

The Relaxation Response

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The Relaxation Response is a natural innate protective mechanism which allows us to turn off harmful effects from stress through changes that decrease heart rate, lower metabolism, decrease rate of breathing, and in this way bring the body back into a healthier balance. There are four basic elements necessary to evoke the Relaxation Response.

- a. a quiet environment,
- b. an object to dwell upon,
- c. a passive attitude – “let it happen,” and
- d. a comfortable position.

In order to trigger the Relaxation Response, follow the steps below:

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Deeply relax all your muscles
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.
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, merely 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 process seems to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

In a comparison study, Dr. Benson found that the physiologic changes elicited by six different techniques (Transcendental Meditation, Zen and Yoga, Autogenic Training, Progressive Relaxation, Hypnosis with suggested deep relaxation, and Sentic Cycles) approximate these changes elicited by the Relaxation Response. The physiologic measurements consisted of oxygen consumption, respiratory rate, heart rate, alpha waves, blood pressure and muscle tension.

Key Religious Equivalents to the Relaxation Response

1. St. Augustine, Martin Luther, Fray Francisco de Oscuna, St. Theresa, Father Nicolas, and other early Christian ascetics and mystics practices “contemplation” and “recollection” in order to shut off the mind from external thoughts and to produce a passive attitude and mental solitude.
2. Contemplation or meditative exercises are found in early Judaic literature. Merkabolism, the earliest form of mysticism in Judaism, involved repetition of a magic emblem. A 13th century Rabbi, Abulafia, used the letters of God’s name as an object upon which to meditate. He also incorporated yogic breathing and body posture techniques.