

AUTOGENIC TECHNIQUE

This is a (sort of) meditational technique that was devised especially for people with chronic hypertension (high blood pressure). It is very well-known, especially in Germany & Austria and has been medically ‘proven’: it is also used for people who are intolerant of hypertensive medicine. I have adapted it very slightly.

You can do this form of meditation anywhere: on a bus or train; on a park bench at lunchtime; in your car, on the way home, having pulled into a lay-by. So, first of all, sit fairly upright (as on a normal chair), with your back reasonably vertical, your head fairly well-supported, and both feet on the floor.

You are now going to go through the various parts of your body: 10 in all. For each section you will have to develop a ‘script’ and an ‘image’ for that part of your body ‘being’ relaxed. Leave aside about 15-20 minutes for this exercise: great for a lunch break, or for the bus or train on the way home from work. It is good to have an analogue clock or watch with a sweep hand, as you learn to do this. It will take quite a few repeats to get this learnt and thus semi-automatic, and until you become properly relaxed doing it.

1. You start with your feet. Say to yourself: “My feet are (for example) ... warm and relaxed”; and imagine a situation where your feet would be warm and relaxed: like walking along a lovely sunny tropical beach, half in and half out of the water; or sitting with your socks on in front of a lovely warm fire. However – the image must work for You. If the last time walked along a beach, you cut your foot on a piece of shell or broken glass, that image won’t help you feel relaxed; or if you fell asleep in front of the fire, and your lovely Afghan socks got scorched, that image won’t work for you. Say the script to yourself – and imagine a relaxing situation – for one minute. Then move onto the next image.
2. The next part of the body is your ankles and calves. For each different part of the body, use a different script and a different image. Say to yourself (something like); “My ankle and calf muscles are soft and warm.” Maybe you imagine those multi-coloured leg-warmers (fashionable in the 80s or 90s); or a blanket (or duvet) wrapped around your ankles and calves. I myself might imagine sitting on the edge of a friend’s swimming pool in the south of France, sipping a glass of chilled white wine. Whatever Works For You! Do this for another minute: and, at the end of that minute, go back to the feet, do just one repeat of the script for the feet, and one repeat of the script for the ankles and calves (not the full minute: just one repeat, so as not to forget about them).
3. The next part of the body is the area of the knees and thighs. Sometimes your script can contain an image, like: “My knees and thighs are like melted chocolate.” By maybe you don’t like chocolate; or you get worried about the state of the sofa. So, choose a script and an image that works for you. You might imagine a child sitting on your lap, whilst you read them a story; or you’re stroking a cat on your lap, or something. Do this for a minute, and then one repeat of the script for the feet; one repeat of the script for the ankles and calves; one repeat for the knees and thighs. Then move on to the next part of the body
4. The whole pelvic area is next. Scripts can contain the word like ‘warm’, ‘soft’, ‘open’, ‘relaxed’, etc.; images might include warm baths, Jacuzzis, having just had great sex, or whatever works for you! If it is pleasurable, then you might be more likely to repeat the exercise. Repeat the script and image for just a minute. Then do the single repeats for the feet, ankles and calves, knees and thighs, and pelvis.
5. The fifth area is the stomach and belly area. When we are stressed or tense – and producing adrenaline, then our digestive system shuts down. We want to start it working again, so – what is your favourite soup? ... Imagine you are sitting in front of a bowl of your favourite soup: imagine sprinkling a little pepper, or parsley, croutons or parmesan cheese; imagine some nice crispy French bread, so something; get it in to your mind so clearly that you start to salivate. Do this for a minute. Then do the repeats for the first five sections.

6. The sixth area is the upper torso, chest area: here, the breathing is all important. Breathe in a little and then breathe out a lot; imagine that you are squeezing the air out of a beach ball; make a long-drawn-out out-breath. Repeat this. Breathe in gently, and then imagine that you are breathing out all of the stress and tension in your body; all of the frustration, anger, bile, etc. Breathe in gently and breathe out long – for just one minute. Then repeat the scripts for the feet, ankles & calves, knees and thighs, pelvic area, your favourite soup, the breathing; etc. and then move onto the next area.
7. The seventh area is the hands; or the hands and wrists, if you are doing a lot of IT or computer work. You need a script and an image: what is the script for relaxed hands? What is an image (that works for you) for relaxed hands? Some people imagine warm, soft gloves; or holding a child's hands; or a hand massage; or a beauty treatment with a glove full of warm cream; or an image like Durer's Praying Hands; or whatever. There is a line from a love poem from the 1960's Liverpool Poets: "*I will hold you tenderly in my hands like broken fruit-cake.*" Do this for a minute; then do all the repeats.
8. The eighth area is your arms: what do they feel like when you get back from the supermarket with the week's shopping? Heavy, floppy, tired: there's an image! Now work out a script: "My arms feel ...". Do this for a minute and then the repeats.
9. The ninth area is the shoulders and neck. Work out a script for how you would like them to feel; then imagine – being under a power shower; having a good strong shoulder massage; the burdens of life lifting, like taking off a heavy rucksack; standing naked a Hawaiian waterfall, with lots of – hey, let your imagination run a little riot: you are more likely to repeat the exercise. Do this for just a minute; then do the repeats.
10. The tenth section is, of course, the head, the face and the scalp. Imagine a lovely facial and head massage; or you are lying in the sun, gently melting a little. Anything that works for you! Do this for a minute and then do the repeats.

Ten sections of the body, with a minute for each equals ten minutes; plus about two minutes for the repeats; makes twelve minutes. And I said to leave aside 15-20 minutes for the whole exercise, so you now have between three and eight minutes left. Just sit there, being relaxed. Any thoughts or images that come in – just let them go out again, floating away, like a balloon, or something; or like when you are in a slow-moving railway carriage, and there's this (that's interesting, and now it's gone) and now there's this (there, now it's gone).

This is when your body really gets it, that this is being relaxed. And, slowly, each time that you are doing it, the body becomes more and more relaxed: a small step each time; occasionally, there's a little relapse, but gradually, the body sets its relaxation level lower and lower further down.

This is good for getting to sleep, if you do it lying down in bed; it's good just before going into an exam, or job interview (you can do it for a little while in the toilet); and the more you do it, the easier it becomes. But, you have to practice it regularly for it to have the maximum effect.

This is another of the body-oriented relaxation techniques that work very well with psychotherapy and psychotherapeutic processes, or just by themselves. Each of these techniques occupies the mind (so there is less space for anxiety to come in and absorb our thoughts), whilst also relaxing the body. This double-pronged technique works really well. Ideally, we need about 8-9 relaxations 'sessions' (of about 20 minutes each) as a minimum each week to stay relaxed and healthy, in a state or relaxed well-being.

Sometimes, if we are very stressed, we need to do something first, like 20 minutes of aerobic exercise – in order to burn off the stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol, steroids, etc) – before our bodies can start to relax. So, done in conjunction with 3-4 "exercise sessions" (30-45 minutes of aerobic exercise), these 8-9 relaxation sessions work even better. There you are! That's it!

MINDFULNESS

When we are stressed, we often become absent-minded, or we may be doing something (like reading a book) and realise that we are not aware of doing it (or what we are reading): our mind is distracted. When we are ‘automatic pilot’ like this, our body is doing one thing and our mind is doing another. Accidents and mistakes can then happen. Negative thoughts can build up and coalesce. We are trying to find ‘better’ solutions, but we are also often constantly monitoring (and judging critically) how we are doing. On a day-to-day basic, mindlessness is not very productive and is often quite harmful. Multi-tasking is all very well, but it is not very relaxing.

Mindfulness means – paying attention – in a particular way – on purpose – in the present moment – and non-judgementally. It can be useful for anxiety, depression, better pain control, anger management, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and self-healing as well as for stress. The core skills of mindfulness are: **Be Aware** and **Let Go**.

Being aware is literally just that: being aware you have a pain here; that you find this or that activity stressful; that you don’t have the energy for ‘this’ any longer; or that you are irritated by that person. Letting go is literally just that: letting go of your irritation, your pain, your stress, your boredom and fatigue; freeing your self from attachments or fixed ideas.

Practicing Mindfulness: You start practicing mindfulness by introducing ‘mindful’ meditations into your regular routine of meditation. Let mindfulness (or awareness) become the ‘focus’ of your meditations. In your meditation, done as before, become aware of every feeling or sensation; every thought or every noise outside – the ticking of the clock, the distant traffic, bird song. And then let these perceptions go! Expand and extend your awareness – and then just let any insights or sensations go: there is a continual emptying process. Try to stay in the moment: what am I aware of now? What now?

You can also extend your mindfulness practice into everything that you are doing. It is a better way of being present, in the here-and-now. How am I doing this? How interesting! What am I feeling right now? How interesting! And now let this go. The moment passes. Now, you are doing something else. How interesting! And now move on to the next step.

You can go deeper into what you are doing. When eating a tangerine, become aware of the texture of the skin, and the contrast with the fruit inside. The feel of the skin being peeled; the tiny spurt of juice; the separation of the segments; the explosion of taste; the smell; the discarded peel. You can become aware of the tree on which it grew; the water and the sunshine necessary for it to grow; the people who grew it and picked it; the country it grew in and how it got into your hand. What a depth and miracle of mindfulness there is in this one action. And now move on to the next action.

When you are doing the washing up, standing at the kitchen sink (or some other action), just do the washing up, become aware of the bubbles and the water; the action of the sponge or mop on the plate; the change in the appearance; the way some bits stick and others don’t. Be aware of the sunshine (or weather) outside; the bird song or street noises; other people in the house - these are all part of the experience of doing the washing up (or whatever you are doing). If you catch yourself thinking about tomorrow’s shopping list, stop doing the washing up, write down the shopping list, then return to doing the washing up. Stay in the moment. If you don’t like washing up, and want to finish it quickly – so as to watch TV or eat dessert, you may be equally incapable of enjoying TV or dessert: your mind will jump on to the next action. Focus on this one, just this one, and you may find that you quite enjoy the process of washing up mindfully.

The Process of Mindfulness: There is no end to this process. Each meditation, each ‘mindful’ action builds and grows. The further in you go (into the territory of mindfulness), the bigger it gets. You will slow down a little, you will become calmer and less reactive, you will look at the wider picture and become more thoughtful. It is so simple, and it is not – for a moment - easy. This is definitely ‘the road less travelled’ – yet it is a very rich journey. We are not trying to get anywhere: we are making every moment count; we are really enriching the journey itself. We can even make each step that we take (literally) mindful: this is a walking meditation.

Adapted from Thich Nhat Han: ‘Peace is Every Step’.

MEDITATION

A very powerful form of relaxation is ‘meditation’. This does not have to be religious, or based on a particular faith. Essentially it is sitting still, breathing regularly, and quietening your mind. When you do this, your body slows down and you shift more into the ‘parasympathetic’. Eventually, your mind will slow down as well and you will become more peaceful and relaxed. This is extremely good for many medical conditions, like hypertension (high blood pressure), or for reducing the stress that can aggravate many conditions, both medical and psychological.

Meditation Position: Make sure you are not going to be disturbed: switch the ringer on the phone off; turn off the mobile; hang a note on the bedroom door; tell others in the house you are going to meditate for (say) 20 minutes. Settle into a comfortable sitting position, either on a straight-backed chair, with your feet flat on the floor, or on a soft surface on the floor sitting cross-legged. Your spine should be vertical, your body fairly relaxed, your weight supported and balanced.

Check your Body & Breathing: Bring your awareness to how your body is feeling. Spend a minute or so, checking your self out, doing a body scan. Become aware of how your body feels; warm or cold, comfortable or uncomfortable, the feel of your clothes against your skin, whether your belt or neck feels constrained. Make any adjustments necessary. Then, become aware of your breathing: it is shallow or light; is it only in the chest or the belly; are you holding your breath at all, or is it flowing in and out fairly freely. Become aware of which parts of your body move when you breathe. Maybe there is a slight pause at the top of the in-breath or the bottom of the out-breath. Maybe you are breathing in and out only through your nose, or only through your mouth. Don’t try to control your breathing, just allow the breath to flow – in and out. Simply let the breath breathe itself. This is very peaceful. You do not have to do anything else, just keep on doing this.

Either Empty Your Mind or Focus Your Mind: Sooner or later your mind will start to wander, or thoughts will come into your mind to distract your awareness and your ‘peace of mind’. This is very common, especially in the early ‘learning stages’. It is not a mistake or failure: it is just what the mind does. Congratulations for noticing that your attention is not on your breath. Just empty your mind of the thoughts, and/or re-focus on your breathing. This will happen over and over again. Just keep on emptying your mind of thoughts and re-focussing your awareness on your breathing.

Sometimes you might wish to focus or meditate on a particular topic, like ‘world peace’, or ‘healing’. As you breathe in, breathe in and focus these qualities inside of you; as you breathe out, send out these qualities into the world. Again, your attention may wander at times, or thoughts may cascade through your mind. That is normal: just re-focus your attention and awareness. Make each moment count. Keep coming back to the topic of the focus or meditation.

All thoughts have equal value: there are not ‘good’ thoughts or ‘bad’ thoughts. Thinking is not ‘bad’ and an empty mind ‘good’. Do not get distracted by judgement or by content. Do not try to suppress or eliminate certain thoughts or topics. What matters is your awareness of your thoughts and when you are thinking, and what you do about it: judge it, hang on to it, or let it go.

Continue like this for 15 to 20 minutes (or longer if you wish). 15-20 minutes is the minimum time to get the maximum benefit. Try doing this once or twice a day – regularly, every day. The affect is cumulative, so you may not notice a huge difference after the first few times. The effect is usually quite subtle, though – over time – it is powerful. After a while you will notice when you miss doing your meditation. Just find a few moments and do it again.

Practice, practice and more practice: You are gradually training your mind to become less reactive and calmer. You will find this has other, wider benefits. Your stress levels will diminish. You will be able to concentrate more. You will feel more centred. You will have greater patience. You will become less judgemental. Each meditation is different. They vary. Some meditations can be dramatic, visionary or life-changing, however these are fairly rare. In some meditations, you fall asleep. Just observe the differences. Don’t get caught up in the ‘glamour’ of a powerful meditation.