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When a Deadline Looms, Breathe!

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It was only 7:15 a.m., yet actuary Jon Anston was already having a no-good, very bad day.

"I told you not to leave your sneakers in the hall," he shouted at his eight-year-old daughter, Sara, as he limped into the kitchen.

"It looks like your razor won the battle this morning," his wife Judy smugly observed from the kitchen table, where she was reading *The New York Times* on her iPad.

"Why don't you shut up?" Jon impertinently replied, as he dabbed his neck with a Kleenex. The wad of tissue in his hand was quickly becoming bright red.

"Don't forget that we have plans to meet Hal and Hope at the Nomad Hotel tonight at seven," his wife reminded him, without missing a beat. "Hal made the reservations a month ago, since Hope's been dying to try it."

That's when Jon exploded.

"Maybe it's fine for you. But I can't leave the office

until our Medicare pricing proposal is out the door. Every year it gets more complicated. This week's been one fire-drill after another. I'm exhausted."

"Yeah, you tossed and turned so much last night that I was afraid aliens had invaded your body."

"Gimme a break. This pricing proposal is a big deal. If I were the only one involved, it would be one thing, but I'm relying on five bozos for information."

"Daddy, Daddy," Sara suddenly called out. "It sounds like your amygdalae are all shook up."

"My amygdalae are all shook up? What are you talking about? And why are we having this conversation before I've had my coffee?"

"My teacher says the best way to calm yourself down is to breathe," said Sara.

"What the heck does your teacher know about the Medicare pricing proposal I'm working on? And about how competitive the insurance business has become?"

“We have huge posters of brains in our classroom. That’s how I know that your amygdalae are small almond-shaped pieces of gray matter in your brain: they have a big effect on how you feel and act. When you feel scared, your amygdalae secrete hormones that shut down your prefrontal cortex, where all rational and creative thought takes place. That way, you can fight or flee without having to think about it. But when it happens, you can’t think straight.”

“My teacher taught us a foolproof way to calm ourselves down, so we can think clearly again. Wanna hear it?”

“Sure, smarty-pants, I’m all ears.”

“Just breathe. Take slow, deep breaths.”

“Your teacher is supposed to teach you English and math. When did he become an expert on the mind-body connection?”

“Jon, it’s part of the new program being piloted at Sara’s school,” his wife interjected. “Research has shown that children, as well as adults, function at higher levels when they can control the emotional storms raging inside them.”

“There are studies that show deep breathing actually changes the chemical balance in your brain, to help calm you down,” she continued.

“Indeed, my company has started a wellness program, focusing on mindfulness. Deep breathing is integral to it. You can’t be ruminating about the past, or feeling anxious about the future, when you’re concentrating on your breath.”

“Yeah,” said Sara. “my teacher says you can change how you think, act and feel just by deep breathing. He says to inhale to the count of four, hold your breath for a second, and then breathe out slowly through your mouth. Inhaling and exhaling three times. That’s all there is to it!”

“Daddy, Daddy, try it with me. Right now,” Sara begged.

“This is silly, Sara. Besides I’ve got to get to work. I’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Please, Daddy. Just once.”

“O.K. Just for you. Make it quick, though.”

“Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose.”

“One, two, three, four,” counted Sara, in a soft voice.

“Picture yourself being filled with fresh energy.”

“Now hold your breath for a second. It opens up the blood vessels on the sides of your neck, decreasing stress.”

“Finally, open your mouth and breathe out: One, two, three, four. Imagine yourself expelling stale air and tension.”

“O.K., Daddy, now open your eyes and see how much better you feel.”

“By God, Sara, you’re right, Sara. I *do* feel better. I don’t know why, but something tells me that things may not be as bad today as I was expecting. Maybe I’ll even be able to make it to the Nomad Hotel by seven. I don’t know what they’re teaching you at school, but I do feel remarkably better. What a lucky man I am to have a daughter like you. Gimme a kiss, sweetie. And you too, Mrs. Anston,” Jon said, with a wink at his wife.

When you own your breath, nobody can steal your peace.

~Author Unknown ●

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