

Dr. Herbert Benson's Relaxation Response

Learn to counteract the physiological effects of stress

Posted Mar 29, 2013, Psychology Today

Marilyn Mitchell M.D.

The term, 'Relaxation Response' was coined by Dr. Herbert Benson, professor, author, cardiologist, and founder of Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute. The response is defined as your personal ability to encourage your body to release chemicals and brain signals that make your muscles and organs slow down and increase blood flow to the brain. In his book *The Relaxation Response*, Dr. Benson describes the scientific benefits of relaxation, explaining that regular practice of the Relaxation Response can be an effective treatment for a wide range of stress-related disorders.

Benson can be largely credited for demystifying meditation and helping to bring it into the mainstream, by renaming meditation the "Relaxation Response". His studies in the 1960's and 1970's were able to show that meditation promotes better health, especially in individuals with hypertension. People who meditate regularly enjoy lower stress levels, increased wellbeing and even were able to reduce their blood pressure levels and resting heart rate.

The Relaxation Response is essentially the opposite reaction to the "fight or flight" response. According to Dr. Benson, using the Relaxation Response is beneficial as it counteracts the physiological effects of stress and the fight or flight response.

The fight or flight stress response occurs naturally when we perceive that we are under excessive pressure, and it is designed to protect us from bodily harm. Our sympathetic nervous system becomes immediately engaged in creating a number of physiological changes, including increased metabolism, blood pressure, heart and breathing rate, dilation of pupils, constriction of our blood vessels, all that work to enable us to fight or flee from a stressful or dangerous situation.

It is common for individuals experiencing the fight or flight response to describe uncomfortable physiological changes like muscle tension, headache, upset stomach, racing heartbeat, and shallow breathing. The fight or flight response can become harmful when

elicited frequently. When high levels of stress hormones are secreted often, they can contribute to a number of stress-related medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, GI diseases, adrenal fatigue, and more.

The Relaxation Response is a helpful way to turn off fight or flight response and bring the body back to pre-stress levels. Dr. Benson describes the Relaxation Response as a physical state of deep relaxation which engages the other part of our nervous system—the parasympathetic nervous system. Research has shown that regular use of the Relaxation Response can help any health problem that is caused or exacerbated by chronic stress such as fibromyalgia, gastrointestinal ailments, insomnia, hypertension, anxiety disorders, and others.

There are many methods to elicit the Relaxation Response including visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, energy healing, acupuncture, massage, breathing techniques, prayer, meditation, tai chi, qi gong, and yoga. True relaxation can also be achieved by removing yourself from everyday thought and by choosing a word, sound, phrase, prayer, or by focusing on your breathing.

According to Dr. Benson, one of the most valuable things we can do in life is to learn deep relaxation- making an effort to spend some time every day quieting our minds in order to create inner peace and better health. This is also true with healing. During the energy healing process, the patient is able to relax, quiet their mind and experience calming effects while the healer does his or her work. Energy healing patients have experienced profound results not unlike the results seen in Dr. Benson's studies.

Learning the Relaxation Response is a great skill that can help us to be better equipped to deal with life's unexpected stressors, heal ourselves, and achieve better health.

The best time to practice the Relaxation Response is first thing in the morning for ten to twenty minutes. Practicing just once or twice daily can be enough to counteract the stress response and bring about deep relaxation and inner peace.

Following is the Relaxation Response technique taken directly from Dr. Herbert Benson's book The Relaxation Response.

Steps to Elicit the Relaxation Response

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. [Relax your tongue—and thoughts will cease.]
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, and then out, and say "one"*, in and out, and repeat "one."* Breathe easily and naturally.
5. Continue 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.
6. 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."*
7. 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.

*Choose any soothing, mellifluous sounding word, preferably with no meaning or association, in order to avoid stimulation of unnecessary thoughts.