

Managing Stress More Effectively

The Relaxation Response

Herbert Benson in his 1975 book "*The Relaxation Response*" brought to national attention a relatively simple meditative procedure that was heralded as being not only easy to use but also potentially effective as an adjunct in the treatment of stress-related diseases such as hypertension. Benson cited a great deal of evidence to show that eliciting the Relaxation Response for short periods of time on a regular basis can greatly help one in coping with the stresses of everyday life. His technique is a meditative one and shares many characteristics in common with the more popular forms of meditation such as Transcendental Meditation, Zen Buddhism, and Yoga. The four basic components for eliciting the Relaxation Response are: a quiet environment, a mental device (known as a mantra" in most forms of meditation), a passive attitude, and a comfortable position.

Benson addresses several important issues in his writings. First, he clearly points out that individuals with medical problems should only practice his procedure under the supervision of a physician. Second, he notes that his technique is not the only way to elicit the Relaxation Response - prayer and traditional forms of meditation, for example, also bring about this state. And, third, the Relaxation Response is quite different from physiological reactions during sleep. For example, during meditation slow brain waves (alpha waves) increase in intensity and frequency—this does not typically occur during sleep. In other words, sleep is not a substitute for meditation.

The case for the use of the Relaxation Response by healthy but stressed or harassed individuals is straightforward. It can act as a built-in method of counteracting the stresses of everyday living. Here we will review the components necessary to evoke the Relaxation Response and present a specific technique that we developed at Harvard's Thorndike Memorial Laboratory and Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. We emphasize that, for those who may suffer from any disease state, the potential therapeutic use of the Relaxation Response should be practiced only under the care and supervision of a physician.

How to Bring Forth the Relaxation Response

The Relaxation Response comes from Eastern and Western religious and lay practices. From these age-old historical techniques we have extracted four basic components necessary to bring forth the response:

A Quiet Environment

Ideally, you should choose a quiet, calm environment with as few distractions as possible. A quiet room is suitable, as is a place of worship. The quiet environment contributes to the effectiveness of the repeated word or phrase by making it easier to eliminate distracting thoughts.

A Mental Device

To shift the mind from logical, externally oriented thought, there should be a constant stimulus: a sound, word, or phrase repeated silently or aloud; or fixed gazing at an object. Since one of the major difficulties in the elicitation of the Relaxation Response is "mind wandering," the repetition of the word or phrase is a way to help break the train of distracting thoughts. Your eyes are usually closed if you are using a repeated sound or word; of course, your eyes are open if you are gazing. Attention to the normal rhythm of breathing is also useful and enhances the repetition of the sound or the word.

A Passive Attitude

When distracting thoughts occur, they are to be disregarded and attention redirected to the repetition or gazing; you should not worry about how well you are performing the technique because this may well prevent the Relaxation Response from occurring. Adopt a "let it happen" attitude. The passive attitude is perhaps the most important element in eliciting the Relaxation Response. Distracting thoughts will occur. Do not worry about them. When these thoughts do present themselves and you become aware of them, simply return to the repetition of the mental device. These other thoughts do not mean you are performing the technique incorrectly. They are to be expected.

A Comfortable Position

A comfortable posture is important so that there is no undue muscular tension. Some methods call for a sitting position. A few practitioners use the cross-legged "lotus" position of the Yogi. If you are lying down, there is a tendency to fall asleep. As we have discovered, the various postures of kneeling, swaying, or sitting in a cross-legged position are believed to have evolved to prevent falling asleep. You should be comfortable and relaxed.

It is important to remember that there is not a single method that is unique in eliciting the Relaxation Response. For example, Transcendental Meditation is one of the many techniques that incorporate these components. However, we believe it is not necessary to use the specific method and specific secret, personal sound taught by Transcendental Meditation. Tests at Harvard have shown that a similar technique used with any sound or phrase or prayer or mantra brings forth the same physiologic changes noted during Transcendental Meditation. In other words, using the basic necessary components, any one of the age-old or the newly derived techniques produces the same physiologic results regardless of the mental device used. The following set of instructions, used to elicit the Relaxation Response, was developed by our group at Harvard and was found to produce the same physiologic changes we had observed during the practice of Transcendental Meditation. This technique is now being used to lower blood pressure in certain patients. We claim no innovation but simply a scientific validation of age-old wisdom.

Our current technique for eliciting the Relaxation Response asks you to do the following:

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position
2. Close your eyes.
3. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed.
4. Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word, "ONE," silently to yourself. For example, breathe IN ... OUT, "ONE"; IN...OUT, "ONE"; etc. Breathe easily and naturally and continue doing this for 10 to 20 minutes.

You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes. Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace. When distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by not dwelling upon them and return to repeating "ONE." With practice, the response should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

The subjective feelings that accompany the elicitation of the Relaxation Response vary among individuals. The majority of people feel a sense of calm and very relaxed. A small percentage of people immediately experience ecstatic feelings. Other descriptions that have been related to us involve feelings of pleasure, refreshment, and well-being. Still others have noted relatively little change on a subjective level. Regardless of the subjective feelings described by our subjects, we have found that the physiologic changes such as decreased oxygen consumption are taking place.

There is no educational requirement or aptitude necessary to experience the Relaxation Response. Just as each of us experiences anger, contentment, and excitement, each has the capacity to experience the Relaxation Response. It is an innate response within us. Again, there are many ways in which people bring forth the Relaxation Response, and your own individual considerations may be applied to the four components involved. You may wish to use the technique we have presented but with a different mental device. You may use a syllable or phrase that may be easily repeated and sounds natural to you.

Another technique you may wish to use is a prayer from your religious tradition. Choose a prayer that incorporates the four elements necessary to bring forth the Relaxation Response. We believe every religion has such prayers. Obviously, there are many other aspects to religious beliefs and practices which have little to do with the Relaxation Response. However, there is little reason not to make use of an appropriate prayer within the framework of your own beliefs if you are most comfortable with it.

Your individual considerations of a particular technique may place different emphasis upon the components necessary to elicit the Relaxation Response and also may incorporate various

practices into the use of the technique. For example, for some a quiet environment with little distraction is crucial. However, others prefer to practice the Relaxation Response in subways or trains. Some people choose always to practice the Relaxation Response in the same place and at a regular time.

Since the daily use of the Relaxation Response necessitates a slight change in life-style, some find it difficult at first to keep track of the regularity with which they evoke the Response. In our investigations of the Relaxation Response, some prefer to use a calendar. Each time they practice the Relaxation Response, they use a checkmark to record the activity.

It may be said that many people have told us that they use our technique for evoking the Relaxation Response while lying in bed to help them fall asleep. Some have even given up sleeping pills as a result. It should be noted, however, that when you fall asleep using the technique, you are not experiencing the Relaxation Response, you are asleep. As we have indicated, the Relaxation Response is very different from sleep.

Personal Experiences with the Relaxation Response

Several illustrations of how people include the practice of the Relaxation Response in their daily lives should answer the question that you may now be posing: "*How do I find the time?*"

One businessman evokes the Relaxation Response late in the morning for ten or fifteen minutes in his office. He tells his secretary that he's "in conference" and that he will not take any calls. Traveling quite a bit, he often uses the Relaxation Response while on an airplane. A housewife practices the Relaxation Response after her husband and children have left for the day. In the late afternoon, before her husband comes home, she again evokes the response, telling her children not to disturb her for twenty minutes. Another woman, a researcher, usually awakens ten or twenty minutes earlier in the morning in order to elicit the Relaxation Response before breakfast. If she wakes up too late, she tries to take a "relaxation break" rather than a coffee break at work. She finds a quiet spot and a comfortable chair while her co-workers are out getting coffee. On the subway, a factory worker practices the Relaxation Response while commuting to and from work. He claims he has not yet missed his stop. A student uses the Relaxation Response between classes. Arriving fifteen minutes early, he uses the empty classroom and says he is not bothered by other students entering the room. If the classroom is in use, he simply practices the response sitting in the corridor.

The regular use of the Relaxation Response has helped these people to be more effective in their day-to-day living. The businessman feels he is "clearing the cobwebs" that have accumulated during the morning. He also states he often gets new perspectives on perplexing business problems. The housewife, before regularly eliciting the Relaxation Response, found it very difficult to face the prospects of preparing dinner and getting the family organized for another day. She now feels more energetic and enjoys her family more. The researcher no longer requires two cups of coffee in the morning to get started at work, and the factory worker notes he "unwinds" going home. The student says he is more attentive and hardly ever falls asleep during

lectures. He even attributes better grades to his regular elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

The examples of when people practice the Relaxation Response are numerous. You must consider not only what times are practical but also when you feel the use of the Relaxation Response is most effective. We believe that regular use of the Relaxation Response will help you deal more effectively with the distressing aspects of modern life by lessening the effects of too much sympathetic nervous system activation. By this increased control of your bodily reactions, you should become more able to successfully cope with stressful events, uncertainties and frustrations both at work and at home.

The following two descriptions of people who have regularly used the Relaxation Response for specific problems show how they feel the Relaxation Response has been of help to them. A young man, who suffered from anxiety, reports that he often felt fearful, nervous and shaky, tense and worried. After practicing the Relaxation Response for two months, he rarely suffered from attacks of anxiety. He felt considerably more calm and relaxed. Usually, he practiced the technique regularly twice a day, but he would also practice it when he began to feel anxious. By applying the technique in such a manner he found he could alleviate these oncoming feelings. In short, he felt that the practice of Relaxation Response had significantly improved his life.

Our second illustration is from a woman with moderate hypertension (elevated blood pressure). She has a strong family history of high blood pressure, and the regular practice of the Relaxation Response has lowered her blood pressure. She has been practicing the technique using the word "ONE" for over fourteen months. Her own words best convey what the response has meant for her.

"The Relaxation Response has contributed to many changes in my life. Not only has it made me more relaxed physically and mentally, but also it has contributed to changes in my personality and way of life. I seem to have become calmer, more open and receptive to ideas which have been unknown to me or are very different from my own. I like the way I am becoming; more patient, overcoming some specific fears concerning my physical health and stamina. I feel stronger physically and mentally. I take better care of myself. I am more committed to my daily exercise and see it as an integral part of my life. I really enjoy it, too! I drink less alcohol, take less medicine. The positive feedback which I experience as a result of the Relaxation Response and the lowered blood pressure readings make me feel I am attempting to transcend a family history replete with hypertensive heart disease."

"I feel happier, content, and generally well when I use the Relaxation Response. There is a noticeable difference in my attitude and energy during those occasional days in which I have had to miss the Relaxation Response. Intellectually and spiritually, good things happen to me during the Relaxation Response. Sometimes I get insights into situations or problems which have been with me for a long time and about which I am not consciously thinking. Creative ideas come to me either during or as a direct result of the Relaxation Response. I look forward to practicing the Relaxation Response twice a day for ten to twenty minutes periods."

Modern society has forced us to evoke the fight-or-flight response repeatedly in response to various stresses, threats or provocations. But we are not using it as we believe our ancestors used it. That is, we do not always run, nor do we fight when it is elicited. However, our body is being prepared for running or for fighting, and since this preparation is not always utilized, we believe anxieties, hypertension and its related diseases ensue. The Relaxation Response offers a natural balance to counteract the undesirable manifestations of the fight-or-flight response.

It has been our experience that people who regularly evoke the Relaxation Response claim they are more effective in dealing with stressful situations that probably bring forth the fight-or-flight response. We believe you will be able to cope better with difficult situations by regularly allowing your body to achieve a more balanced state through the physiologic effects of the Relaxation Response. You can expect this balanced state to last as long as you regularly bring forth the response. Within several days after stopping its regular use, we believe, you will cease to benefit from its effects, regardless of the technique employed, be it prayer, Transcendental Meditation or the method we have described above.