

## RELAXATION TECHNIQUE

The basic technique of concentrative meditation used to achieve significant levels of relaxation is essentially very simple. Four components are basic to all techniques of concentrative meditation: a quiet environment, a mental device, a passive attitude, and a comfortable position. Following is a summary of relaxation technique incorporating these four basic elements:

1. A quiet environment: Choose a quiet, calm environment with as few distractions as possible. Sound, even background noise, may prevent the elicitation of the relaxation response. Select a convenient, suitable place, for example, a comfortable chair in a quiet room.
2. A mental device: Many approaches to meditation employ the constant stimulus of a single-syllable sound or word. The word is repeated silently or in a low, gentle tone. The purpose of this repetition is to free oneself from logical, externally oriented thought by focusing solely on the stimulus word itself. Many different words and sounds have been used in traditional practices. Because of its simplicity and neutrality, the use of the syllable “one” is suggested. Other traditional mantras are “om” and “mu”.
3. A passive attitude: The purpose of the response is to help one rest and to relax. This requires a completely passive orientation and attitude. It is imperative not to scrutinize one’s performance, attempt to force the response, or to use the time devoted to meditation for worrying, fretting, or concentrated practice in obsessionism, since these effectively prevent the relaxation response from occurring. When distracting thoughts enter the mind, simply disregard them and return to gently, effortlessly thinking or repeating the mantra you have selected.
4. A comfortable position: the mediator should sit in a comfortable chair in as restful a position as possible. The purpose is to reduce muscular effort to a minimum. The head may be supported; the arms should be supported or balanced as well. Shoes may be removed and the feet propped up several inches. Loosen all tight-fitting clothing.

## **ELICITING THE RELAXATION RESPONSE:**

1. In a quiet environment, sit in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Devote the first few minutes to emotional decompression. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Allow them to remain deeply relaxed.
4. Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, think or say the mantra silently to yourself. Thus: breathe in...breathe out with “one.” In...out, with “one.” Try to make the “one” as long as the exhaled breath.
5. Continue this practice for 10-20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm and be certain you will not be suddenly distracted or startled (as, for example, by a ringing telephone). When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes open.

Remember not to 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, ignore them and continue to repeat the mantra as you breathe. The technique should be practiced once or twice daily, and not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the expected changes. With practice the relaxation response should come with little effort. Research investigations suggest that only a small percentage of people do not experience the desired relaxation response and concomitant relief from stress and reversal of some physiologic changes associated with chronic stress. The majority of people report feelings of relaxation and freedom from anxiety during the elicitation of the relaxation response and during the rest of the day as well. These feelings are akin to those noted after physical exercise but without the attendant physical fatigue.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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Benson, Herbert. Beyond the Relaxation Response. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1984.

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