

Feeling Better is as Easy as ABC

*As I veered into another mini lecture during Friday Friends last week, a friend suggested I write some of this pearls down. You have Pearl to thank – Rob Olmsted*

There is a principle taught to Health Care professionals to prioritize their response during an emergency. We're taught to consider first ABC: Airway, Breathing and Circulation. Today I want to make a case for that principle as a daily priority to help maintain health and wellbeing. This idea points to the crucial and fundamental importance of delivering oxygen to every system in the body, and then removing the waste products. We can last for some weeks without food, some days without water. But without adequate oxygen, most tissues begin breaking down in minutes. So, the priority is ABC.

**A is the airway**, insuring first that there is an unobstructed pathway for oxygen rich air in, and of course carbon dioxide out. (It is the buildup of CO<sub>2</sub> in the blood which signals our body to breathe.) We all know the feeling of struggle that comes from nasal and bronchial congestion with a cold, or worse. But consider the day to day impact of constricted flow and reduced lung space from slumped posture and tension. Putting aside issue of lung disease or asthma, what can be done to maximize the flow of air in?

**B is breathing.** 12-20 breaths per minute means as much as 29,000 inhalations per day. Thankfully we're hardwired to breathe without thought. But unconscious breathing is also passive breathing. We breathe normally into just a portion of potential lung space. Yawns and sighs are the body's ways of deepening and cleansing. And over the years we all develop patterns of holding our breath in moments of stress.

**C is circulation.** Getting oxygen into the blood is only the beginning. There are a lot of nooks and crannies in the body, lots of tissue far from the organs. All need oxygen and have waste needing to be "washed away." Blood is pumped to the tissue "under pressure" by the heart, but we need to get much of the old venous blood (and the lymph fluid) back to the organs through the mechanics of body movement. Much of that distance is "uphill." One of the impacts of aging is a narrowing and stiffening of circulatory pipes.

Anything we can do to encourage the functioning of ABC will improve how our bodies feel, lift our energy and sharpen our thinking. (The brain really likes its oxygen!) You know well that as we age, little can be taken for granted, but simple practices can help. **I offer this bit of wisdom – change comes from little things done often.** Here are some little things to practice:

Sit on the edge of the chair or the bed, feet firmly on the floor. Focus on your posture. Roll your hips forward, lift your chest and tuck your chin. Are you sitting right atop your hips?

Take 3 breaths through your nose and try to relax and let your abdomen expand. This "belly breath" is what we did as babies. You may find it easier to learn lying on your back. Push a bit with your belly when you exhale to squeeze a bit more CO<sub>2</sub> out.

Roll each shoulder back 3 times. Take a deep belly breath and lift your shoulders. Exhale and let them fall.

Keep opening your airway – inhale and let your head tilt to your shoulder as you exhale. Stay and breathe 2-3 times. Inhale your head up and exhale your as you let it fall to other shoulder. Inhale up.

Continue this active breathing and explore movements that help “pump” the air and the blood, **inhale as you lift or expand, exhale as you relax or contract**. Lift or open your arms, then wrap your arms and squeeze. Raise one leg or knee, then lower it breathing in and out etc.

Moving to standing, you can hold the edge of the sink or back of the chair. Rise up on your toes and inhale, exhale and squat. Inhale standing and reach back with your toes; exhale and pull your knee up to your chest. Repeat on each side.

After a few days of practice the whole process is about 5-7 minutes. It comes out of the practice of Yoga- giving attention to alignment and to movement and then hitching them to breath (the word yoga shares the root of the word yoke.) Try it, and try it again. This magic is cumulative and as easy as ABC.