

Do it just for the sake of doing it

Excerpt from 'The Relaxation Response'

Timeless Healing: the power and biology of belief

This is a good skill to learn, eliciting the relaxation response for the sake of doing it, not because you have been conditioned to believe that you must meet some goal or report some results. It's no different from what we already instinctively know—that taking a walk after a stressful day is good for us. In general, we don't have to dissect or assign specific values to this 'stuff of life.' Quite ironically, when we do, we undermine not only our enjoyment and experience of life but also the specific and measurable benefits that science is now telling us can be culled from such activities.

One other misconception can stand in the way of enjoying the benefits of the relaxation response. Many people have heard and been conditioned to expect that meditation and prayer bring 'altered consciousness,' or that they can result in 'peak' spiritual or mystical enlightenment. So if the relaxation response isn't mind-blowing in proportion, we think it isn't working or that it's not doing anything. Again, I encourage my patients not to expect fireworks, just to perform the steps without a great deal of reflection or anticipation.

Visualizations are very powerful mind exercises, as I explained in the section on top-down generated thoughts...Visualizations send signals to the brain that arise not from the body itself, not from the environment, but from your imagination or memories. Similarly, many people enjoy using affirmations after eliciting the relaxation response, when the mind is open and ready for new concepts. Psychologically, this is the perfect time to introduce positive messages, to restructure your thoughts, and to rid your mind of the destructive thinking that can engage the nocebo effect.

Once people make the elicitation part of their daily routine, I also encourage them to use 'minis.' Minis are bite-size versions of the relaxation response, the simple act of breathing deeply, releasing physical tension, and saying your chosen focus word, sound, prayer, or phrase to yourself on your out-breaths when you feel stress getting the best of you in the midst of your day.

Cumulative Effects

At the Mind/Body Medical Institute, we recommend that the elicitation of the relaxation response be combined with other self-care techniques such as nutrition, exercise and stress management. This complete program is described in a book my colleague Eileen M Stewart RN, C, MS, others members of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, and I have compiled entitled *The Wellness Book*.

Most people feel some effects of these lifestyle changes immediately, but the larger, more dramatic effects of the relaxation response are cumulative.

In the tug-of-war I alluded to earlier, the mind/body needs time to even the teams, countering the fight-or-flight with the relaxation response over an extended period in which an individual elicits the response daily.

When I met him in 1986, Jimmy Burke had already endured two years of one long anxiety attack. At first, maybe two or three times a year, he experienced the classic symptoms of an anxiety attack—dizziness, headaches, tightness in his chest, breathing difficulties, sometimes even hyperventilating—for about five minutes. But one morning, he woke up and felt an intense fright. It gripped him very hard and did not go away after a few minutes, a few hours, a few days and even months later. A plumber, Mr Burke barely got through his work every day, and felt like he was ‘living on the edge’. He took tranquilizers, he went to therapy, he saw several specialists in Boston but couldn’t get any relief. Eventually he began drinking very heavily, leaning on alcohol to calm him in whatever way it could.

‘I was searching for anything’, Mr Burke remembers. ‘I was desperate. Someone at work asked him if he’s tried meditation and gave him my name. When Mr Burke came to see me, I laid out the progress he could expect to see as a result of the elicitation, based on the experiences other patients had had.

He recalls, ‘Dr Benson told me that within six months, we’d try to cut back to one -third of the medications I had been taking, and that after a year, I’d be medication-free. I wanted to believe him so badly. He was the only doctor who seemed sure that he could help me.’

Mr Burke took part in a program at the Mind/Body Medical Institute in which he was introduced to about twenty other people, all of them experiencing different medical problems. He remembers that in addition to the relaxation response, he learned about self-esteem and positive thinking. In the beginning, he came to see me once a week.

Within a few months of his first visit, the anxiety attack Mr Burke had endured for two years began to subside. He says that sometimes, after a hard day, he’ll take time out for a mini and he’ll feel so energized that it’s as if he’s napped for three hours. Today, nearly ten years later, he has to laugh when people tell him how ‘laid-back’ he seems. And Mr Burke says he is ‘95 percent cured,’ remembering that I told him it could take ten years to counter and reverse the incredible influence stress had had on his body.

‘To think that I sat in front of a therapist for months and months!’ he exclaims. “We never found out what brought it on. It’s the same as when you get an ulcer. Nobody knows what exactly brings this on. It’s just things in your life... I was in Dr Benson’s waiting room one time and another tradesman was there with the same symptoms I had had. He told me that he just couldn’t find the time for the focusing exercise, and I said, ‘You haven’t got the time not to do it!’”

Life Changes

Many of my patients report a lifestyle change, a calm that extends long after the elicitation is finished. My colleague John Hoffman, PhD and I found that after exposure to the relaxation response, the body requires more of the hormone nor-adrenaline to increase heart rate and blood pressure—a blocking effect previously only partly achieved with the use of several categories of drugs, the so-called alpha- and beta-blockers. Moreover, these drugs cause side effects and do not produce the other positive changes brought on by the relaxation response. The relaxation response nullifies, to a certain extent, the action of nor-adrenaline, so that the body does not react as radically to mildly stressful events but retains the ability to respond immediately to major threats. In this way, people with hypertension can experience long-term relief with the relaxation response.

For all patients, the relaxation response is not only a short-term boon but also a long-term balm. My colleagues and I at the Mind/Body Medical Institute have amassed evidence of the tremendous diversity of medical conditions that the elicitation, together with other self-care strategies such as nutrition, exercise, and stress management, can heal or cure (principle investigators are listed after each study; Dr Richard Friedman, research director of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, made major contributions to most of these research projects):

- Patients with hypertension experienced significant decreases in blood pressure and needed fewer or no medications over a three-year measurement period (*Eileen M Stewart, RN, C, MS*).
- Patients with chronic pain experienced less severity of pain, more activity, less anxiety, less depression, less anger, and they visited the managed care facility where they received care 36 percent less often in the two years after completing the program than they did prior to treatment (*Margaret A Caudill, MD, PhD*).
- Seventy-five percent of patients with sleep-onset insomnia (meaning that they couldn't fall asleep easily) were cured and became normal sleepers. Sleeping also improved for the other 25 percent, and most patients took significantly fewer sleep medications (*Gregg D Jacobs, PhD*).
- Thirty-six percent of women with unexplained infertility became pregnant within six months of completing the program (*Alice D Domar, PhD*).
- Patients with complaints described by the admitting personnel as psychosomatic and who were frequent users of a health maintenance organisation reduced their number of visits by 50 percent (*Caroline J C Hellman, PhD*).

- Women suffering from symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) experienced a 57 percent decrease in severity. The more severe the PMS, the more effective the relief with the relaxation response (*Irene L Goodale, PhD*).
- Patients with cancer and AIDS experienced decreased symptoms and better control of nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy (*Ann Webster, PhD*).
- Patients with cardiac arrhythmias experienced fewer of them (*Herbert Benson, MD*).
- Patients who suffered from anxiety or mild or moderate depression were less anxious, depressed, angry, and hostile (*Herbert Benson, MD*).
- Patients undergoing painful x-ray procedures experienced less anxiety and pain and needed one-third the amount of pain and anxiety medications usually required (*Carol L Mandle, RN, PhD*).
- Patients who had open-heart surgery had fewer post-operative arrhythmias and less anxiety following surgery (*Jane Lesserman, PhD*).
- Migraine and cluster headache sufferers found they had fewer and less severe headaches (*Herbert Benson, MD*).
- High school sophomores increased their self-esteem (*Herbert Benson, MD*).
- Working people experienced reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety and hostility (*Patricia Carrington, PhD*).
- Working people had fewer medical symptoms, fewer illness days, improved performance and lower blood pressure (*Ruane K Peters, SD*).

To the extent that any condition is caused or worsened by stress, the relaxation response or relaxation-response-based programs practiced at the...Hospital can be effective at curing or improving the condition. This is extremely important since 60 to 90 percent of all doctor office visits in this country are stress-related and fall within the realm of maladies that mind/body medicine can alleviate. These conditions are poorly treated by two of the legs in the three-legged stool, namely medications and surgical procedures.

Source: Herbert Benson, MD, *Timeless Healing: the power and biology of belief* (1996, chapter six, pp 143–148)