

Certificate in Meditation Teaching and Holistic Human Development

Book Review of The Relaxation Response by Herbert Benson, M.D

Dr Herbert Benson is a Mind/Body Medical Institute Associate professor of Medicine Harvard Medical School

A review by Kerry Doolan.

The Relaxation Response is a goldmine of information about the original research; conducted at Harvard University in the USA by Dr Herbert Benson and his team. This research is the first scientific evidence which validated meditation as a healing therapy. The format of the book is straightforward and a good pattern to follow in planning a presentation about the benefits of meditation.

First chapter:

Dr Benson explains the effects of stress and emphasises the critical importance of creating public awareness of what he calls *"THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC"*: *"We are in the midst of an epidemic, one that is all too prevalent in the United States and other industrial nations. The name of this epidemic is hypertension, the medical term for high blood pressure."* He explains how and why stress and hypertension are related, then he talks about the stress response and introduces the fight-or-flight response.

Chapter 2:

Dr Benson follows this up with lots of research results illustrating how serious a problem high blood pressure or hypertension is in Western societies calling it: *"A disease with no symptoms"* *"High blood pressure may be dangerous. Not only does it increase development of atherosclerosis, but high blood pressure itself may cause blood vessels to burst. It also requires the heart to work harder. Pumping at higher pressures places an excessive strain on the heart and the heart grows larger, as would any muscle that is worked excessively. A weight lifter's muscles increase in size because he does the work of lifting barbells. So, will heart muscles increase in size or bulk when doing the work of pumping harder. This results in what is called hypertensive heart disease, in which the heart is enlarged."*

"The insidious nature of hypertension lies in its covert, seemingly harmless nature, which can end in permanent damage to the heart or brain or, at worst, in sudden death. Death of heart or brain tissue occurs either directly, through bursting blood vessels or an enlarging heart, or indirectly, through the development of atherosclerosis."

Chapter 3:

Benson delves in to the connections between stress and high blood pressure with a brief look at the historical record and differing racial and cultural factors. He makes this statement: *"We reiterate that a crucial factor in the development of high blood pressure is the necessity to cope with an environment requiring continuous behavioural adjustment. Certainly, if the environment is as difficult as ours is today, we have to become aware of the situations that require behavioural adjustment and in turn raise our blood pressure. This is a new direction in how we should think*

about stress. We can either change the complexities of life – an unlikely event, for they are likely to increase –or develop ways that enable us to cope more effectively.”

The work of Dr Walter B. Cannon is discussed, as he was the first to describe the fight-or-flight response; also, the important follow up research by a Czech scientist, Dr J. Brod, which supplied the first scientific proof as to how stress increases blood pressure.

“We are all basically the same human organism, which responds to stressful events through this common innate response. We may differ in what is stressful to us individually, depending upon our value systems, but our society poses enough stressful circumstances to affect all of us”

Chapter 4:

There are useful graphs showing the decrease in oxygen consumption during meditation in figure 10 and then the comparison of oxygen consumption during meditation in figure 11 compared to when asleep - showing a clear distinction and demonstrating quite dramatically that meditation is not just simple relaxation as when one rests or sleeps.

Further in Chapter 4, we learn about “DR HESS’S CRUCIAL EXPERIMENTS” -- His were the first research results which showed how the changes observed in different parts of the hypothalamus of a cat resulted in either the stress response or the relaxation response thus proving the relaxation response to be an autonomic function of the central nervous system that only needs the right stimuli to switch it on.

A useful feature of Chapter 4 is TABLE 2 – DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES ELICITNG THE PHYSIOLOGIC CHANGES OF THE RELAXATION RESPONSE. This is a good table to reproduce, it illustrates in a visual form the research showing the superiority of the meditation to other types of relaxation therapies.

Chapter 5:

This chapter is especially useful when one is considering an approach to a corporate entity, or when confronted with religious misconceptions and beliefs about meditation.

Benson discusses some of the myths current about meditation and also the altered states of consciousness experienced; he briefly discusses the common features of eastern and western religious and spiritual meditation/reflective practices and then tells the reader how simple it is to evoke the relaxation response.

Benson then expands on the historical and cultural use of meditative practices. This chapter is a great resource to answer objections based on religious or spiritual ideas or beliefs.

Chapter 6:

This chapter presents the research showing the remarkable decreases registered by researchers in the blood pressure of individuals due to the relaxation response. This is of enormous import considering the statistics showing high blood pressure to be involved in the leading causes of premature death in Western society.

Perhaps of most relevance to parents, schools and employers would be the research showing the decrease in ‘illicit’ drug use discovered when drug users meditate regularly. This should be of significant interest to teachers, business managers and parents.

The decrease in the use of 'legal' drugs, specifically alcohol and tobacco is remarkable: *"Before the regular practice of meditation was begun 60 percent of the participants used hard liquor and, of these, about 4 percent were heavy users (that is, drank hard liquor once a day or more). After twenty-one months of meditation, approximately 5 percent used hard liquor and only 0.1 percent were heavy users."* Considering the enormous social harm, criminal activity, family violence and other traumas and conflicts associated with the abuse of alcohol; this research indicates meditation is a natural and easy way to satisfy the internal drivers compelling many people to overindulge in alcohol.

"Approximately 48 percent smoked cigarettes before starting meditation and 27 percent were heavy users (more than one pack a day). Marked decreases were seen after twenty-one months [...] 16 percent smoked cigarettes and only 5.8 percent were heavy users." That is an incredible difference! A success rate in ceasing of cigarette smoking of 66%! Do some research on other methods of quitting smoking and you will find this is an amazing result even though the author includes a disclaimer as to the methodology used.

Chapter 7 & 8:

This chapter expands on the method to evoke the relaxation response and in chapter 8 we find this gem: *"How can we thus deal with our anxieties and feelings of stress? Perhaps what we should do is modify our behaviour by regularly evoking the Relaxation Response. If you view the Relaxation Response as a mechanism that effectively counters some of the harmful psychological and physiologic effects of our society, then the regular practice of the Relaxation Response may have an important place in your life. If you would regularly elicit this response, build it into your daily existence, the situations that activate your sympathetic nervous system could be counteracted by a process allowing your body to decrease its sympathetic nervous system. You would be using one innate body mechanism to counteract the effects of another."* The author is clearly expounding the benefits of learning and using the Relaxation Response to enhance and improve one's life through comprehension of how one's body operates and learning how to take conscious control over the effects of those processes.

He continues: *"Our Western society is oriented only in the direction of eliciting the fight-or-flight response, which is repeatedly brought forth as a response to our difficult everyday situations and is elicited without conscious effort, the Relaxation Response can be evoked only if time is set aside and a conscious effort is made."* Dr Benson has a great point here that, when emphasised to a corporate client, can demonstrate the importance of incorporating meditation in to their routines.

In Chapter 7, page 126, is the process of "How to Bring Forth The Relaxation Response". Dr Herbert Benson's research showed that evoking the relaxation response may be effectively achieved without using a traditional pose or any 'cultic technique':

"From the TM technique, we extracted four essential components that would elicit the Relaxation Response:

- 1. A quiet environment.*
- 2. A mental device – a sound, word, phrase, or prayer repeated silently or aloud, or a fixed gaze at an object.*
- 3. A passive attitude – not worrying about how well one is performing the technique and simply putting aside distracting thoughts to return to one's focus.*
- 4. A comfortable position.*

Later we discovered that only the middle two components -- the mental device and the passive attitude – were required”

The ease with which the relaxation response may be accessed by anyone is emphasised in the following passage: *“It is important to remember that there is not a single method that is unique in eliciting the Relaxation Response.”* He goes on to give an account of the research conducted and then makes this statement: *“[...] any one of the age-old or the newly derived techniques produces the same physiologic results regardless of the mental device used.”* Dr Benson continues by giving an account of the method used at the Beth Israel Hospital and on page 131 says *“your own individual considerations may be applied to the four components involved. You may wish to use the technique we have presented but with a different mental device.”*

From this it is clear the two most important factors necessary to evoke the relaxation response are, a ‘passive attitude’ and a ‘mental device’. This is critical knowledge especially when called upon in the marketplace to answer objections based on faulty understanding of meditation techniques and false advertising by some organisations claiming theirs to be the only effective form of meditation. Effectively those organisations are saying the method is the most important element, a statement which is at complete odds with Benson’s research results.

A meditation teacher’s most important result sought for their student is the successful elicitation of the relaxation response, the method used to get there is only relevant so long as it works to evoke the relaxation response. What this means is we really do not need a pose or any particular method to evoke the relaxation response, certainly they are an aid, more so for some than others. What is useful, is to distinguish between the ways in which the word ‘meditation’ is used. Sometimes the word ‘meditation’ is used as a verb to describe a doing, a method. At other times, the word ‘meditation’ is used as a noun to describe a state of consciousness. ‘Meditation’ used as a verb, that is to describe the doing of it, the method; is distinct from ‘meditation’ used as a noun to describe the state of consciousness arrived at.

We know meditation, the noun, is a state of consciousness capable of being measured in several different ways, for example: with observation of brainwave amplitude or use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging or similar technology. Meditation the verb, the method used to enter the state of meditation is only useful to achieve the state. In itself the method is of no more import than using either a car, a train, or a bus to travel to the same destination. It is the destination which is important, not the method used to get there. This is why we teach learning styles as being an essential tool for discovering the best method of meditation for each individual to travel to the destination - the state of meditation.

One of the most important results of research presented in chapter 7 is as follows:

“The subjective feelings that accompany the elicitation of the Relaxation Response may vary among individuals. The majority of people feel a sense of calm and feel very relaxed. A small percentage of people immediately experience ecstatic feelings. Other descriptions that have been related to us involve feelings of pleasure, refreshment, and well-being. Still others have noted relatively little change on a subjective level. Regardless of the subjective feelings described by our subjects, we have found that the physiologic changes, such as decreased oxygen consumption are taking place.”

This is crucial information, so many myths about meditation abound that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between truth and fantasy. Most important for a meditation teacher to know that, no

matter the subjective feelings experienced, the physiologic changes which carry the real benefits are taking place regardless of the intensity of the experience.

Of particular note is the following from pages 142 & 143 of the Relaxation Response: *“Our Western society is oriented only in the direction of eliciting the fight-or-flight response. Unlike the fight-or-flight response, which is repeatedly brought forth as a response to our difficult everyday situations and is elicited without conscious effort, the Relaxation response can be evoked only if time is set aside and a conscious effort is made. Our society has given very little attention to the importance of relaxation. Perhaps our work ethic views a person who takes time off as unproductive and lazy. At the same time, our society has eliminated many of the traditional methods of evoking the Relaxation Response. Prayer and meditation, as practiced by the ancients, have become part of our historical memory. We need the Relaxation Response even more today because our world is changing at an ever increasing pace. Society should sanction the time for the Relaxation Response. Is it unreasonable to incorporate this inborn capacity into our daily lives by having a “Relaxation Response break” instead of a coffee break?*

Think of Dr Benson and the experience he relates in discovering the Relaxation Response ... what a discovery for a cardiologist! A simple natural treatment to reduce high blood pressure, a condition he describes in no uncertain terms as EPIDEMIC in the Western world. When I consider the research in this book it is obvious that effective treatments for the major psychological and physiological diseases and illnesses of Western society may be found in the Relaxation Response.

Paraphrasing Dr Benson’s conclusions, ***“We could all greatly benefit; ‘individuals, couples, families, schools, workplaces – everyone on the planet’; by the reincorporation of the Relaxation Response into our daily lives. At the present time, most of us are simply not making use of this remarkable innate, neglected asset.”***

Right here, in this basic foundational text, we find the seminal research showing with great clarity the advantages and benefits of relaxation therapies. The very format of the book leads from a profound opening statement about a ‘hidden epidemic’ and the immense costs of that both economic and personal, to a dissertation of how simple it is to evoke the Relaxation Response. A good template to follow for any corporate or individual presentation.

Highly recommend obtaining a copy of this book, it may be out of print but is still available in some bookstores and second-hand. The copy this review was compiled from was purchased online and promptly delivered from ANGUS & ROBERTSON BOOKWORLD: www.angusrobertson.com.au. No doubt there will be many other bookstores which also have stock. The ISBN is 9780180815951.