

The Truth About Relaxation Techniques

WE all know that **relaxation techniques** are all the rage - be it meditation, yoga, massage, or whatever. But how important is relaxation? And what exactly will it do for you? The answers may surprise you...

Numerous studies have shown that using relaxation techniques regularly can:

- Decrease the likelihood of **heart attack** and stroke, and can significantly reduce the incidence of a 2nd heart attack
- Protects you from **mental health problems**
- Improves your **immune system** function
- Aids **memory** and **learning**
- Improves your **coping skills** and makes you **feel better!**

If there's one truth about the way we live today, it's that our stress levels are higher than they were a century ago. A lot higher. And that's not because life is 'harder', but because of the *type* of stressors we have to cope with.

Today, so much of what we rely on is in the hands of *other people*, like job security (our employer), food for our family (our employer), our security (the police) and so on. Added to a decrease in the feeling of community and extended family support and you have a great recipe for stress.

With increased stress and the accompanying decrease in relaxation time, comes raised levels of **stress hormones** within your body - hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. Blood pressure rises. Your brain behaves differently affecting memory and healing.

Stress hormones are extremely useful in the short-term - say if you are attacked, but they are toxic in the long-term. They suppress your immune system function and interfere with sleep quality.

But I won't go on, it could get a bit depressing ;-)

Using Relaxation Techniques to Beat the Effects of Stress

So how can *relaxation* help? And what type, how often and when?

Well, as with all these things, there's no 'one size fits all' answer, but there are certain scientifically-supported guidelines we can follow.

1. Listen to your body's natural relaxation rhythms. Every 90-120 minutes your brain swings from left to right-hemispheric dominance for about 20 minutes. During these times you feel more day-dreamy, or have difficulty concentrating, or if you are asleep, you dream. Taking a break at these times allows your body its natural period of rest and healing, as the brain takes care of 'internal housekeeping'
2. Relax deeply once a day for 15-20 minutes. Even if you can't manage every day, you will soon notice how much better you feel and how much more capable you are when following this regime. The best time to do it is when you naturally experience a dip, such as after lunch or mid-afternoon.
3. If you find 'pure' relaxation difficult, make sure that you give your brain time to switch off by doing exercise, or taking a quiet walk, or use a tape.
4. If you have an immune-based, digestive, heart, or skin problem, using relaxation techniques is even more important as relaxation may help your condition significantly. Ongoing stress disrupts the normal bloodflow to the gut and can lead to problems such as IBS.

The Evidence for the Benefits of Relaxation

There has been so much research carried out into the benefits of relaxation, that it's impossible to do more than skim the surface here. There are several references at the bottom of the page, but the main points are:

- Because stress hormones suppress the immune response, relaxation allows the immune system to recover and so function more effectively.
- Relaxation lowers blood pressure in many people and so decreases the likelihood of stroke and heart attack.
- Relaxation gives a 'break' from things and lowers activity within the limbic system of the brain, the emotional centre.
- The brain has a regular need for more pronounced right-hemispheric activity. Relaxation helps meet this need.

In my opinion, the key to using relaxation techniques regularly is to build them into your lifestyle. The motivation for sticking with it comes from the results you get. I always say to delegates at workshops,

"You don't have to believe me, just try relaxation yourself for 1 week. If it doesn't help you, then stop. But if you don't try it, you'll never know what you're missing."

Why am I such an advocate for relaxing once a day? Because when I do it it makes me feel great. It improves my energy levels, my sleep, my creative ability and more. Do I do it all the time? No - like anyone it comes and goes; but I know it's there if I need it.

Go on, give it a go - I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. (And your body will too.)