

MMC FACT SHEET 909

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

Controlling the autonomic nervous system

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The autonomic or automatic nervous system that controls the internal organs, heart and blood flow was once thought not to be able to be influenced by conscious mind control. However observations of Eastern mystics and the participants of yoga, relaxation and meditation techniques demonstrate that the mind can indeed, with training, slow the heart rate, lower blood pressure, normalize the immune defense system and so influence internal organ function.

A number of years ago Harvard cardiology Professor Herbert Benson¹ studied Nepalese monks, as well as American medical students, engaged in meditation. His studies established that when the mind was distracted by consciously repeating either a **single word** or a **word phrase** for 15-20 minutes, twice daily, for more than four weeks, there was a profound effect. The result was a lower heart rate and blood pressure, as well as muscle relaxation, and Benson called this effect "**the relaxation response.**" Benson also showed that when the **word phrase** represented our inner belief system and deep religious convictions, it had a more profound effect. Performing the **relaxation response may have a beneficial effect** if you suffer from insomnia, anxiety, stress, phobias, depression, blood pressure, palpitations, asthma, migraines, irritable bowel disease and any condition where negative thoughts and emotions may be adversely affecting the body's function.

If you are interested in exploring stress reduction techniques, progressive relaxation, self hypnosis and guided meditation visit the Auckland Medical School University CALM (Computer-assisted Learning for the Mind) website <http://www.calm.auckland.ac.nz> which has a range of useful practical resources.

Simple instructions for beginning the RELAXATION RESPONSE:

- 1. Choose a quiet place.**
- 2. Sit in a comfortable position.**
Maintain a straight back, with hands loosely lying on your lap and feet placed flat on the floor. If you are able to sit cross- legged, use a small cushion to sit on.
- 3. Close your eyes and relax your muscles.**
Reduce external distractions
- 4. Breathe slowly and naturally.**
Diaphragmatic breathing involves pushing your tummy (abdomen, below waist) out as you slowly inhale. This is more effective than chest breathing, which expands the ribs and raises the shoulders. Many mystics breathe in through the nose.
- 5. Choose a focus 'word' or 'phrase' and repeat it each time you exhale.**
- 6. Maintain a passive attitude.**
It doesn't matter how well you do. Don't worry about the thoughts that enter your mind, ignore or file them and return to your focus 'word' or phrase'.
- 7. Practice for 10-20 minutes once (or even better, twice) daily.**
Regular practice will diminish tension and anxiety. Once you become familiar with the 'relaxation response' try experimenting with 'controlled breathing' and use your 'focus word' in stressful situations.



SUGGESTED FOCUS 'WORDS' OR 'PHRASES'

GENERAL	One Let go Relax Peace	EASTERN	Sh'ma Yisroel (Hear O Israel) Om (the universal sound) Shantih (Peace)
CHRISTIAN	Come Lord Jesus Father Lord Jesus, have mercy on me The Lord is my shepherd	ISLAMIC	Allah
ARAMAIC	Maranatha (come Lord) Abba (Father)		
JEWISH	Shalom (peace) Echod (One) Hashem (The Name)		

¹ 'The Relaxation Response' & 'Beyond the Relaxation Response' by Dr Herbert Benson.