

The Relaxation Response

Developed by Dr Herbert Benson of Harvard University in the 1970's

The Relaxation Response is a physical state of deep rest that changes a person's physical and emotional responses to stress. It refers to your personal ability to encourage your body to release chemicals and brain signals that make your muscles and organs slow down and increase blood flow to the brain.

Through research scientists have found that Relaxation Response practices are able to:

- Lower heart rates, blood pressure and oxygen consumption
- Alleviate the symptoms associated with a vast array of conditions, including hypertension, gastrointestinal, arthritis, insomnia, depression, anxiety



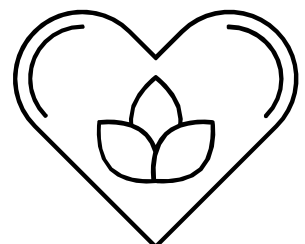
The Relaxation Response is not the same as mindfulness practice. The Relaxation Response instructs individuals to deliberately relax each body area as they become aware of it. Mindfulness emphasises awareness and acceptance, through noticing what is happening in the present moment, without judgement or action.



The Relaxation Response is the opposite reaction to the “fight or flight” response. The fight or flight response has evolved as a survival mechanism, it occurs naturally when we perceive that we are under excessive pressure, and it is designed to protect us from bodily harm. When we encounter a life-threatening situation, a surge of stress hormones prepares us to fight or to flee. As a result our sympathetic nervous system becomes immediately engaged, leading to our hearts pounding, our muscles becoming tense, and we are suddenly on high alert.

Unfortunately, we tend to activate the fight-or-flight response multiple times during a typical day, usually because of situations that are annoying and stressful, but not life threatening. The fight or flight response can become harmful when elicited frequently, this is because when high levels of stress hormones are secreted often, they can contribute to a number of stress-related medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal diseases, adrenal fatigue, and more. The Relaxation Response may help people to counteract the toxic effects of chronic stress by slowing breathing rate, relaxing muscles, and reducing blood pressure.

The Relaxation Response is a helpful way to turn off fight or flight response and bring the body back to pre-stress levels. The Relaxation Response is a physical state of deep relaxation which engages the other part of our nervous system—the parasympathetic nervous system. Research has shown that regular use of the Relaxation Response can help any health problem that is caused, or exacerbated by, chronic stress such as fibromyalgia, gastrointestinal ailments, insomnia, hypertension, anxiety disorders, and others.

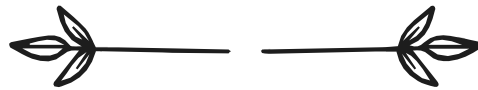


The best time to practice the Relaxation Response is first thing in the morning for ten to twenty minutes. Practicing just once or twice daily can be enough to counteract the stress response and bring about deep relaxation and inner peace.

True relaxation can also be achieved by removing yourself from everyday thought and by choosing a word, sound, phrase, prayer, or by focusing on your breathing.

There are many methods to elicit the Relaxation Response including:

Visualisation
Progressive muscle relaxation
Massage
Breathing techniques
Meditation
Tai chi and yoga



Steps designed to slowly relax the body & mind

- 1) Sit quietly in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
- 2) Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed. (*Relax your tongue—and thoughts will cease*).
- 3) Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word "one"* silently to yourself. For example, breathe in, and then out, and say "one"*, in and out, and repeat "one."* Breathe easily and naturally.
- 4) Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes.
- 5) 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. When distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by not dwelling upon them and return to repeating "one."*
- 6) With practice, the response should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

**Choose any soothing, mellifluous sounding word, preferably with no meaning or association, in order to avoid stimulation of unnecessary thoughts*

