

How to Elicit the Relaxation Response

The steps to evoking the relaxation response are not necessarily difficult or unusual. To enjoy the relaxation response, both its short-term calming effects and its long-term contribution to health, choose a technique that conforms to your own beliefs. The relaxation response can be evoked by any large number of techniques, including meditation, certain types of prayer, autogenic training, progressive muscular relaxation, jogging, swimming, Lamaze breathing exercises, yoga, tai chi chuan, chi gong, and even knitting and crocheting.

Only two basic steps need to be followed. You need to repeat a word, sound, prayer, phrase, or muscular activity. And when common, everyday thoughts intrude on your focus, passively disregard them, and return to your repetition (see Table 3).

The choice of a focused repetition is up to the individual. You can choose any focus, but to enhance the benefits of the relaxation response with the effects of remembered wellness and to ensure that you will adhere to the routine of eliciting it, the focus should be appropriate. If you are a religious person, you can choose a prayer; if you are a nonreligious person, choose a secular focus. The relaxation response and remembered wellness are a very potent pair, the combined force of which we will discuss in the next chapter. Regardless of the technique or focus you select; the relaxation response will be evoked if you use the two steps—the repetition of a focus and the passive disregard of interfering thoughts with a return to the focus.

TABLE 3
THE TWO STEPS
TO ELICITING THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

1. Repeat a word, sound prayer, phrase, or muscular activity.
2. Passively disregard everyday thoughts that come to mind and return to your repetition.

<p>TABLE 4</p> <p>SECULAR FOCUS WORDS</p> <p>One Ocean Love Peace Calm Relax</p>					
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There is no “Benson technique” for eliciting the relaxation response. In fact, my colleagues and I offer people a smorgasbord of techniques and focuses. Sometimes patients tell me they like having an instructor decide on a focus or assign one to them. Evidently, for these people, it lends more credence or meaning to the focus for them if a doctor, nurse, clergyperson, or another leader helps them choose it. Again, this is a product of remembered wellness: The trust you place in a caregiver adds power to the process. The point is any focus will work, and if you like the sound of one that is given to you, try it.

Here are some very common focus words, phrases, and prayers that may help you get started (see Tables 4 and 5).

While adherence to the two steps-repetition and passive disregard for

<p>TABLE 5</p> <p>RELIGIOUS FOCUS WORDS OR PRAYERS</p>	
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Christian (Protestant or Catholic)

“Our Father who are in heaven”

“The Lord is my shepherd”

Catholic

“Hail, Mary, full of grace”

“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”

Jewish

“Sh’ma Yisroel”

“Shalom”

“Echod”

“The Lord is my shepherd”

Islamic

“Insha’allah”

Hindu

“Om”

intrusive thought-readily evokes the relaxation response no matter how and where they are performed, the following is the generic technique I teach to patients and which I have used myself for many years:

Step 1. Pick a focus word or short phrase that is firmly rooted in your belief system.

Step 2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.

Step 3. Close your eyes.

Step 4. Relax your muscles.

Step 5. Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, repeat your focus word, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.

Step 6. Assume a positive attitude. Do not worry about how well you are doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, "Oh, well," and gently return to the repetition.

Step 7. Continue for ten to twenty minutes.

Step 8. Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.

Step 9. Practice this technique once or twice daily.

In this generic technique, I suggest that you sit quietly in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and relax your muscles. However, you can also do it with your eyes open; you can kneel, you can stand and sway, or you can adopt the lotus position so many people associate with meditation.

You can also jog and elicit the relaxation response, paying attention to the cadence of your feet on the pavement-"left, right, left, right"-and when other thoughts come into your head say, "oh, well," and return to "left, right, left, right." Of course, you much keep your eyes open! We have found that by using this approach, the runner will achieve in the first's mile the "runner's high" that usually occurs in the third or fourth mile.

Several years ago, I was addressing a luncheon of armed service chaplains in Texas and met an army general, the highest-ranking clergyman in the United States. This catholic priest told me that he had always tried to be efficient by saying his prayers and exercising at the same time. When he jogged, he had always repeated to himself the Jesus prayer-"Lord Jesus, have mercy on me." But unbeknownst to him until that meeting, he had achieved even more efficiency-exercising, praying, and eliciting the relaxation response all at once!