

The Relaxation Response

Focused breathing, meditation & prayer to help neutralize stress

• by Barney Self •

- We all experience heightened levels of stress
- Whether by TV news feeds, radio, or social media sources, we are consistently bombarded with negative reports.
- Fears arise for our safety, stability and sanity as we navigate difficult situations that occur from time to time.
- It is no wonder our stress levels are elevated.
- The average person will have 40-50 stress responses daily
- I suspect that in days of increased trauma the number will be significantly elevated from that number
- Each stress response deposits adrenaline and cortisol into the blood stream
- We like the adrenaline – it makes us feel energized and empowered
- The cortisol, on the other hand, is generally harmful to us – especially since it decreases the functioning of our immune system.
- In these days it is critical for our immune system to be functioning at peak levels.
- In order to offset the Stress Response we need to elicit the Relaxation Response – a pattern of focused breathing and meditation
- Western Christianity has looked at meditation as a “New Age” element
- The reality is that meditation and silence were a part of the worship service for the first several centuries of the church. It is our birthright as believers.
- One way that meditation was used was in “Lectio Divina”
- In that encounter, scripture was read and a period of meditation followed. That process was repeated twice more facilitating memorization as well as the opportunity to hear from the Holy Spirit.
- This is really a means to approach a Psalm 46:10 place of “Be still and know that I am God”.
- We are hardly ever still and our minds are constantly racing from one issue to another.
- Our minds are even active when we sleep. That is why we dream. I also have had a client report waking up from a deep sleep at 2 a.m. in a full-blown panic attack.
- So, how do we offset the Stress Responses we encounter in life?
- We must elicit the Relaxation Response
- The Relaxation Response was defined by Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School.
- In his research, he found that two periods of focused breathing and meditation would allow the body to offset or neutralize the negative effects of stress

- So what is the Relaxation Response and how do we elicit it?
 - I. **The first element needed for eliciting the Relaxation Response is a Quiet Environment.** It is not essential but is very helpful.
 - II. **The second element is a comfortable position** – one that facilitates good posture – not your comfy or overstuffed chair but rather a firmer chair with a good lower back support. (a kitchen chair with a pillow behind you will suffice)
 - III. **The third element is full-lung breathing.** If you have ever sung in a choir or played a musical instrument that required air, you understand the concept of a full-lung breath. If you have not, then imagine being in a swimming pool in a breath-holding contest. You would get the biggest breath possible – that is a full-lung breath. We breathe using the upper lobes of our lungs 90% of the time. In a stress response, that is also true. In order to offset that, we need to give the body the correct cues to remove the adrenaline and cortisol from our blood stream. Full-lung breathing triggers the para-sympathetic nervous system. That is the part of our brains that controls the blood chemistry. Once engaged, the body will filter out the unneeded adrenaline and cortisol allowing the body to return to a baseline state of rest. It takes 20 minutes to accomplish this process because that is the time necessary to filter 23 pints of blood which is what we all carry about.
 - IV. **The next factor is utilizing specific words in tandem with the breathing.** One word or phrase is used on the in-breath and one word or phrase on the out-breath. This is not spoken but merely thought. The goal is to focus our minds on the nature of God to be faithful, to help, to heal and to comfort us and to facilitate an even closer relationship to God. The stillness that comes in this process allows our emotions to be calmed, our bodies to be healed and our spirits to be more intimately connected to God. In that space we can hear the voice of His Spirit better than ever because we are still and quiet. My favorite word phrase is “Jesus” on the in-breath, “Is Lord” on the out-breath. My wife’s favorite phrase is “Gracious God” on the in-breath, “Loving Father” on the out-breath. Both patterns are very personal and soothe our very souls in focusing on Our Lord and Savior. We are promoting the opportunity to Abide or Rest in Him.
 - V. **Adopt a Passive Mental Attitude** – avoid being distracted by intrusive thoughts that are bound to occur. Some examples might be “When I go to the store I need to pick up...” or “When this is over I need to remember to...”. When the intrusive and distracting thoughts come the goal is to side-step them by thinking “I’m not going to think about that right now. I’m staying with the words and the breathing; the words and the breathing.”

This process will take 20 minutes because that is the time required to filter 23 pints of blood which is what we all carry about. In doing this process for 20 minutes we receive the same rest component of an 8-hour sleep cycle. We don't receive the muscle repair or the R.E.M. sleep factors but we do receive the rest portion. This regimen can aid in the healing of almost any malady because of the health that is generated by it.

I have never encountered any activity that pulls together Body, Mind and Spirit repair in a simultaneous fashion the way that this process does. Please consider utilizing this process to boost your immune system, calm your emotions and give you an avenue to connect ever more deeply with God in this, our time of need.