

Relaxation, A Key To Health, Happiness, and Healing

by John J. Bowman, Ph.D.
Sport Psychologist

Relaxation is now considered a skill. That's right, many health providers are now prescribing relaxation exercises to help people learn to relax. But is this really necessary? The answer may lie in this truism, "Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you are probably right." To put it another way, people who believe that they can relax are finding relaxation to be a natural consequence for some type of activity. While others who believe they can't relax, probably are not able to experience relaxation without specific training.

Whatever category you may find yourself falling into, it may be helpful to consider some of the findings that are now available in looking at the phenomenon relaxing.

1. RELAXATION IS A NATURAL PART OF OUR BIOLOGICAL NATURE.

Our bodies are continually moving through a basic rest and activity cycle. This occurs both while we are awake and asleep. This cycle allows the mind and body to communicate by way of messenger molecules which are read and responded to by each cell in the production of new structures to help adaptation and coping. These cycles, termed Ultradian Rhythms by Dr. Ernst Rossi, a noted author and researcher in Body-Mind Communication occur every 90 to 120 minutes and provide our body-mind with numerous occasions for physical and emotional recovery. Given these fascinating new findings it makes it all the more imperative to take to let the body relax.

2. RELAXING REQUIRES MORE THAN JUST TAKING TIME AWAY FROM OTHER THINGS. Although it may seem simple, relaxing does take some mental work. According to University of Chicago psychologist, Dr. Mihaly Csikszent Mihalyi, "Most people assume that all they need is free time to relax. But that doesn't happen. In order to really enjoy your free time, you have to put in a bit of planning." He suggests that you may feel more relaxed with leisure activities that you plan ahead of time and look forward to engaging in beforehand.

3. THE RELAXATION RESPONSE HELPS US RELAX BOTH MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY. Almost 40 years ago, Dr. Herbert Benson, a cardiologist at Harvard Medical School, described a natural reflex type response that occurs in the body when we clear our minds of ordinary thoughts. By focusing on a single word and repeating it mentally each time you breath out (like the word one) as you sit quietly for about 20 minutes you will activate this relaxation response. Over the past four decades researchers have continued to discover the myriad of benefits of this simple form of meditation ranging from stabilization of blood pressure to increasing mental concentration. Perhaps the most obvious result of the Relaxation Response Exercise is that you feel physically and emotionally rested, peaceful and relaxed. For those who believe they can't relax, this may be a good starting point in learning a helpful skill. Although not nearly as dramatic from a scientific discovery standpoint, relaxation has long been known to be associated with specific changes in breathing patterns. Given the fact that we breath some

20,000 times a day, is it any wonder that disciplines such as Yoga, Tai Chi, and meditation have focused on this one behavior to bring about deeply relaxed states. It appears that the relaxing has both subtle and obvious aspects. This may not be as important however as knowing deep down inside that relaxing not only feels good but is good for you as well.