

Episode 37 | Recapturing Silence - Your Secret Weapon for Decreasing Stress Quickly!

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Using silence as a strategy to decrease stress and anxiety and increase wellbeing, that's what we're talking about in Episode 37.

Welcome to the Joyful DVM podcast. I'm your host, Veterinarian, and Certified Life Coach, Cari Wise. Whether you're dealing with the challenges in Vet Med, struggling with self-confidence, or you're just trying to figure out how to create a life and a career that you actually enjoy, you'll find encouragement, education, and empowering concepts, you can apply right away. Let's get started.

Hey, everybody. Welcome to Episode 37. Today, I want to talk about the power of silence and I'm not talking about just stepping away from the fray. I'm talking about complete and utter lack of noise and how we can benefit from a little bit more of that in our lives.

These days, the world is super busy and it's super loud. Everywhere we turn, there are opportunities to listen and to read and to watch, and having all that information right at our fingertips literally is really useful. I love my smart devices. I love the ability to look up something in a moment when I'm curious, but that constant input does have a side effect. And that is, it keeps our bodies in a heightened state of awareness far longer than it needs to in any given period of time.

Silence helps us to reverse the effects of that just a little bit. What we don't recognize is that through these constant inputs, particularly when the things that we're watching or reading or listening to are highly energized with emotion and negative emotion these days, what we don't realize is that our sympathetic nervous system is often engaged. And if we think about the sympathetic nervous system and its entire purpose of fight or flight, we also know that things like cortisol and adrenaline are also increased when that part of our physiology is in overdrive. The long-term effects of cortisol and adrenaline are not good for us, and over time, we will start to experience medical problems associated with that change. We can reverse this though. We can slow down that progression. We can change that experience for ourselves, but what it requires us to do is intentionally step back away from the inputs.

Now, historically, if you guys are anything like me, I love to kind of hang out and watch mindless television or read a good book just to try to relax. But these days, those things aren't enough. First off, trying to find mindless television has become a little bit challenging. I'm not saying that it can't be done because there are always things like Netflix and DVDs and stuff like that that I can throw in. But what happens is that it doesn't give our minds the opportunity to relax. Even if it is "mindless television", we're still engaging with it mentally. We're still watching. We're still taking in the inputs. We're still processing information, and our mind is constantly evaluating, interpreting, and analyzing what it sees. We don't get a break. If we don't slow down the inputs then our body doesn't have the opportunity to reset. And so what seems like a relaxing activity is something that may have historically actually worked okay, just doesn't have that same benefit anymore. Instead, what

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happens is that the time we spend doing these previously relaxing activities, we come to the other side of it still feeling as tired or as anxious or as frustrated as we did when we started.

It makes perfect sense when we think about the Think-Feel-Act cycle. The way that we feel emotionally - so stressed, anxious, angry, happy, sad, excited - no matter what the emotion is, the way that we feel is created by what we're thinking about. It's not created by what happens in the world. And so, as long as we are thinking thoughts, which is something the brain does automatically unless we try to divert it and have taught a new skill not to unless we're able to shut off the thoughts, then we're always going to be feeling different emotions. Now, if we're watching a feel-good movie, maybe those emotions are better than the emotions that we came into the movie with. But either way, it's still interaction, in between your thinking and your physiology, which doesn't give your body a break.

Silence, on the other hand, allows us to rest. Silence allows our minds to actually relax a little bit, but it's not just silence alone that does that. As I said, it's a bit of a skill. Silence allows us space to really connect with our own intuition and our own gut instinct. And if we can't tap into the benefits of the silence, not only this our physiology will reap a negative effect from that, but then our own intuitive processes do as well. So just shutting off the television or just turning off the music, if we have other audible and thought worthy events going on around us may not be enough. What we want to try to do here is find some absolute silence in the engaged process. Now you might be thinking, "But Cari, you just said the whole point is to try to stop thinking about things." And yes, it is. The point is to stop the sentences in our minds. If we can stop the sentences in our minds, even for a short period of time, then we stop the emotional cascade, and that gives us a sense of relief and the ability for the body to kind of reset.

How do we do that? Well, one thing that we might think would be an easy way to get away from all the external noise would be to play music. I would offer that if you play music, that includes lyrics, you're still giving your brain something to think about. So that's not going to be the best method of approach. Same thing with reading a book. "Well, it's quiet. I'm just reading." So even though you're reading, you're still thinking. You're still engaging with the material, and so you're still having an emotional response. We want to give our bodies the opportunity to really be in a very neutral place by shutting off all the inputs. A way that we can do this is through deep breathing that includes a very long exhale.

When we take deep breaths that are followed by a very long exhale, the parasympathetic nervous system is activated. As that parasympathetic nervous system is activated, the sympathetic nervous system obviously slows down and overall we start to have a lower heart rate and we start to feel better. Now for many of us, when we try this, stopping the thought loops is going to be a bit of a

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challenge. So just know that's totally normal - if you start to try to do some deep breathing and you just can't shut the thoughts off. One thing that works really well is to give yourself something very intentional to consider as you're breathing, and I like to just do the counting. If you count as you're breathing, then when your mind tries to wander off and think about what's going on at work or what's happening with your family or the person that cuts you off in traffic, you can just recognize that thought and just let that go and come right back to counting and breathing. Try to keep your focus on that, and for me, what I think works really well is to envision what the air looks like as it moves throughout my body. So as I breathe in, where's the air going? As I breathe out, where's it going from there? And as I kind of track with my mental eye where that air is going in and out, and I count at the same time, concentrating on those two things doesn't leave a lot of space for sentences to pop up. If the sentences aren't popping up, the emotions aren't popping up. And what also tends to happen is I start to feel much lighter and much more calm as a result. It's that benefit of that parasympathetic nervous system that really starts to kick in. If you can give yourself the opportunity to try this for just five minutes, you'll be surprised at what you can accomplish. But don't expect to be an expert at it the first time. It's going to take some trial and error. You're going to have to be a little strategic on where you go to do this because if you live in a household with lots of other people, or if you're trying to do it at work where people are interrupting, it can be challenging. But it can be done.

One thing that I have found that works pretty well is to use earbuds when I'm trying to have a little bit of this quiet breathing time. And when I put my earbuds in, I purposefully pick an app that's white noise; that doesn't have any lyrics; that doesn't have any like melody even with it. It's really just static white noise. There is little to think about when all it is staticky white noise. So I can put that in to block some external noise in my own house. You know, external noise, like even things like the dogs barking or hearing the livestock outside. Any of those things have the potential for me to start thinking about something other than what I'm trying to do at the moment, which simply just counts and breathe. So come up with a way that you can find that space.

This is a really great exercise to also do if you're having a bit of an anxiety attack or you're feeling anxious or worried, or really stressed out during the day. Taking a few minutes to even go sit in your car and just breathe in and out for about five minutes and count, you'll be amazed at how effective it is at helping you reset to get some clarity to let go and to go back in more focused. In our society, with how everything is on all the time, and then in our profession where we are constantly meeting the needs of pets and clients, and there's always something going on, there doesn't allow much space for mental rest. And it's the compound effect of that always going a hundred miles an hour, 24/7, that really starts to wear on us over time.

Many of us recognize that even when we're at home at night, the thoughts continue to loop. And even when we're sleeping, our dreams often include the events of the day or our sleep is restless because we have a hard time shutting off those thoughts. This can help do that. It does take some

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practice to learn how to do it, but just five minutes a day can make a massive impact on the way that you feel and your overall wellbeing. And like I said before, it gives you that opportunity also to kind of check-in and hear your own intuition.

Oftentimes as veterinarians, when we are handling medical cases, we're faced with a best guess scenario. This happens because we don't have enough diagnostic data. Perhaps the clients have declined diagnostic testing, or perhaps we have all the diagnostic testing and the answer is still not clear. We have to go with our gut instinct; with our best guess, and it's often more challenging for us to come up with that best guess when there's so much going on upstairs mentally. When our thoughts are looping about the three other cases and the people waiting and the what happened the last time and the worries of what might happen with this particular case, if all of that chatter is going in overdrive and in a constant loop when we're trying to make decisions, it's very hard for us to tap into what we actually know. Taking a couple of minutes, just to step away, to find a bit of silence, to just breathe a few times, really will make a difference. And I know that it sounds kind of ridiculous to say, "You know what? Give me a minute. I got to go breathe." You don't have to say that by any means. You can just excuse yourself to the restroom or do whatever you need to do to find the moment, but if you really feel yourself getting to that point, that you're so anxious and stressed out; that it just seems like you wanted to scream, make everybody stop moving, that's a big signal that you could just really benefit from taking a minute and everybody else could too.

Our nature, as helpers, as solvers, as service providers, is to keep going until the work is done. But what you've probably recognized is that no matter how hard you work, there's always still something left to do it. It doesn't get better for you when everything is finished. Does it? So let's try to make it a little bit easier along the way, by giving ourselves the opportunity to kind of refocus and recenter.

Now, I recognize not everybody's going to have the ability during a workday to do this, and here's my recommendation in that regard. When you have the opportunity to take a lunch or to take a break, you need to take it. I don't care how many medical records you have left to write. I don't care how many callbacks you have left to do. You have got to take care of yourself first. We are notorious for running ourselves into the ground. And these days, with the increased demand for veterinary services that there is, and the way in which we're seeing it which really has a stretch thin, this is more true than ever. We have got to take care of ourselves first because it is absolutely true that if you don't take care of yourself, that you're not going to be able to take care of anybody effectively.

This means, take your lunch, take your break, and if they're not offered to you, then you ask for them. You need that moment even if you just grab a sack lunch and you sit in your car for 15 minutes. Take five of those minutes of total silence. Use earbuds if you need to block out the external noise from around the building. Whatever you've got to do, get five minutes of silence where you can just breathe and count, really focus on having long, deep exhales. That's going to settle down your

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nervous system. It's going to help you reset. And it's going to help you go back in with more clarity, with more positivity, and with more motivation to finish strong and get out of there on time so you can move on with the rest of your day.

So here's the bottom line. A lot of us have these coping mechanisms in place to handle the stress that we deal with day in and day out. We have the things in our lives, kind of our habits, of how we decompress at the end of the day. And like I said before, for some of us it's television. For others, it's social media. For some of us, it's listening to music or reading a book. And all of those things are great ways to decompress. But they are not going to be as effective as five minutes of silence because those things do not give your brain the opportunity to tap into an area without thought. If you give yourself the chance to just try it, and I know it sounds a little crazy, but here's the deal. You don't have anything to lose. Whatever coping mechanism that you're using right now probably isn't working all that great, especially if you're finding yourself staying at work late, being stressed out, and looping about work when you're not there, dreading going back the next day. Whatever coping mechanisms that you're using right now just to get through the day and get through the next day is probably having a net negative impact on your quality of life and your own health.

So just consider trying this one little thing. Start with five minutes, and what you're going to find is that the way that you feel on the other side of five minutes, is going to be drastically better. As time allows, start to stretch that out a little bit - go to 10 minutes, go to 15 minutes. I know that it sounds like that would be a very long time just to breathe and to count, and I want to promise that once you get started and you realize the benefit of it, that time actually goes very, very quickly. The benefit of it becomes something that you can actually look forward to because it is so effective.

For me personally, what I have found is starting in the morning - the very first thing - with about 10 to 15 minutes of this can set the rest of the day in a positive outlook. I can start out more centered, more focused, and in a more calm demeanor. I don't know about you, but I wake up completely anxious sometimes. That's just my nature, but this helps me kind of get recentered and focus on the things that I actually want to achieve during that day. Does that mean that I'm never going to have a moment of time during the day where I feel anxious or I start to feel stressed out? Absolutely not. But now as I start to notice the extent to which those emotions are starting to drive what I'm doing, it's a signal for me to just take a minute. And in that case, I can take three, four, five of these deep breaths with these long exhales and really regroup in a pretty quick period of time and get back to what I was doing. The ability to do this has been life-changing. It just takes breathing and a little bit of silence, both of which are readily available to you.

I know this is not a typical recommendation from the Joyful DVM podcast, and I'd love it if you'd send us a note through the website to let us know how it's worked for you. It's [Joyfuldvm.com/contact](https://www.joyfuldvm.com/contact). We always love to hear from you. I'd love to know what you think about this breathing exercise, and I

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really want to hear your success stories about how this has helped take the edge off of your day in day out activities and helped you to find a little bit more calm and peace and joy as you move forward.

Alright, my friends, that's going to wrap it up for this time and I'll see you next week. Thank you for listening to the Joyful DVM Podcast. If you'd like to learn more about the concepts and ideas discussed here, and how to apply them to your own life to create confidence and empowerment for yourself, you'll love Vet Life Academy. To check it out and learn more, visit joyfuldvm.com/vetlifeacademy. And if you're loving this podcast, I'd appreciate it if you'd share it with your friends and leave us a review on iTunes.

We can change what's possible in Vet Med together.