



A Conversation with Debra A. Levinson & Relaxation Expert Jeffrey Migdow, M.D.

Jeff, thank you for meeting today to again address our court reporting association. On June 2nd, NYSCRA hosted a webinar where you presented techniques how to deal with test anxiety, a highly situational stressor, familiar to most court reporters. That was very well-attended and received excellent feedback.

There are specific relaxation techniques you recorded for NYSCRA to counter feeling over-stressed so that the demands of becoming credentialed, writing in realtime, or any number of stressors that affect our daily lives can be managed. With so many talented people in our profession unable to perform to potential, understanding more about the physiology of the mind/body connection would be helpful for many to understand and self-correct so the body can return to normal.

We are together now (masked and six feet apart) in your Lenox, MA office to talk more about symptoms, such as sweating and shaking hands, almost panic-like rapid breathing, in anticipation of timed dictation. For some reporters, the anxiety can become so excessive that it makes it difficult or even impossible to focus on the test.

Last month, you talked about how humans are continually in a low-level fight-or-flight response. I have my steno machine set up and ready to write your responses in *realtime*. I can feel my heart starting to beat a little faster just anticipating writing perfectly for you!

Deb, it's really nice being with you today. I thoroughly enjoyed being with your group last month and talk about fight or flight in terms of test-taking and the panic reactions we all go into because of that.

The truth is, as we all know, the experience of stress and panic and being overwhelmed go well beyond test-taking. There's so many situations during the day where we feel our heart racing or we become short of breath, get that little tightness in our stomach where we just have to stop and take a deep breath, and sometimes we're not able to. The situations can be real situations like someone going through a stoplight and almost hitting your car, or something in my mind, like fear about talking to my boss about getting a raise, or is my co-worker going to be on my

back all day about a certain project. So, the stress can come in real-life situations, relationships with people in our family or friends or a job or just fears that emerge out of our head, which can go all the way back to our childhood.

The problem is, in terms of our central nervous system, the adrenal gland and the nerves can't tell the difference between a life-threatening situation, where we definitely do need to flight or flee a difficult situation, like trying to decide if I should drive through a yellow light or not or something I just made up in my head when I'm out taking a walk. Did I leave the oven on or not? In all cases, the initial reaction is the same.

The adrenal gland releases adrenaline, which creates the following reactions, which we talked about, including the eyes opening wider, the face becoming still, the breath stopping, and often the heart rate and the blood pressure going up. The initial reactions are related to a predator response where we stop breathing so we can hear better and the predator can't hear us. The heart rate speeds up so more blood can be pumped into our muscles so if we fight, we have those muscles on reserve. Or if we flee, we can run away as quickly as possible. The difficulty is at the same time we release sugar from our liver and insulin from the pancreas, which takes the sugar into the muscles, to allow the muscles to do the extra work in the flight-or-flight response.

If in truth there isn't a strong stress, for example, I'm just worried I left the oven on or not sure if I'm going to be to a meeting on time or not, I'm just sitting in my car or walking slowly, adrenaline is released, sugar's released and insulin is released, but they really don't have any place to go because my body's not acting in a flight-or-flight type of way. Thus, my mind will immediately get more anxiety. The anxiety comes from the fact that there's excess sugar in the blood, and the nervous system is on overdrive, but my body isn't moving to use up that extra energy. So now my whole walk can be ruined by the fact that I'm wondering about the oven, and I cut it short to rush back to see if it's on or not. Or I decide to go through the yellow light, which is fine, but then the next five minutes I'm feeling short of breath and what if another car came through and hit me, which is all mental tension but fueled by the fact I went into the flight-or-flight response in the first place.

Since we have so many experiences like this every day, it tends to age ourselves more quickly because they're working harder, put stress on the lungs and the heart, and make our minds more reactive. On top of this, if you're a coffee drinker or have a lot of sugar or caffeine in your system, then you're already in a low level flight-or-flight response, and then whenever stress comes up, it puts you into an almost overwhelming type of feeling. Fortunately, there is a way out through the breath.

The breath is the only function we have in our physiology that we can truly control that's related to internal organs. Even yogis, who are well-known for controlling their heart rate or blood pressure, do it by controlling their breath. Thus, I can choose to keep my breath held when a stressful situation occurs that's not life-threatening, or, instead, realize I'm feeling really tight for not a very good reason and take a few deep breaths.

Physiologically, it is impossible to breathe slowly and deeply through the nose and feel tension at the same time. The reason is as soon as I take some slow deep breaths through the nose, it relaxes my nervous system through the slowness of the breath and relaxes the emotional centers of my brain through the limbic system when the breath flows slowly in and out through the nose.

So, a good technique which we often hear, maybe even heard from our parents or tell our children, is just stop, and take a few deep breaths. The key, though, is you have to take slow deep breaths long enough that you actually feel relaxed. If you just take a few deep breaths and feel tense the whole time, as soon as you stop, you're back in the overwhelming response. But if I can take enough slow breaths that I actually feel slowed down, that means my adrenal gland has slowed down, the excess sugar in insulin is used up, and now I'm back in a relaxation state. Of course, my mind or the situation can throw me back into feeling tense in the next moment, but then I also have the choice to take a few deep breaths again.

I'm often asked by people how can I possibly remember to stop and breathe when I'm in a stressful situation, which is a great question. The only way out of that situation is to practice breathing slowly and deeply for a few minutes every hour or two during the day so it becomes a habit that is on my mind, directly in my central nervous system.

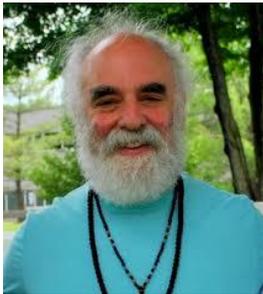
So, by practicing some gentle stretching and slow deep breathing through my nose periodically during the day, then when a stressful situation arises, I'm much more likely to remember and stop and breathe and re-center myself because I've been doing this periodically during the day when I haven't been under stress at all.

Some research studies show if we stop periodically during the day and stretch and breathe and relax, after six weeks that becomes the normal response when tension emerges. That is, if I almost get hit by a car when I'm driving but just misses me and I continue driving, my normal response will be to take some slow, deep breaths rather than hold my breath and get tighter.

As we all know, if we are feeling relaxed, more flexible, breathing more deeply, our reactions are much more positive for all concerned. When we are feeling tense and tight and holding our

breath, we tend to overreact to situations anyway. So, really, the best prescription for diminishing the stress response in all situations is to limit our stimulant intake, which would be caffeine, coffee and sugar. And periodically during the day, take a few moments to stretch, take some deep breaths, and affirm that when tension comes up, I'm going to stop and breathe before I react.

And you will find if you do this over time, there will be more and more situations where you'll be able to respond in a more centered, balanced way, rather than from stress and anxiety.



Relaxation recordings for test-taking anxiety, created by Jeffrey Migdow, M.D., for the New York State Court Reporters Association, are available for purchase through NYSCRA website.

Jeff is a holistic medicine specialist in Lenox, MA. He graduated from University of Illinois College of Medicine Chicago and combines over 30 years of expertise in yoga with his background as a holistic physician and general medicine practitioner. He is the former director of the Kripalu Yoga Teacher Training Program, and he writes about and teaches yoga, holistic health, and medicine. He is the coauthor of *Breathe In, Breathe Out: Inhale Energy and Exhale Stress by Guiding and Controlling Your Breathing*.

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