

# The Principles of the Autogenic Therapy Technique

## A Mind-Body Form of Relaxation

### Preamble:

The basic Autogenic Therapy Technique (ATT), or Autogenic Training (AT); often called '*Autogenics*', is a relaxation technique that –over time – teaches your body to respond to your verbal commands, and also to various mental images, by allowing itself to relax – on a sub-conscious level. These images and commands effectively "tell" your body to relax, and this sort of self-guided relaxation can thus help to moderate your breathing, blood pressure, heartbeat, and body temperature – beneficially.

The goal of ATT is to achieve a state of deep relaxation and thus reduce the effects of everyday life stress on your body. If done over time, ATT can also have a similar effect to some meditation and mindfulness practices – though this technique is based purely on physiology.

ATT, while requiring a considerable amount of time and discipline to learn initially, has far more far-reaching benefits than simple muscle relaxation exercises (like 'progressive relaxation'). The word, *autogenics* is composed of *auto-* (from the Greek *autos*, self) and *-genous* (a suffix meaning *produced by*, and reflecting the word *genesis*, creation), the word was chosen by Johannes Schultz, a German doctor, to describe his original discovery, first published in 1932.

Today, '*Autogenics*' trainings (there are various sorts and different types) teach people to *self-generate* a feeling of warmth and heaviness throughout their body, thereby experiencing a profound state of physical relaxation, and this aids general bodily health, and eventually can result in a degree of mental peace.

Once a person has become proficient at ATT, they can use the ATT to help to: overcome nervous habits; modify addictions (such as smoking or gambling); change unwanted behaviours (such as nail biting); resolve phobias (such as fear of flying); and it can also mitigate the symptoms of physical ailments (such as high blood pressure, tension headaches, etc.). It can also 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 (OCD); myalgic-encephalomyelitis (ME) or chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS); and for problems stemming from their childhood experiences. It can be particularly helpful with psychosomatic symptoms.

If you tend to be a nervous or anxious person, *Autogenics* can help you find an 'inner' place of calmness and emotional peace. If you are a highly sensitive person, with *Autogenics* you can learn to cope better with environmental stimulation by dismissing it from your attention, rather than feeling overwhelmed by it. In fact, you can use *Autogenics* as a significant part of a process to help overcome just about any psychological or physiological problem; the results will vary according to the severity of the problem, and according to your own discipline and confidence.

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 magic technique; you don't need any belief or faith; you can do this on a bus or a train, going to work; just practice this simple basic exercise on a regular basis and see if it works for you!

### **How ATT works:**

A little-known part of your body's functioning, your autonomic nervous system (ANS), controls involuntary body functions such as heart rate, digestion, and breathing. This ANS system is hard-wired into two main branches, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems.

Normally, the parasympathetic nervous system is working more than 90% of the time: it is your basic "rest-and-digest" system, your ordinary "mooching about" operational system. The other 'sympathetic' half is the body's emergency response mechanism: the immediate "flight-or-flight" response to any threat. Unfortunately, given our modern life styles, there isn't too much mooching about time, and there is too much time spent running about in 'sympathetic' mode. So, as a result, our ANS system becomes chronically overloaded, and then we can get 'stuck' – and then we need help (to help ourselves) get back to a more relaxed position. *Autogenics* thus helps to re-balance the body's ANS more towards the 'relaxed', normal, parasympathetic system.

The **Autogenic Therapy Technique** is very easy – once learnt – and then it can be done anywhere, anytime. It doesn't require any special equipment, and a session is usually completed in about 20 minutes. Here is how to start learning the Autogenic Therapy Technique:

- First, sit or lie down in a comfortable position somewhere where you will not be disturbed.
- Uncross your legs, relax your arms at your sides, breathe out and let go of any tension in your shoulders.
- Then, take a few slow, deep breaths and then start to say to yourself the statements in the 10-part process slowly and evenly.
- Repeat each statement a number of times, for the duration of **about a minute**.
- Visualize experiencing each sensation, or each image, in as much detail as possible as you proceed through the technique.

While ATT is simple, there are still ways that can help you get the most out of it:

- For best learning results, do your *Autogenics* exercise twice a day as regularly as possible, for about 3 months.
- While you may feel more relaxed after just one session, the full health benefits won't really kick in until after a few months of regular practice.
- *Autogenics* works better for some people when they listen to the sound of their own voice. You can record your own guided session using the script below.
- Some people feel *more* anxious when they first begin autogenic training. If this happens, warm up with progressive muscle relaxation first.
- If you aren't getting the results you're looking for, seek out an Autogenic therapist.

### **Medical Integrity:**

Dozens of studies have confirmed that ATT is particularly useful for treating anxiety disorders. There are also numerous studies that show a number of benefits for many different health conditions. ATT is very popular and well-integrated into the healthcare systems in (particular) in Germany & Austria, where Autogenic Therapy has also developed into a form of psychotherapy.

Dr. Johannes Schultz, a neurologist and psychiatrist, developed Autogenic Therapy (ATT) 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. ATT 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 also works especially well for people, who are relatively intolerant of hypertensive medicine.

More detailed information about ATT can be obtained from the website of the British Autogenic Society: [www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk](http://www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk)

### **Learning the Technique:**

Learning the technique takes a while: maybe, at least, 3 weeks. This version is not quite as simple as the original, but I find that the variation works better, and is also much more interesting for the person who is doing the technique. In order to get the main benefits, it depends on constant (daily) repetitions – perhaps twice a day.

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. 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.

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 them-self. Once you have ‘learnt’ it – and it is a form of self-training – then you will be able to relax much more quickly, easily and more deeply. It encourages a “passive observer” attitude that opens up the person to perceiving the mind and body more objectively, more like the position of a witness to what is happening inside them. Thus, regular practice of ATT, with its passive concentration, encourages a shift towards a different mode of perception, to a “witnessing self” that simply observes itself, without judgement, and without striving for any particular result or goal.

There are **10 sections of your body** and you will spend about **a minute on each section**. It can therefore be useful to have a small clock with a sweep-hand in a visible position to start with: to get used to timing the exercise. For each phase, you are going to develop **a short script** and also **an image** to help that particular part of your body relax.

### **Section 1: Your Feet**

Your ‘script’ for this section can be something like: *“My feet are warm and relaxed”* – and the ‘image’ can be (something like): – (a) walking along a lovely golden beach; or (b) sitting in front of a lovely open log fire; or (c) wearing your favourite slippers. But ... if the last time that you walked along a beach, you had cut your foot on a shell ... then that image wouldn’t work for you. It has to be a ‘script’ and an ‘image’ **that works for you**. During the minute spent in that section, try to imagine (or feel) that your feet *are* becoming actually warmer and more relaxed. At the end of that minute, you then move on to the next Section.

### **Section 2: Your Ankles and Calves**

The ‘script’ for this section can be something like: *“My ankles and calves are soft and warm”* – and the ‘image’ can be (something like) – (a) wearing multi-coloured leg-warmers; or (b) wrapping your legs in a nice warm blanket; or (c) imaging yourself sitting on the edge of a swimming pool in

the south of France, with a cold glass of something in your hand. You choose what script and image works for you. If you want to change an image for a particular section, change it the next time that you do the exercise. During that minute, try to imagine (or feel) that your ankles and calves *are* becoming softer and warmer and thus more relaxed. At the end of that minute, do one repeat of the script for Section 1: Your Feet, and then one repeat of the script for Section 2: Your Ankles & Calves. Then, you move on to the next Section.

### **Section 3: Your Knees and Thighs**

Sometimes, a script can contain an image: “*My thighs are like melted chocolate*”. Otherwise, the ‘script’ for this section can be something like: “*My thighs are ... and ...*” (insert your own words: soft, warm, relaxed, comfortable, etc.). Your image for this section might be of your cat sitting on your lap; or reading a story to a child, or grandchild, on your lap; whatever image works for you! At the end of that minute, do one repeat of the script for Section 1; one repeat of the script for Section 2; one repeat of the script for Section 3; and then, move on to the next Section.

### **Section 4: Your Pelvis**

For this section, your script can contain words like: “*warm, soft, relaxed, open, ...*” and your image might be something like having a warm bath; or in a Jacuzzi; or just having had great sex: whatever works for you! Again, try to allow the images to actually have a physical and relaxing effect on your body. Keep repeating the script to keep your mind occupied and focused. At the end of the minute for that Section, do one repeat of the script for the feet: one repeat of the script for ankles & calves; one repeat of the script for knees & thighs; and one repeat of the script for the pelvis. Then, move on to the next Section.

### **Section 5: Your Abdomen**

Under the influence of stress hormones like adrenaline, i.e. at times of stress, the digestive system automatically shuts down. So, for this section, we want your digestive system to start up again, properly, naturally. So ... “*What is your favourite soup?*” Imagine, you are sitting in front a bowl of your favourite soup; imagine sprinkling a bit of parsley, or fresh herbs, or maybe some grated parmesan; perhaps, there is also some warm, crusty bread alongside. Keep your imagination as active as possible – until you actually start to salivate! That is your parasympathetic-oriented digestive system starting up. At the end of that minute, do one repeat of the script for each of the previous sections. Then, move on to the next Section.

### **Section 6: Your Torso**

When we are under stress, we tend to breathe in and hold: to retain energy. So, for this section, focus on breathing *out*, more than breathing *in*. Breathe in for a count of three; breathe out for a count of six, seven, eight, nine, ten ... as long as you can. Repeat this exercise gently for the rest of the whole minute. You can imagine: squeezing the air out of beach-ball; or standing on a beach, breathing out, with all your stress and tension being carried out to sea. Whatever works! At the end of that minute, do one repeat of each of the scripts for each of the previous Sections. Then, move on to the next Section.

### **Section 7: Your Hands**

There are lots of potential scripts for warm, flexible, soft, relaxed hands – and even more potential images: Kashmir gloves; warm hand cream; holding a child’s hand; Dürer’s praying hands; etc. For myself, I would choose a line of poetry from the 1967’s anthology ‘The Mersey Sound’: “*I will*

*hold you in my hands tenderly like broken fruitcake.*” At the end of that minute, do one repeat of the script for each of the previous sections. Then, move on to the next Section.

### **Section 8: Your Arms**

What do your arms feel like when you get home from the supermarket, having carried the heavy shopping bags into the kitchen: ‘Tired’, ‘Heavy’, ‘Floppy’, etc. There’s a script and an image. You want someone else to put the food away and put the kettle on for a cup of tea. At the end of that minute, do the repeats of the scripts for each of the previous Sections. Then, you can move on to the next Section.

### **Section 9: Your Shoulders and Neck**

There are lots of images (or methods) that can help your neck and shoulders relax. We often store massive amounts of tension there. To relax one’s shoulders – and neck – you can develop a suitable script; “carrying the ‘world’ on one’s shoulders” is a common phrase; or ‘this’ or ‘that’ is a heavy burden. You can even make a little stretching and re-settling movement; and possibly imagine a strong, hot power-shower; or a skilled masseuse, working on one’s shoulders. Fantasy images can even take you to ... (maybe) ... a waterfall on a tropical island; the warmth of a summer meadow, filled with wildflowers; whatever works for you!

### **Section 10: Your Head, Scalp and Face**

There are 43 muscles in your face, and many of them go towards making either a smile or a frown. By expanding or contracting our facial muscles in different degrees and combinations, we can produce thousands of different expressions: messages that provide cues to our overall emotional state; our short-term feelings about our immediate environment; our mental well-being; our personality and mood; our physical health; our integrity; and whether or not we view others as being creditable. There are also thousands of subtle micro-expressions expressed in facial expressions and tilts of the head. Much benefit can also be got from imagining a scalp massage; or one’s hair being brushed; or that one is just lying in the sun, melting.

### **Completing the Exercise:**

You have just spent a minute on helping each Section o relax a little more – 10 Sections is 10 minutes, with an additional 2-3 minutes for the repeats. The whole exercise takes 20 minutes; so, there are about 7 or 8 minutes left, where you can spend the time just ‘being’ relaxed.

Thoughts and feelings can come, and then be let go of; if you need an image, imagine looking out of the window of a slow-moving passenger train. Things come into focus; and then pass by. Allow the thoughts and feelings to pass by. Occasionally, there will be a thought that you wish to retain: “I need to pay my Car Tax”; or “It is Aunty Mary’s birthday: I need to send her a card.” Imagine a note on a white-board, or a post-it note, so that you remember it without effort: and then let it go.

This is where and when the goodies really start to happen; this is where your body rediscovers a state of greater relaxation; this is how you move towards that state of greater relaxation, bit by bit, each and every time that you do the exercise. This is when you gradually start to really and truly benefit from doing the exercise.

### **Finishing:**

Let yourself come back 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 too 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 bit 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 at least three weeks or 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); resolving 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 even 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 perhaps a (body-oriented) psychotherapist, to try to understand the particular meaning of these symptoms for you. Ideally, these people should be familiar with similar relaxation techniques.

### **Variations:**

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 Therapy Technique exercise.

If you suffer from an upset stomach, you might 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 you can 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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