

Building Resilience: One Step at a Time

The Relaxation Response

What is the Relaxation Response?

- The term “Relaxation Response” was created by Harvard Cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson in 1975.
- The response refers to a physical state of deep relaxation because of our body's ability to release chemicals that increase blood flow to the brain.
- While the “fight or flight” response is the activation of our sympathetic nervous system, the Relaxation Response engages the parasympathetic system, which tells the body to rest and digest.
- Dr. Benson’s research shows that engaging one’s body regularly in a relaxation response can help with both mental and physical health problems that are caused by chronic stress.
- Engaging the Relaxation Response at any time can be beneficial, but practicing it in the morning has shown to produce the most favorable outcomes.

Try out these steps to elicit the Relaxation Response

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position—both feet on the floor.
2. Close your eyes as you feel comfortable.
3. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at the top of your head and move downward.
4. Breathe through your nose easily and naturally. Become aware of your breathing. Add a single word or sound to your breath.
5. Continue for just a couple of minutes and build up your time as you continue to practice your relaxation response. When you finish, sit quietly for several 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.
7. When distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by not dwelling upon them.
8. With practice, the response should come with little effort.

Similar concepts to try

Although these strategies have different names, they are based on the physiological effects explained in Dr. Benson’s work.

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