The Principles of the Autogenic Therapy Technique of Mind-Body Relaxation

Preamble
The Autogenic Therapy Technique (ATT), or Autogenic Training (AT) was designed to reduce long-term stress held in the body and also to address imbalances between the mind and body. It is called “autogenic” (which means ‘self-generated’) because it comes from the Greek ‘auto’ (self) and ‘genus’ (from within).

It can help to reduce or manage recurring stress-related symptoms e.g. sleep problems, anxiety, mild depression, fatigue, asthma, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), chronic pain and especially high blood pressure. It can also help with general self-development, and as a form of self-help therapy for people with a wide range of conditions, such as: depression; obsessive compulsive disorder; myalgic-encephalomyelitis (M.E.); and for problems stemming from their childhood experiences. It can be particularly helpful with psychosomatic symptoms.

It was developed by Dr Johannes Schultz, a neurologist and psychiatrist, from reports given by patients describing their experiences of relaxation during hypnosis. Schultz developed Autogenic Therapy (AT) as an alternative to hypnosis, with the goal of eliminating people’s reliance on a therapist, in favour of teaching people how to regulate their own experiences of entering and coming out of deep relaxation by themselves. He realised that they had their own ‘natural’ resources and ways of restoring a sense of internal and external balance and thus of healing themselves from stress. He first developed these theories in about 1912 and then published the results of his extensive research in 1932. AT is particularly popular in Germany & Austria, but has spread to other countries as far as Japan and Australia. It was first practised in the British National Health Service in the 1950s.

It involves: special sitting (or lying) positions; an environment that minimises disturbances; an attitude of mind that is passive (observing / being aware); and silent repetitions of various phrases and images associated with the body’s (your) own experience of being relaxed.

It is not a meditation, but the meditative state that is induced is often very deep and can bring some profound insights and even greater peace-of-mind. It does not use any drugs, though it was designed for, and is still used for, people who are intolerant of hypertensive medication. It is also not a form of self-hypnosis. It is a form of mind-body therapy, practised by the person themselves. Once you have ‘learnt’ it – and it is a form of training – then you will be able to relax much more quickly, easily and more deeply.

It encourages a “passive observer” attitude that opens the person to perceiving the mind and body more objectively, more like the position of a witness to what is happening. Thus, regular practice of AT, with its passive concentration, encourages a shift toward a different mode of perception, to a “witnessing self” that simply observes itself, without judgement and without striving for any particular result or goal.

More detailed information about AT can be obtained from the website of the British Autogenic Society: www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk

Preparation
You should allow yourself about 20 minutes for the main exercise. As you will need to ‘learn’ the AT technique (or training), you will need to practice it fairly regularly – and this ‘learning process’ usually takes (about) a minimum of 3 weeks of regular practice, once or twice daily. You can do this by yourself, or you can do this with the help of an AT therapist.

Find a place that is warm, quiet and relatively free from disturbances. If possible, dim the lights and/or tell people that you do not want to be disturbed – you might want switch off any phones. Music can be distracting, so it is better to learn it without.

As you start to learn the technique, it is sometimes a good idea to have a clock with a sweep hand (showing the seconds) visible, so that you can easily tell when a minute is up.
Then take a few moments to get yourself as comfortable as possible. Ideally, at first, you should learn the technique sitting fairly upright, with your bottom ‘tucked into’ the chair, and with your head well balanced on the top of your spine. Make sure that your body is fairly well supported and comfortable. Your hands and arms should be loose, either resting on your lap, or down by your side. Make sure that you are not clapping your hands or clenching your fists. Your legs and feet should be loose in front of you. Make sure that your legs and ankles are not crossed.

If you (later) do the technique lying down, then let your feet turn out to relax the muscles on the inside of the legs. You can also – with practice – do the technique for 20 minutes or so when travelling to and from work, by bus, or by train.

Close your eyes and spend a few moments concentrating on your breathing. Be aware of your breathing and the gentle rise and fall of your chest and belly. Be aware of the air entering and leaving your lungs, and of your body loosening and relaxing a little more each time that you breathe out. Slip your shoes off, if you need to. Loosen buttons and belts, if you need to. Get comfortable. You are now ready to start.

**The Exercise**

What follows is a variation on the basic Autogenic Therapy technique. It is not quite as simple as the original, but I find that this variation works better, and is also more interesting for the person who is doing the technique.

You are going to take yourself through the various parts of your body, encouraging each part of your body to relax: and, as you do this, your whole body – and thus your Self – will gradually become more and more relaxed. There are 10 sections of your body and you will spend about a minute on each section. For each section, you will develop a phrase, and also an image, to help that part of your body to relax. For the phrases, most people use words like: limp, heavy, warm, relaxed, open, soft, etc. and associate these with the part of the body in that section.

**First section: The Feet and Toes**

Your phrase might be: “My feet and toes are warm and relaxed.” Repeat this phrase gently to yourself, over and over again. See if there is any tension in your feet and toes, and if there is, let it go: let the tension drain away with the gentle repetition of the phrase. Let your feet and toes loosen and unwind to become more comfortable and relaxed.

Your image should be imagining a situation where your feet would be warm and relaxed: this might be when … (say) you are sitting in front of a nice warm fire; or … wearing a comfortable pair of your favourite slippers; or … you might use the image (or memory) of when you are walking along a lovely golden sandy beach. However, the image must work for you: if the last time you walked along a lovely sandy beach, you cut your foot on a shell or a piece of glass, your body will remember that, and that image won’t work – for you.

Gently repeat the phrase and hold the image that works for you – for a minute. Then go on to the next section of the body.

**Second section: The Ankles and Calves**

Your phrase for this section might be: “My ankles and calves are soft and warm.” See if there is any tension in your ankles and calves, and if there is, let it all go: let the tension drain away with the gentle repetition of the phrase. Let the muscles in the lower part of your legs feel loose, comfortable and relaxed.

Your image would be a situation where your ankles and calves were soft and warm: this might be … (say) if you were wearing woolly leg warmers; or … having a warm blanket wrapped around your legs. It could be … (say) of you sitting on the edge of a swimming pool in the south of France, with a nice glass of wine in your hand and some good friends around. Let your imagination go as well. Enjoy these images. If you don’t enjoy the exercise, you will be less likely to repeat it. Gently repeat the phrase and hold the image – for a minute.

At the end of that minute, repeat the phrase and remember the image for the first section - once only, just so as not to forget that part of the body. Then go on to the next section of the body.
Third section: Knees and Thighs
Your phrase can sometimes contain an image: “My knees and thighs are like melted chocolate … or soft marshmallow.” However, if that doesn’t appeal, or if you are worried about the state of the sofa or armchair, then find a phrase and image that does work for you. “My knees are relaxed and my thighs are warm,” and you might imagine … (say) a cat curled up on your lap; or a child sitting there as you read them a story; or … whatever works for you, for that part of your body. Gently repeat the phrase and hold the image – for a minute.

You will need to develop these phrases and images for yourself: this is part of the learning process, the training. If you get bored with a particular phrase or an image, then change it – the next time you do the exercise: not during the minute.

Then, do just one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for first section: the Feet & Toes; one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for the second section: the Ankles & Calves; one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for this third section: the Knees & Thighs. And then go on to the next section of the body.

Fourth section: The Hips and Pelvis
Here, your phrase might contain words such as “warm”, “soft”, “open”, … your image might be of sitting in a warm bath, or in a Jacuzzi, or of just having had great sex … anything that helps that part of your body to be more relaxed. Make the exercise enjoyable; make it work for you. Gently repeat the phrase and hold the image – for a minute.

Then, do one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for first section: the Feet & Toes; do one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for the second section: the Ankles & Calves; one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for the third section: the Knees & Thighs; and one repeat of the phrase and remember the image for this fourth section: the Hips & Pelvis.

Before we go any further: do a little check. Let your hips loosen; let your thighs loosen; let your legs and feet and toes loosen. Tell yourself: “My hips and thighs are feeling loose, comfortable and relaxed. My legs and feet are feeling loose, comfortable and relaxed.”

Feel your hips, thighs, legs and feet growing warmer and heavier; and more comfortable and relaxed as you let them relax more and more. And, then go on to the next section of the body.

Fifth section: The Stomach and Belly
Whenever we are tense and stressed, our digestive system shuts down. This is due to the action of adrenaline on the smooth muscles of the digestive system. Adrenaline shuts down the digestive system and this is thus a large part of the “fight or flight” mechanism: the digestion shuts down as you don’t want to be digesting your lunch, if you are trying to avoid being something else’s lunch.

So, we are trying to redress the internal balance of the body’s Autonomic Nervous System: the dance between the sympathetic half – the “fight or flight” mechanism, activated by work, stress, tension, anxiety, fear, etc. – and the parasympathetic half: the ordinary, everyday, relaxed, laid-back, gently “mooching about” system.

For this part of the body, we want the digestive system to be functioning well, or working better, and so … “What is Your Favourite Soup?”

Imagine now that you are sitting in front of a bowl of your favourite soup: this might be … (say) tomato, … or red lentil, … or minestrone, … or carrot & coriander; or your mum’s speciality: “What is Your Favourite Soup?”

Imagine you can smell it; imagine the taste of it in your mouth; Yum! Yum! You may even feel hungry, or begin to salivate; your tummy might even start to rumble.

You might also imagine some parsley, or grated cheese, or black pepper, sprinkled on the top; some crusty warm French bread alongside; whatever … get into the imagery, make it as vivid as possible – for a minute.
Then, do the repeats of the phrases and remember the images for the earlier sections of the body: the Feet & Toes; the Ankles & Calves; the Knees and Thighs; the Hips & Pelvis; and then that lovely soup ready for the Stomach & Belly. And, then go on to the next section of the body.

**Sixth section: The Torso (Chest & Back; Heart & Lungs)**
For this section, we are going to focus mainly on the breathing. When we have to pick something heavy up; we breathe in. When we put it down again, we breathe out – with relief. Whew! So, focus on the breathing: breathe in for a count of one, two, possibly three; hold a moment, then breathe out for one, two, three, four, five, six seven, eight, nine, ten, possibly eleven and twelve; hold a second; then breathe in again for a count of three; and then out for a count of eight, ten or twelve; hold for a second; then in again, and a long out-breath; etc. Do this again and again – for a minute.

You can imagine you are standing by the sea-shore; the waves come in; and then they recede; or you are standing on a hill top, having just climbed all the way up; and you are breathing out all the stress and tension; all the crap, the anger, the frustration, etc. to be carried away and dispersed by the wind. Do this pattern of breathing – for a minute.

Breathe into both the chest and the belly – as full a breath as possible; let the shoulders and the back become involved as well; move the shoulders and back a little to bring them into play – so to speak. Breathe as fully and deeply as possible – for a minute.

Then, do the single repeats of the phrases and remember the images for the earlier sections of the body: the Feet & Toes; the Ankles & Calves; the Knees and Thighs; the Hips & Pelvis; and the lovely soup for the Stomach & Belly; and now the breathing in the Chest, opening up the Back as well. And, then go on to the next section of the body.

**Seventh section: The Hands and Wrists**
We often use our hands to express the stress and tension in our body: e.g. clenching our fists; picking at things; nervous habits with the hands, like drumming fingers; biting nails; cracking knuckles; etc. So … what is a phrase and what is an image for relaxed hands?

Try to imagine yourself with warm, soft gloves on; or … lightly holding a child’s or your partner’s hand; or … getting a hand massage, or a manicure, or there is a beauty treatment that involves putting your hands in warm cream; for myself – there is an evocative line from a piece of poetry that says tenderly: “I will hold you in my hands like broken fruitcake”. What phrases or images work for you? Use your phrase, repeating it gently to yourself; use your image, holding it in your mind’s eye; - for a minute.

Then, do the repeats of the phrases and remember the images for all the earlier sections of the body: finishing with the Hands & Wrists. And, then go on to the next section of the body.

**Eighth section: the Arms and Elbows**
What do your arms feel like when you get back home from the supermarket; or when you have been carrying logs, or bags of sand? … tired, soft, floppy, heavy, etc?

There are some words for a suitable phrase, “My Arms are tired and heavy; my Elbows are floppy and loose.” And there’s an image – getting back home with the shopping, or carry lots of logs. Repeat the phrase to yourself, and imagine the image – whatever it is – for a minute.

Then, do the repeats of the phrases and remember the images for all the earlier sections of the body: finishing with the Hands & Wrists, and then the Arms & Elbows. And, then go on to the next section of the body.

**Ninth section: the Neck and Shoulders**
We often store a lot of tension in our neck and shoulders. They can be tense and tight; so let’s loosen them up a bit; relax them as much as possible; drop them, if you are holding them high; ease them back, if you are holding them forward; rotate them slightly, let the muscles unwind; breathe in, and then just let the shoulders relax with the out-breath; open the jaw, yawn a little, rotate the head just a fraction; and let the neck soften and relax.
Images of a shoulder massage; a warm (even hot) power shower; or you’re in one of these spas and there’s a waterfall; or you’re on a Hawaiian island and … let the fantasy unfold – **for a minute**.

Then, do the repeats of the phrases and remember the images for all the earlier sections of the body: finishing with the Hands & Wrists, then the Arms & Elbows, and now the Neck & Shoulders. And, then move on to the last section of the body.

**Tenth section: the Face, Head and Scalp**

Let go of any tension in your face; let your jaw soften and unclench your teeth (if they are clenched). Let the muscles under the skin and the skin of your face, both soften; almost as if you are going to sleep. Check that your eyes are resting and your eyelids lightly closed. Let your forehead and brow smooth out. Feel your face growing calmer, more relaxed, and smoother, as you gently breathe in and out and just notice that it relaxes you more and more.

You may like having a head massage: if so, imagine that, or perhaps that you are lying on a beach, in the sun, gently melting. Use something like this phrase and image for the head. Face and scalp – **for a minute**. Then do the final set of repeats.

**The Rest of the Exercise**

You are now about as relaxed as you can make yourself in the moment – breathe gently and try to stay like this. Be aware of that comfortable relaxed feeling throughout your whole body. Be aware of your body growing heavier, more comfortable, as it relaxes, and be aware of your body loosening and relaxing a little more each time you breathe in and out. Be aware of how comfortable it feels as you let your body relax and enjoy that feeling for a short time longer.

Try to keep your mind empty: thoughts and images will come in – almost inevitably, and so just let them go out again; perhaps imagine that you are in a gently moving railway train: thoughts and images become present, and then slide away. Occasionally there is a thought that needs to be kept: “It’s Aunty Mary’s birthday soon: I’ll have to send her a card.” Imagine, a balloon bobbing around, as a reminder: you can pick it up later when you have finished.

There were 10 sections of the body; and you spent a minute on each, so that’s 10 minutes; plus 2-3 minutes for all the repeats. So, you should have about 7 minutes left of your 20 minutes. These seven minutes are where you don’t have to do anything – just practice staying relaxed. This time is also when all the goodies happen in your body: you are re-setting your Autonomic Nervous System to a new, lower level of its resting potential.

**Finishing the Exercise**

Let yourself come to consensual awareness slowly. When you are ready, just open your eyes. Take a few more moments while still sitting down. When you are ready to get up, get up slowly. There is something called *Orthostatic hypotension*—where a sudden drop in blood pressure due to standing up quickly—can cause you to faint. Some people like to count backwards from 5 to 1, timed to their slow, deep breathing, and then say (something like), “My eyes open. I am supremely calm. I am also fully alert.”

However, try to maintain something of that comfortable and relaxed feeling as you gently move around. Don’t immediately run for a bus, or something like that.

Each time you do this, you should be able to relax just a little bit more. You are gradually re-training your body to become a little more relaxed each day: it is like turning the “stress and tension” dial setting down a notch each time that you do it. It is best to do the exercise regularly, at least once, or possibly twice a day; and it is also slightly better to do the exercise at the same time each day, working it into your regular daily schedule.

The Autogenic Therapy Technique teaches you to *self-produce* a feeling of warmth and heaviness throughout your body, thereby experiencing a profound state of physical relaxation, bodily health, and mental peace. Once you become proficient at it – and this might take as long as three months – and, if you practice it regularly, you can use the technique to do a number of different things.
The claims are numerous and include: overcoming unwanted behaviours (such as nail biting); resolve phobias (such as fear of flying); and mitigating the symptoms of several physical ailments.

There is one ‘caveat’: while doing the technique, you will be focusing intently on your inner experiences, to the exclusion of most external events. Therefore, it is possible that you might encounter some kinds of hypnagogic (i.e. dream-like) or dissociative experiences, where bodily perceptions can seem to become distorted. In general, just try to ignore these experiences and they should pass. If you find them at all troubling, then you might want to consult with a clinical psychologist or a (perhaps body-oriented) psychotherapist, to try to understand the particular meaning of these symptoms for you.

You can add in other – more specific – scripts or phrases as well. If you are particularly anxious, you can, for example, try calming yourself down and slowing down your heartbeat. Your script or phrase might be (something like): “My chest feels warm and pleasant; my heartbeat is calm and steady; my anxiety is diminishing; my breathing is slower and deeper; I am feeling calm and at peace.” And repeat this a few (between 6-8) times, each time you do the Autogenic exercise.

If you suffer from an upset stomach, you can focus on calming down your digestion, and so your script or phrase might be (something like): “My stomach is feeling warm and soft. I am feeling calm and relaxed. My digestion is calm; my tummy is relaxed.” And repeat this a few (between 6-8) times, until your upset tummy is calm again. Watery images of a smooth sea, or a gentle brook, or waves lapping on the shore, can also help. Maybe you will have to repeat this exercise each time that you do the main Autogenic exercise.

If you suffer from headaches, then you could use a script or phrase that might be (something like): “My forehead is cool; my mind is calm; my breathing is steady; my headache is getting smaller, and smaller.” And repeat this a few (between 6-8) times, with the breathing, until the headache has diminished or virtually disappeared. Again, imagery can be useful and imagining a cool pair of hands placed lightly either side of your forehead might help. If you suffer from migraines, then adapt the script and image accordingly.

It isn’t sufficient, however, that you just “know” these things intellectually, or use these scripts, mechanically, routinely or automatically; it is important to try to understand how they work by feeling them working within your body, in depth. It is a little like mindfulness practice, with an intent.

The Autogenic Technique can also be helpful in changing unwanted behaviours, because you can use your autogenic skills to work through the basic steps of change, by starting with a calm base; and then actually feeling the elements of each step with the help of autogenic visualizations and suggestions; and then calming yourself down again. Visualise the ‘problem’ and the ‘damage’. Then calm yourself down. Then, you can try to visualise a more positive situation, and then revert back to the calming ritual.

Of course, some long-standing addictive behaviours, or serious personality problems, can have their roots in the deep unconscious and/or possibly in early childhood conflicts, so you may need to consult a professional psychotherapist, rather than, or as well as, using the Autogenic Therapy technique. Still, even in these cases, the Autogenic Therapy technique can be very useful, especially if used in conjunction with other appropriate techniques.

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Courtenay Young is a UKCP registered psychotherapist and an accredited Body Psychotherapist. He is not a trained Autogenic Therapy practitioner, and does not pretend to be. He recognises the value of the Autogenic Therapy technique and has modified it in a way that he hopes makes it more efficient and useful. He can be contacted by e-mail: courtenay@courtenay-young.com