

Relaxation: Surprising Benefits Detected

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Excerpts:

What Kind of Relaxation Works?

Herbert Benson, Director of Behavioral Medicine at Harvard Medical says, "Watching TV is not enough to produce the physiological changes we are talking about. You need to use a relaxation technique that will break the train of everyday thought and decrease the activity of the sympathetic nervous system."

What are the Proven Benefits?

Relieve stress and mental tension

If practiced regularly can strengthen the immune system

Asthmatics – widening of restricted respiratory passages

In some diabetics, relaxation can reduce the need for insulin

In many patients with chronic, unbearable pain, relaxation brings relief

May help ward off disease by making people less susceptible to viruses

Lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels

New studies are showing that along with the "relaxation response" that lowers blood pressure, slows the heart and breath, come shifts in hormone levels that seem to produce beneficial effects on the immune system.

Studies on Immune Effects:

Relaxation training in medical students during exams found to increase levels of helper cells that defend against infectious disease, according to a report in the Journal of Behavioral Medicine. The degree of effectiveness depends on repetition and consistency.

Those medical students who used the techniques just a few times had little or no change, while those who did faithfully had strongest immune effects.

Janice Relaxatio Kiecolt-Glaser and Ronald Glaser of Ohio State University College of Medicine at Columbus taught relaxation techniques to residents of a retirement home, whose average age was 74 years. After a month of training, their levels of resistance (killer cells and antibody titers – indicators of resistance to tumors and viruses) had improved significantly, according to a report in Health Psychology.

Studies on Cardiovascular Issues:

A report in British Medical Journal reported that patients who had been trained to relax significantly lowered their blood pressure and had maintained that reduction four years later.

Harvard Medical School. Dr Benson found that simple meditation techniques reduce the body's sensitivity to norepinephrine – a hormone released in response to stress. Although the endocrine system continued to emit the hormones, they did not seem to have their usual effects.

Relaxation seems to mimic the action of beta-blocking drugs that are used to control blood pressure. "Ordinarily norepinephrine stimulates the cardiovascular system. But relaxation training resulted in less blood pressure increase to norepinephrine than usually seen", says Dr. Benson.

Dean Ornish, Director of Preventative Medicine Research Institute in San Francisco has shown that relaxation training improves blood flow in the heart. Silent ischemia, which chokes off that blood flow, can damage the heart without causing noticeable pain. He also found that relaxation lowered cholesterol levels and lessened the severity of angina attacks.

In 1984, a National Institutes of Health report recommended the use of relaxation, along with the restriction of salt and weight loss as the first therapy for mild hypertension.

Diabetes

Richard Surwit, a psychologist at Duke University Medical Center, found that relaxation improved the body's ability to regulate glucose in patients with the most common type of diabetes, which has its onset in adulthood. It is the body's inability to control glucose, or blood sugar, that ultimately leads to damage done by the disease.

Asthma

Paul Lehrer of Rutgers Medical School in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research reports that , relaxation seems to offer relief to many asthmatics by diminishing both the emotional upsets that can trigger attacks and the constriction of air passages that chokes breathing. The effects are more pronounced for those who suffer from chronic asthma.

Pain

Dr. Kabat-Zinn in the Journal of Behavioral Medicine reported a sharp decrease in pain and related symptoms in patients trained in relaxation at the UMASS Medical Center in Worcester. The patients in the study, who included the full range of those typically seen in pain clinics (backache, migraines, cancer, etc.), were able to lessen, or, in some cases, stop altogether their use of pain drugs. Four years after the training ended, the majority of patients were still using the relaxation practice to decrease pain and be less reliant on drugs, Dr. Kabat-Zinn said.

What Techniques are Most Effective?

Dr. Kabat-Zinn says that they are just beginning to sort out which techniques work best with which medical problems, but most seem to be interchangeable.

Tension/Relaxation and Images:

Harvard Research found that students who were identified as being easily engrossed in thoughts and images were trained in tension and relaxation of muscles and then asked to visualize certain specific images. Relaxation alone increased defenses against upper respiratory infections. The added imagery, however, enhanced the effect. The research was done by Mary Jasnosi, a psychologist, who reported the findings at a meeting of the Society of Behavioral Medicine in San Francisco.

What Dr. Kabat-Zinn used in his relaxation research:

Mindfulness:

Paying careful attention to sensation in the body – sweeping slowly from head to foot. Not trying to change sensations, but note them precisely with neutral awareness.

Gentle Yoga Movements and Stretches:

done with same careful attentiveness as above

Dr. Lehrer uses progressive Tension and Relaxation of the major muscles of the body to help patients learn the subtle signals of tension in the body and systematically release that tension.

Dr. Benson has found that for many of his patients, the relaxation response can be evoked by sitting quietly for 15 minutes, two times a day, with the eyes closed and mentally repeating a simple word or sound. "Eighty percent of patients chose a simple prayer to repeat."

Experts caution that intensive training, followed by regular use of the techniques may be required before medical benefits appear. Most training programs last several weeks. Dr. Lehrer feels that relaxation may be better when taught in person.

Not everyone is helped by relaxation training, says Joan Borysenko, who directs the relaxation program for outpatients at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. "Some people don't change much, some do a little, some do a lot. And there are a few whose lives turn around totally."

Hypnosis and Relaxation:

Dr. Lehrer says that the benefits of relaxation seem to come from the physiology of relaxation, rather than from mere suggestion. In a recent study, he found that asthmatic patients – who were highly open to suggestions and hypnosis actually benefited the least from his relaxation training.