

activities, the body responds with a dramatic decrease in heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure (if elevated to begin with), and metabolic rate—the exact opposite effects of the fight-or-flight response.

### *Essential Components*

Just as the fight-or-flight response could be triggered by any number of stressful scenarios in modern life, my fellow investigators and I hypothesized that the Relaxation Response might also be elicited in a number of different ways, not just by the method espoused by Transcendental Meditation. From the T.M. technique, we extracted four essential components that would elicit the Relaxation Response:

1. A quiet environment
2. A mental device—a sound, word, phrase, or prayer repeated silently or aloud, or a fixed gaze at an object
3. A passive attitude—not worrying about how well one is performing the technique and simply putting aside distracting thoughts to return to one's focus
4. A comfortable position

Later we discovered that only the middle two components—the mental device and the passive attitude—were required. A person could be jogging on a noisy street and still elicit the Relaxation Response. The jogger needed only to maintain a mental focus and be able to return to her focus when distracting thoughts interfered. Since ancient times, diverse religious believers have said or sung repetitive prayers—practices that also elicit the Relaxation Response. Obviously, people who are nonreligious and those who do not identify with a particular religion can just as easily and routinely reap the physical rewards. In fact, the Relaxation Response could be evoked with any number of techniques—Yoga or *qigong*, walking or swimming, even knitting or rowing. The person evoking it could sit or stand, sing or remain silent.

As my colleagues and I studied the Relaxation Response, we learned that stress—and the secretions of adrenaline and noradrenaline stress produced—contributed to or caused many more medical problems than Western medicine appreciated. The Relaxation Response proved effective in treating not just hypertension but also headaches, cardiac rhythm irregularities, premenstrual syndrome, anxiety, and mild and moderate depression.

We started teaching patients to elicit the Relaxation Response in ways that were meaningful to them. In addition to the simple repetition of the word *one* suggested in this book, Catholics could recite “Hail Mary full of grace,” Jewish people might say “Sh'ma Yisrael,” and



Protestants might find "Our Father who art in Heaven" calming. "Isha'allah" might be repeated by Muslims, and "Om" by members of the Hindu religion. Secular or non-religious people were encouraged to focus on words, phrases, or sounds that were compelling to them, such as the words *love*, *peace*, or *calm*. We learned that phrases learned in childhood could be particularly powerful, evoking the calm and security felt, for example, when in the presence of loving parents and family. In this way, we observed that all types of people were able to incorporate their own belief systems and values into evoking the Relaxation Response.

### *How to Elicit the Relaxation Response*

In my most recent book, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (Scribner, 1996), Marg Stark and I provide updated instructions for eliciting the Relaxation Response. After twenty-some years of refining my understanding of our remarkable physiologic capability, we found that the two essential steps to eliciting the Relaxation Response are:

1. Repetition of a word, sound, phrase, prayer, or muscular activity.

2. Passively disregarding everyday thoughts that inevitably come to mind and returning to your repetition.

This is the generic technique I have taught patients and that I have used myself for many years:

1. Pick a focus word, short phrase, or prayer that is firmly rooted in your belief system.
2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Relax your muscles, progressing from your feet to your calves, thighs, abdomen, shoulders, head, and neck.
5. Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, say your focus word, sound, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.
6. Assume a passive attitude. Don't worry about how well you're doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, "Oh well," and gently return to your repetition.
7. Continue for ten to twenty minutes.
8. Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return.



Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.

9. Practice the technique once or twice daily. Good times to do so are before breakfast and before dinner.

You can also elicit the Relaxation Response while exercising. If you are jogging or walking, pay attention to the cadence of your feet on the ground—"left, right, left, right"—and when other thoughts come into your mind, say "Oh, well," and return to "left, right, left, right." Of course, keep your eyes open! Similarly, swimmers can pay attention to the tempo of their strokes, cyclists to the whirl of the wheels, dancers to the beat of the music, others to the rhythm of their breathing.

### *A Best-Seller*

The basic message of *The Relaxation Response* took little time to ignite. Within a few weeks, the book jumped to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. It remained on the list for months. A book about something as simple and sensible as the use of quiet, focusing techniques to calm the body went on to sell almost four million copies, to be translated into thirteen languages, and to become the self-care book most often recommended

by health professionals. The book is now in its thirty-eighth printing.

Why was the book's message so revolutionary? After all, prior to the twentieth century, doctors had few scientifically proven remedies to offer patients and were forced to rely almost exclusively on the power of the mind to heal the body. That began to change when Western medicine acquired new knowledge about the human body, starting with the recognition of bacteria in the mid-1800s. Then came the discovery of insulin and penicillin in the 1920s and 1930s, the Salk vaccine in the 1950s, and an explosion of new findings in the 1960s that led to the high-tech medicine of the 1990s. When *The Relaxation Response* was published, self-care was the farthest thing from the minds of Western physicians and patients. We were still trying to get beyond the period in which patients had little but their own resources on which to rely, when the healing of serious wounds and diseases had to be left "in God's hands." Bacteria and viruses were suddenly better understood; we were enamored, and understandably so, with all the new tools medicine had to offer us—medications, surgeries, X-ray procedures, and other innovations that identified and solved problems extraordinarily well.

Mind/body medicine appeared to be unnecessary in an age when drugs could vanquish such illnesses as pneumonia and tuberculosis and when anesthesia made surgery acceptable. In 1975, medicine had almost completely dismissed the advantages of the third leg, that of self-care,