HANDOUT 18: BREATHING RETRAINING

Breathing retraining is a technique for reducing your level of arousal and managing your anxiety. Most of us realize that our breathing affects the way that we feel. For example, when you are upset, you may think of taking a deep breath to calm down. Or, when you are anxious, you may breathe in quick, shallow breaths. Very often, when people become frightened or upset, they feel like they need more air, and they hyperventilate in response to that feeling. Taking a deep breath or breathing quickly often does not help. In fact, hyperventilation causes anxious feelings. Unless you are preparing for a really dangerous situation, you usually don't need as much air as you take in. When you hyperventilate and take in more air, it signals your body to prepare for danger. If you feel anxious or overaroused and want to calm down, you need to slow down your breathing and take in *less* air. **You should take a normal breath and exhale slowly.** It is *exhaling* that is associated with relaxation, not *inhaling*.

Breathing retraining can also help you to focus your attention at times when you are not anxious. Focusing on the sensation of your breath can help you control negative thoughts by being mindful of the present. It can also help you relax your body and let go of stress you may be carrying with you.

Learning to control your breathing takes daily practice. Practice your breathing as often as possible. At first, it is important to practice breathing retraining when you are relatively relaxed and are *not* feeling very anxious so that you can get familiar with the skill and how to use it. Then, as you get better at the skill, you can begin to use it in other situations when you are feeling anxious, stressed, or tense, such as when in a crowd or after a long day. The more you practice the more effective it will be. Ideally, you should practice at least once a day every day.

BREATHING INSTRUCTIONS

1. Take a normal breath in through your nose with your mouth closed.

2. Exhale slowly through your nose with your mouth closed.

3. When exhaling say the word **CALM** or **RELAX** (or some other word that you find soothing) very slowly, for example:

   "c-a-a-a-a-a-a-l-m" or "r-e-e-e-e-l-a-a-a-x"

4. Focus on the sensation of your breath entering and leaving your body.

5. Count slowly to four and then take the next inhalation.

6. Practice this exercise at least once a day, taking 10 to 15 breaths at each practice.