

# The Relaxation Response

Here are two sample RR elicitation exercises. At first, most people find it helpful to practice these exercises in a quiet place, with minimal distractions. You can however use these exercises any time or any place to help cope with stress. You may spend as little or as much time on these exercises as you like. For optimal benefit, however, try to build up to practicing an RR exercise 10-20 minutes a day.

## Exercise 1) Breath Awareness

You may wish to practice breath awareness while seated in a chair. If you find this type of breathing is confusing, it may be helpful to lie on your back.

*Invite the inhalation to fill the belly and the ribs and, as you exhale, release the breath completely. Do this a few times. It may feel awkward, at first, to put so much attention on your breathing. Suddenly a lifelong, normal process may feel new and foreign. "I'm not doing it right!" or "I'm not sure I know how to breathe" are common responses at the beginning. With patience and practice, you will come to experience the many positive benefits that come with deep breathing.*

*Close your eyes and bring your awareness to your breath. Are your breaths long or short? Are your in-breaths and out-breaths balanced, or is one longer than the other? (Naturally, an out-breath is often twice as long as an in-breath.) What parts of your chest and stomach are moving?*

*Take a deep breath and then exhale slowly and completely. Place a hand on your belly and notice whether you can feel your belly expand on the in-breath, and relax on the out-breath.*

*Next, simply notice each breath as it happens. As you inhale, notice that you are inhaling. As you exhale, notice that you are exhaling. Continue to focus on your breathing. If your focus shifts, gently bring it back to your breathing. Notice the breath entering and exiting the body at the tip of your nose. Notice the breath move through the airway, from the nose to the mouth to the throat as you inhale, and from the throat to the mouth to the nose as you exhale. Notice the quality of your breath. Does it feel jagged, or smooth? Does it feel rushed, or slow? Does it feel shallow, or deep? Notice the sound of your breath. Can you hear it? What does it sound like? Notice the length of*

*each inhalation and exhalation. Are they even? Is the breath slowing down or speeding up? Notice the belly and ribs moving with the breath. Notice the chest and upper back moving with the breath. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and allow your focus to come back to your surroundings.*

## Exercise 2) Imagery

*To begin, close your eyes and make your body comfortable. You are about to enter a beautiful meadow. Allow this to occur during your favorite season and during your favorite time of day. To bring yourself into the richness of this experience, tune into all your senses. As you walk through this meadow, allow yourself to see that which you find beautiful, comforting, nurturing. What are the unique sounds of this space? Maybe you hear children laughing in the distance. Perhaps there are birds singing. Whatever sounds are pleasing to you. You may even sprinkle some tastes along the way, some berries and sweet honey. There may be a little pond that you rest by. You may feel the warmth or coolness of the water, or a gentle breeze. This is your experience, for your benefit. Bring into this anything that pleases you.*

*Now, very gently allow your awareness to move from this meadow, taking a path into a lightly wooded forest. As you continue along your path use all of our senses to notice the woods around you. The smell of the earth or fall leaves, the rustling of the wind in the trees. Whatever you find most relaxing. You may choose to pause as some point, sitting on a fallen tree or rock. Just letting yourself be fully immersed in the experience.*

*When you're done with this, begin your journey back along your path, spending a few moments paying attention to your surroundings. Feeling confident, feeling loved, as you walk along your path out of this wooded area, back into your meadow. Notice your senses. Feel the richness of this experience. When you feel ready, very gently bring your awareness back into your current surroundings. You might want to imagine your environment before you open your eyes to ease this transition.*

# The Relaxation Response

## Fight-or-Flight Response

**The Fight-or-Flight Response** is a set of physical changes in the body that take place when we experience stress. Your body redirects resources by shutting down digestion and redirecting blood flow to your major muscle groups so that you can fight or flee a threat.

Some of the changes you might notice are rapid breathing, rapid heart rate, sweaty palms, dry mouth, and shakiness. This response can be triggered by real or imagined danger including external threats and internal threats like negative thoughts and emotions.

For individuals who have experienced traumatic events, the brain can find it difficult to separate dangerous or threatening situations from non-threatening situations. As a result, a chronic stress response may occur. As you might imagine, being in a chronic stress response can be harmful to your physical and emotional health.

The good news is that your body has a built in system, known as the Relaxation Response, which can be used to buffer against the harmful effects of chronic stress on your body.

## Relaxation Response

**The Relaxation Response (RR)** is a physiologic state brought about from repetitive or sustained mental focus and an attitude of receptivity. It is experienced as a state of profound rest. Daily elicitation of the RR for as little as eight weeks has been shown to alter brain structures that are critical to regulating stress.

Eliciting the Relaxation Response:

- Reduces and prevents muscle tension
- Reduces breathing rate
- Leads to decreased heart rate
- Helps reduce blood pressure
- Prevents cell toxicity
- Stimulates cell growth
- Improves digestion
- Improves sleep

## How to Elicit the Relaxation Response (RR)

The RR can be elicited using a variety of different methods including the following:

- **Breathe Awareness:** This is a form of single-point meditation which involves using your breathing as a focus for your attention. When practicing this exercise the individual seeks to pay attention to their breath, noticing the bodily sensations associated with breathing without trying to change or alter their breathing. In alternate versions of this exercise, one may choose to focus on a phrase as they breathe in and out (e.g., thinking *I am* on the in-breathe and *relaxed* on the out-breath).
- **Imagery:** This involves being guided or self-directed through calming or helpful mental images. It involves following along with a description of a peaceful place, a calming scene, healing process, an idealized experience of oneself, or other images.
- **Mindful Awareness:** Involves focusing on being fully present in activities of daily living, putting our complete attention to what we are doing at particular moments in time. Our self-awareness is increased through experiences of thoughts, sensations and memories that spontaneously come to mind.
- **Body Scanning:** This approach involves bringing non-judgmental attention to different parts of the body in sequence. When you do a body scan, you start at your toes and then move up your body, a part at a time, slowly making your way up to your head. Noticing each part as you go. A body scan is not intended to elicit changes in any part of the body, but simply to notice the sensations in parts of the body at a given moment. This grounding approach shifts attention from stress and worry.
- **Repetitive Prayer:** This method involves continued focus on a word or phrase that is sacred or holy and has positive meaning to the individual.
- **Yoga and Stretching:** In this method, one aligns breath awareness with body awareness through specific movements and postures. Yoga builds body awareness, relaxation, flexibility, and strength.