

Publication:

The Relaxation Response By Herbert Benson, M.D.

Throughout this book we have tried to show you that the Relaxation Response is a natural gift that anyone can turn on and use. By bridging the traditional gaps between psychology, physiology, medicine, and history, we have established that the Relaxation Response is an innate mechanism within us.

The Relaxation Response is a universal human capacity, and even though it has been evoked in the religious of both East and West for most of recorded history, you don't have to engage in any rites or esoteric practices to bring it forth. The experience of the Relaxation Response has faded from our everyday life with the waning of religious practices and beliefs, but we can easily reclaim its benefits. The people of the United States enjoy a standard of living and affluence beyond the experience of the majority of the world's people. But as individuals within the cornucopia, we are plagued by unhappiness.

We seem never to be satisfied with what we have accomplished or what we possess. Perhaps it is ingrained in our present Western society that success and progress, no matter the price, are the names of the game. Go out, get as much as you can for yourself, don't be content with your present lot. The idealized work ethic reinforces the notion that monetary success or upward progression can be attained by a wide spectrum of our population. But even those who achieve these goals of monetary success and continued advancement are often not satisfied. They frequently find their lives thwarted by frustrating circumstances requiring behavioural adjustment. For those who do not advance in the careers or gain monetary security, behavioural adjustment is also necessary.

Dissatisfaction, boredom, and unemployment should be looked upon as situations that require adjustment. In most instances we cannot limit the situations that require behavioural adjustment. Because in our society we want more and we want it faster, this attitude does not leave time for realisation or for appraising problems. When problems do develop, we look for a quick and easy solution. Our answer, aided by excessive advertising, is often to take a pill. You have only to turn on the television set and look at the advertising to see how we are trained to deal with problems. If you have tensions, pains, or insomnia, simply consume a tablet or capsule and your problems will disappear. How can we thus deal with our anxieties and

feelings of stress? Perhaps what we should do is modify our behaviour by regularly evoking the Relaxation Response. If you view the Relaxation Response as a mechanism that effectively counters some of the harmful psychological and physiologic effects of our society, then the regular practice of the Relaxation Response may have an important place in your life. If you would regularly elicit this response, build it into your daily existence, the situations that activate your sympathetic nervous system could be counteracted by a process allowing your body to decrease its sympathetic nervous system activity. You would simply be using one innate body mechanism to counteract the effects of another.

Our Western society is oriented only in the direction of eliciting the fight-or-flight response. Unlike the fight-or-flight response, which is repeatedly brought forth as a response to our difficult everyday situations and is elicited without conscious effort, the Relaxation Response can be evoked only if time is set aside and a conscious effort is made. Our society has given very little attention to the importance of relaxation. Perhaps our work ethic views a person who takes time off as unproductive and lazy. At the same time, our society has eliminated many of the traditional methods of evoking the Relaxation Response. Prayer and meditation, as practiced by the ancients, have become part of our historical memory.

We need the Relaxation Response even more today because our world is changing at an ever-increasing pace. Society should sanction the time for the Relaxation Response. It is unreasonable to incorporate this inborn capacity into our daily lives by having a "Relaxation Response break" instead of a coffee break? You can choose any method of eliciting the response which best fits your own inclinations: as secular, a religious, or an Eastern technique. We would all greatly benefit by the reincorporation of the Relaxation Response into our daily lives. At the present time, most of us are simply not making use of this remarkable innate, neglected asset.