next time you are walking up a long flight of stairs, try taking a few of these deep breaths as you go. You'll be surprised how much less tired you feel when you reach the top.

The nice thing about this "stress buster" is that it takes virtually no extra time out of your day. It merely involves making a conscious effort to be mindful of an activity you are already doing to enhance its effectiveness. It can be done without much effort, without anyone really noticing, and is great when standing in line at the dining hall or bookstore, while walking across campus, while waiting for the elevator in Watterson, or while stuck in traffic. By regularly incorporating this method of breathing throughout your day, particularly if you can take 5 to 10 deep breaths in the morning and 5-10 before bed and then 5-10 at periodic intervals during your day, you will be surprised by the impact on your feelings of stress.

You can also enhance this breathing technique by focusing your mind on your breathing instead of the zillion other things you have to think about. Some people find it useful to have a key word or phrase to help them focus their mind. Some

useful ones include thinking "In" as you inhale and "Out" as you exhale, thinking "Peace" as you inhale and "Calm" as you exhale, or continually thinking "I am (inhale) relaxed (exhale)." Visualizing can also enhance this technique. For some imagining breathing in light and energy as they inhale and exhaling their stress and tension is helpful, while others prefer to imagine a calm, peaceful setting where they can take a momentary mental vacation. Experiment and find ones that work for you. Just remember to take a breath!