

Feeling a Fresh Breath of Air

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Local Interest

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"Better Breathers" Support Group Helps in Coping with Respiratory Disorders

By Jim Akans



Respiratory Therapist Leslie Miller leads a recent Better Breathers group session at the Tendercare facility in Gaylord. Photo by Jim Akans

On the first and third Wednesdays of every month, a steadily growing group of people gather at the Tendercare Facility in Gaylord to learn how to breathe...better. They are participants in the Better Breathers support group, an ongoing hour-long class led by Leslie Miller, a Respiratory Therapist who began the program at Cheboygan Memorial Hospital nearly twelve years ago. Miller has recently introduced Better Breathers in the Gaylord area to help people with pulmonary or respiratory disease increase their stamina level as they move through their daily lives.

"It can be very frightening when the diminished ability to breathe freely takes control of someone's life," explains Miller. "It results in a loss of life quality, where even simple tasks such as walking to the mailbox can't be done because of shortness of breath. For someone who breathes normally, I tell them the experience is like taking a great big breath, and then trying to breathe on top of that breath. It produces a feeling that can easily lead to fear and panic."

I recently attended one of the Better Breathers sessions at Tendercare, sharing the learning experience with a warm, welcoming group of people, each experiencing differing levels of COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease), a disorder that reduces the lungs ability to capture and transfer air into the bloodstream, typically resulting from chronic bronchitis, emphysema, pulmonary fibrosis, or a combination of these afflictions.

Cliff Hiler, a former volunteer fireman who attended the Better Breathers class with his wife, Alice, on the afternoon of my visit, was struck by double pneumonia early this year. After recovering he found that his lung capacity was reduced to approximately fifty percent. Another attendee; Judy Johnston, has been afflicted with asthma all of her life and now has less than twenty percent lung function. The same is true for classmate Joyce Goodwill, diagnosed with COPD about five years ago.

What each of these Better Breather program participants have in common is a significant reduction in their capacity to perform life's simple tasks without running short of breath. Improving their breathing ability, and quality of life, is Leslie Millers goal.

She states, "Together, we learn proper mechanics that will help optimizing their breathing and that will actually augment their medical management. We also explore the disease that has caused this difficulty, as well as the appropriate medications and instruction about how to use them properly. We discuss how to deal with environmental

triggers such as weather, dust and mold and we also learn exercise routines that help build up muscle strength which will ultimately makes breathing more effective."

I found the one-hour session to be incredibly informative, informal and relaxing. I learned about breathing from the diaphragm; the area just above the stomach which should extend out as a breath is drawn in. Another common problem is "air stacking," which occurs when air is not fully exhaled from the lungs prior to taking the next breath, creating a cycle that leads to rapid, shallow breathing that does a terrible job feeding oxygen to the bloodstream...causing the heart to work harder.

The exercises were not strenuous at all. Performed while sitting in a chair, the routine was a gentle series of arm, leg, and "pursed lip" breathing work outs designed to revitalize, not to strain. The results speak for themselves; Judy Johnston, who was wheelchair bound when she joined the group six sessions ago, now walks to class and is even rumored to be mowing the lawn!

"It is so rewarding to see people improving after attending the program," notes Leslie Miller, but she cautions, "Unfortunately, COPD is now the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, and the numbers are rising. And it's not just smokers who contract COPD. There are environmental risk factors, often in the workplace, that people are exposed to, and some people can be genetically predisposed for increased risk."

She adds, "Early detection is critical. There are simple, non-invasive breathing tests using a device called a "Spirometer" that can be performed in just a few minutes in a doctor's office which can detect the onset of COPD."

For those with respiratory difficulties, as well as the spouse, friend or caretaker of someone afflicted with COPD, the Better Breathers program is like finding a fresh breath of air. For information about attending a Better Breathers session, call 989-732-3508 or stop by the Gaylord Tendercare facility at 2 pm on the first or third Wednesday of the month. Spend an hour with the Better Breather group...I'm glad I did...