

# Connections

The Newsletter of the Connections Program

A Partnership between the Health District of Northern Larimer County and the Larimer Center for Mental Health

## Managing Stress - One Breath at a Time

By: Poling Chan, MSW, LCSW

**S**tress is in fact a primitive response which sets off a fire alarm in our body. In a stressful situation, the adrenal gland sends out a flood of cortisol, the "stress hormone", raising our blood pressure, speeding up our heart rate and breathing and quickening our metabolism. While stress mobilizes the fatty tissues for extra fuel, our pupils dilate, our diaphragm locks and large muscles start to gather with increased blood supply, ready for the classic "fight or flight" response.

This response is crucial had we encountered a wild animal. However this is not particularly helpful if we have been arguing with our spouse or trapped in traffic jam. Constant exposure to such a "high-powered chemical brew" takes a toll on our body. We become much more likely to suffer from certain physical problems such as headaches, ulcers, heart disease, chronic fatigue, obesity, chronic pain and high blood pressure. Our mental health will inevitably be compromised, leaving us in anger, anxiety and depression. It is also quite common for people who have experienced trauma to be locked up in a chronic state of stress, meaning they almost handle other life circumstances with a stress reaction.

To manage stress, we can easily fantasize being on vacation on a beautiful island, having a full body massage, or smelling nice aroma. While these are wonderful relaxation ideas, breath control has been proven to be one of the most successful techniques in stress management. What I mean here is not about holding your breath, rather it is breathing so that your body learns to contract and expand at your ease. If you have ever

watched a baby breathe, you will notice how his or her abdomen is going in and out smoothly. Indeed you are watching the works of the diaphragm muscles.

Diaphragm is a sheet-like muscle that separates your chest from your abdomen. Breathing from the diaphragm is the most efficient way of replenishing your body with the oxygen and disposing the carbon dioxide. However, when we are stressed our diaphragm is often pulled up by strenuous work of the chest muscles, shifting our body to the "fight or flight" gear, and preventing deep breathing from taking place. So it is important to reorient ourselves to deep breathing which we instinctively know as babies.



Let me walk you through regaining breath control and deep relaxing breathing:

1. Find a comfortable chair that you can sit upright, resting your soles on the floor. Begin by noticing your natural breathing patterns, stay neutral as an observer. Avoid getting into a hurry of changing your breathing.
2. When you are ready, place your right palm on your abdominal area, on top of your belly button; then bring your left palm on your chest. Gently close your eyes if that relaxes you. Breathe in through your nose, watch your abdomen rise, allowing it to expand as much as possible; breathe out through your nostrils or mouth, let your abdomen subside slowly and steadily.

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We encourage you to submit short articles (50-500 words) on therapeutic approaches, mental health topics, case studies, or therapeutic book/movie reviews, etc., & will publish them as space allows. We reserve the right to edit all submissions.

## Connections

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*Connections* is published 6 times/year. The purpose of *Connections* is to offer information on current therapy groups and services in the community; provide updates on services available through the Connections Program; and offer a place where information on community happenings of interest to mental health and human services providers can be shared.

Submissions are welcome. E-mail them to Carrie Husted at [chusted@healthdistrict.org](mailto:chusted@healthdistrict.org) by the following deadlines:

**NEXT EDITION:** March/April 2009  
**Article Deadline:** February 15, 2009

Submissions printed in *Connections* do not necessarily reflect the views of the Connections Program. Our editorial staff do not check the credentials of individuals wishing to submit groups or other listings. If you have concerns regarding credentials or other issues, please contact the group leader or author of the article directly. Thank you.

- You will notice that only your right hand moves up and your left stays rather stable. Your attention is on moving the diaphragm and letting your often active chest muscles rest.
- Continue to practice breathing in this fashion and imagine you are watching the waves rise high and low. Remember to go slowly. If you find yourselves getting uptight or distracted, just gently invite yourself back toward attending your breathing.
  - Once you get a hang of this pattern, you may deepen your breath by holding for a count of three as your inhale and exhale slowly with another count of three. Gradually increase your count to five or six to experience a longer and deeper breath, pulling up and relaxing your diaphragm one count at a time. As you become more familiar with this breathing pattern, you may rest your palms and simply let your diaphragm guide you along.

Breathing exercises have been an integral part of physical and spiritual development in the Orient. Deep breathing is often embraced in health practices such as yoga and tai chi, both of which emphasize the connection between body and mind.

Make a commitment to breathe deeply, practice this breathing exercise when you rise for your day and before you rest. When a stressful moment is impending or occurring, it is important to retrieve your deep-breathing skills to help your body to decompress. You may also rehearse an upcoming challenge by relaxing your breath. It is amazing how breath can restore your sense of balance and harmony. Once again, breathe like a baby.

To read more articles related to mental health and to learn more about Poling Chan's private practice please visit <http://polingchan.com/>.



# Best Wishes in 2009!

## Resources for the Community

### Group Supervision



This is an ongoing group providing supervision for people who need hours for licensure. Space is limited. This group meets two times per month for an hour each time.

The cost is \$35.00 per session. The location is in Old Town, Fort Collins. There are two facilitators: Rachel Isenberg, LCSW, ACSW and Maggie Tibbitts, LCSW.

If you are interested in participating in this group, please call Rachel at (970) 490-6851 or Maggie at (970) 988-4173.

### The Gifts of Grief

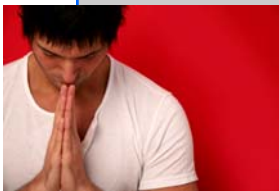
The Gifts of Grief is a compelling film that explores how a unique group of people embrace their pain, learn to live with their loss and now engage in life with more compassion, courage and awareness. Told through personal and moving stories of eight remarkable people.



**Date:** January 29, 2009  
**Time:** 7:00 p.m.  
**Location:** Pathways at Hospice of Larimer County  
305 Carpenter Road, Fort Collins

No registration required. Following the showing there will be an opportunity to participate in a discussion group. Suggested donation is \$5.00. Please contact Hospice of Larimer County at (970) 663-3500 or visit [www.hlchospice.org](http://www.hlchospice.org) for more information.

### Explore Mind, Body, Spirit



**When:** February 9, 2009  
**Workshops:** 2:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.  
**Vendor Fair:** 1:30 p.m. – 5:45 p.m.  
**Keynote Speaker:** Joan Borysenko, Ph.D.

**EXPLORE** Mind, Body, Spirit is an event designed to develop knowledge of complementary and alternative wellness practices related to the mind, body, spirit connection in the Colorado State University and Fort Collins. Visit [www.mindbodyspirit.colostate.edu](http://www.mindbodyspirit.colostate.edu).

For more information contact: Tamra Cline at (970) 491-3319 or email at [Tamar.Cline@colostate.edu](mailto:Tamar.Cline@colostate.edu).

# Weaving the Arts Creative Therapies to Address Grief and Loss A Hands-On Conference

**C**ombining creative art therapies with grief theory is a powerful way to address grief and loss. This conference offers a way to expand awareness of the effectiveness of integrating the arts and grief counseling. Whether you are a trained creative arts therapist, grief counselor or would like to better understand the intersection between grief and the expressive arts, this conference will show you ways to incorporate these approaches into your practice effectively.

Who should attend? This conference will be of special interest to grief counselors, creative arts therapists, psychotherapists, students and those involved with hospice care.



**When:** May 15, 16 and 17, 2009

**Location:** Pathways: Programs for Grief and Loss at Hospice of Larimer County

**Registration:** Fees are \$295. Early registration between January 10 and March 1, 2009 is \$250.

For more information or to register please contact Nancy Jakobsson, Pathways Services Director, by email at [nancy.jakobsson@holchospice.org](mailto:nancy.jakobsson@holchospice.org) or by phone at (970) 663-3500 - or visit [www.hlchospice.org](http://www.hlchospice.org).

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## • connections •

mental health & substance abuse resources

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