Reducing Internal Stress

There are many positive actions you can take to reduce internal stress. One of the most effective and easiest methods for reducing internal stress is to focus on your breathing. By simply putting your attention on your breathing, without even doing anything to change it, you move in the direction of relaxation. There are many worse places to have your attention—on your thoughts, for one, since thoughts are the source of much of our anxiety, guilt, and unhappiness. Get in the habit of shifting your awareness to your breath whenever you find yourself dwelling on upsetting thoughts.

One of the single most effective relaxation techniques is conscious regulation of breath. The following breathing exercise is simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment, and can be done anywhere.

Although you can do the exercise in any position, to learn it, do it with your back straight. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling though your mouth around your tongue, try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.

First exhale completely though your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
Next close your mouth and inhale quietly though your nose to a mental count of four.
Next hold your breath for a count of seven.
Then exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.
This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Note that you always inhale quietly though your nose and exhale audibly though your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at a time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it eight breaths. If you feel lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you. Use it whenever anything upsetting happens, before you react. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension. Use it to help you fall asleep. Everyone can benefit from this exercise.