



Relaxation

While many factors contribute to our being able to learn effectively, one that is often overlooked is the impact of stress. We all experience stressful situations every day, ranging from serious impediments to relatively minor inconveniences. The effects of these stressors accumulate over time and combine to create a negative impact on our mental and physical well-being. We often deal with stress in counterproductive ways or in ways that provide only short-term relief. However, by practicing a simple meditation technique you can relieve and eventually negate the negative effects of unavoidable stress that can impact health and productivity.

Thirty years ago, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University began a study of the physiological effects of Transcendental Meditation. He found a connection between lowered blood pressure and the practice of TM, and called this connection the “relaxation response.” Benson eventually adapted the techniques of TM practitioners and made his findings available to the general public through his book, *The Relaxation Response*.

Eliciting the relaxation response is done through a simple two-step process: 1) mentally focusing on a word or phrase; 2) maintaining a passive attitude toward distracting thoughts. The physiological effects of this technique include decreased metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration. Cognitive benefits include improvements in concentration and memory.

To experience the relaxation response, begin by selecting a focus word (ex: one, cloud, ocean). Ideally, you should use the same word consistently, so choose one you like. Sit quietly in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and relax. Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, silently repeat your focus word as you exhale. Maintain a passive attitude—if you become aware of intrusive thoughts, simply resume your repetition. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. When finished, continue sitting quietly for a minute or so before opening your eyes and resuming your activities. Practice this technique once or twice daily—before breakfast and dinner is ideal.

Try to set aside this little bit of time for *yourself* every day. Overall, you should experience a sense of calm and control, and before long you will begin to appreciate the positive benefits to your mental, physical, and emotional health.