

THE BIG IDEAS

The Relaxation Response
It's the opposite of "Fight-or-Flight."

How to Trigger It
There are a bunch of ways.

Visualization
It's powerful.

Brush Your Brain
Approach it like brushing your teeth.

Just Say, "Oh Well."
When your mind wanders.

Mind Body Practices
Are *really* powerful.

The Placebo Effect
Is surprisingly powerful, too.

Expectation & Belief
Science says: BELIEVE!

Mind Body Genetics
Stunning research.

"We now have scientific proof that the mind can heal the body."

~ Herbert Benson



The Relaxation Revolution

Enhancing Your Personal Health Through the Science and Genetics of Mind Body Healing

BY HERBERT BENSON · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2010 · 269 PAGES

"Gradually, study after mind body study, carried out with the most careful scientific protocols, produced incontrovertible evidence that the mind can indeed influence—and heal—the body."

~ Herbert Benson from *The Relaxation Revolution*

Herbert Benson MD, the brilliant Harvard Medical School professor and leading mind body researcher, has been studying the science of meditation for decades. He published his groundbreaking book *The Relaxation Response* in 1976 where he documented the incredible positive benefits of inducing what he calls "The Relaxation Response." This book basically brings that book up-to-date and goes into great detail on how meditation (and other mind body practices) can significantly boost our levels of health and well-being.

The Relaxation Revolution is part "why to" and part "how to" and is packed with all kinds of scientific research studies, specific tips and guided meditations/visualizations on how to deal with a range of specific challenges. I highly recommend it.

I'm not sure how many times I said, "Wow!" out loud as I read it but it was a lot. I'm blown away by what we know *scientifically* about the benefits of meditation and I'm excited to share a few of my favorite Big Ideas from this great book.

Let's kick it off by getting to know a little more about the relaxation response.

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

"Briefly stated, the relaxation response is defined as the response that is the opposite of the "fight-or-flight" or stress response. It is characterized by the following: decreased metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing; a decrease or "calming" in brain activity; an increase in attention and decision-making functions of the brain; and changes in gene activity that are the opposite of those associated with stress."

The relaxation response. As Benson says above, it's basically the opposite of the "fight-or-flight" response that most of us spend way too much of our time in these days.

Our bodies are brilliantly architected in such a way that, when faced with a life-threatening danger, all systems necessary for our survival are activated: from our hearts pumping blood to our legs so we can make a quick exit to adrenalin flooding our system so we're as strong as possible for a potential fight.

Now, back in the day when we needed to worry about saber-tooth tigers having us for lunch, that fight-or-flight response mechanism was pretty sweet. Unfortunately, our body's evolution hasn't quite kept up with our mind's evolution and now a sideways glance from our boss or someone cutting us off in traffic often elicits the same response. All. Day. Long.

That constant barrage takes a significant toll on our well-being. And, researchers have discovered that our ability to induce its opposite relaxation response is H-U-G-E.

" We knew from our previous scientific studies that those practicing mind body techniques tended to experience lower blood pressure, calmer brain activity, healthful emissions of nitric oxide in the body's cells, and other physical and emotional benefits."

~ Herbert Benson

So, relaxation response = decreased metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing; a decrease or "calming" in brain activity; an increase in attention and decision-making functions of the brain; and changes in gene activity that are the opposite of those associated with stress = good.

Now, how about some love on how to actually rock the relaxation response?

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO TRIGGER THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

"The participants in the genetics study used a number of different meditative, relaxation, and prayer-based techniques. These included repeating a mantra, mindfulness meditation, Transcendental Meditation, Vipassana meditation, breath focus, Kripalu or Kundalini yoga, and repetitive prayer. Despite the variety, all techniques yielded the same gene expression. We found that our minds and bodies, all the way down to the genetic level, are built to experience a common relaxation response state, regardless of the technique used to elicit it."

Love that.

One of the key themes Benson comes back to again and again throughout this book is the fact that it's *not* the specific technique per se, it's the mind body response that's induced.

We can use any number of techniques to induce the relaxation response—the key point is to consistently get there!!!

As Benson also says: "There is no single, correct approach for triggering the relaxation response or employing any other mind body technique. For one person, a repetitive action, such as walking or jogging with a focus on regular footfalls, may be the answer; for another, a repetitive phrase or prayer, said silently or audibly, may provide the gateway to healthful inner physiologic and genetic changes; or for someone like Adam, an appropriate recording, such as the Olivia CD, may be the best approach. But if you use one of these options, it is just as essential to include the three components listed on page 10 of the first chapter: 1) break the pattern of everyday thoughts; 2) assume a passive attitude; and 3) devote at least 12 to 15 minutes to the Phase One relaxation response trigger."

Check out the book for the eight step process of inducing Benson's relaxation response. For now, know that we want to make sure we have three things: "1) A mental focusing device to break the pattern of everyday thoughts. 2) A passive, "oh well" attitude toward distracting thoughts. 3) Sufficient time—an average of 12 to 15 consecutive minutes."

And, check out www.Blissitations.com where Alexandra and I are developing cool guided meditations, visualizations, affirmations and other goodness to help you rock the relaxation response.

Now, let's check out a few more cool "How to" Big Ideas then get into some more of the "Why to" of meditation/mind body practices!

THE POWER OF VISUALIZATION

"I introduced her to our two-phase Benson-Henry Protocol for mind body healing: 1) the Phase One relaxation response trigger, and 2) Phase Two visualization or mental imagery."

The protocol Benson recommends throughout the book has two phases: First getting into the relaxation response-mode and then using visualization and guided imagery to address your specific challenge. It's really cool. And, in the book he actually has separate sections on how to deal with everything from back pain to anxiety. Good stuff.

The basic idea is that we want to spend 12-15 minutes dropping into the relaxation response and then, while in that relaxed, receptive state, "use mental imagery, such as picturing a peaceful

"The power of expectation—the kind of expectation that embraces a deep belief that what is expected will actually occur—has long been recognized as a significant mental and emotional force."

~ Herbert Benson

scene in which you are free of your medical condition, to engage healing expectation, belief, and memory."

You can find a lot of great guided meditations online and we're using this basic framework for our Guided Blissitations as well.

BRUSH YOUR BRAIN

"Here is a typical, simple response that I give to such performance-focused anxieties: "Don't worry about how well you're doing! Don't worry about whether the relaxation response is really working or whether your mental picture is maximizing your health benefits. Just do it!" I also frequently use the analogy of brushing teeth. Most of us are concerned to one extent or another with dental hygiene, but we don't dwell on the tooth-cleaning process. We just work away with that brush every day. Almost no one evaluates the brushing, to say, "That was a good brush!" or, "Too bad—that was a bad brush." We simply do it! Similarly, if you're taking a pill your doctor has prescribed for your cholesterol or blood pressure, you probably don't wonder, "Am I putting this pill in the proper side of my mouth? Am I swallowing it correctly? Is it really going to work?" Again, you just do it—and that should be your approach to mind body treatments."

How great is *that*?!?

When was the last time you worried about how well you were brushing your teeth? You just grab a tooth brush and brush, yah?

Well, imagine if we took the same approach with our meditation. It's not about doing it perfectly, it's about doing it *consistently.*

And, of course, the same rule holds for any activity in our lives where we may hold back for fear of not doing it perfectly—whether that's writing or performing or teaching or whatever. Fact is, the greatest risk is simply not showing up, eh?

So... If you've been holding off on starting your meditation/relaxation response practice out of fear of not doing it perfectly, just go sit down and brush your brain, please. :)

JUST SAY, "OH WELL."

"As part of these review sessions, the researcher answered the participant's questions, including those posed on the daily home logs. Probably the most common was some variation of this one from Adam: "I keep having these outside thoughts that interfere with my concentration—what can I do to avoid them?" The best answer: "Just say, 'Oh well,' and return to the exercise."

I love that.

"Just say, 'Oh well,' and return to the exercise."

A big part of meditation/inducing the relaxation response is ACCEPTANCE. We spend so much of our lives constantly berating ourselves about how we could have done something better. Stress gremlins feed on hyper-critical self-talk and meditation is a time to let that go.

So, if you're wondering what you should do when all kinds of thoughts interfere with your concentration during meditation, just say "Oh, well," and return to your practice.

What's really cool about this, btw, is that not only does this whole "Oh, well," business help us get into the deeply restorative relaxation response, it also helps us re-wire/re-train our minds to deal with stress OUTSIDE of our meditation. One of the biggest benefits I've gotten from my meditation practice is the ability to "see" that some problems just aren't worth worrying about—namely, those problems that I can't do anything about!

And all this reminds me of The Serenity Prayer—one of the prayers I say during my meditations:

"Emphasis was placed on the calming effects of regular, deep breathing; on the benefits of using a repetitive phrase or sound; and on the importance of passively ignoring intrusive thoughts."

~ Herbert Benson

"These studies have established clearly that eliciting the relaxation response through any of a wide variety of techniques will actually change the body's gene activity or expression."

~ Herbert Benson

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

Amen.

Alrighty. Now it's time for some "Why to" goodness.

MIND BODY PRACTICES ARE POWERFUL

"In fact, any condition that is caused or exacerbated by stress can be helped by a well-designed mind body approach. Furthermore, because all health conditions have some stress component, it is no overstatement to say that virtually every single health problem and disease can be improved with a mind body approach."

It's awesome to see philosophical and self-dev wisdom scientifically established.

In our Note on Dale Carnegie's classic *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* we quoted a bunch of peeps, including some old-school philosopher guy named Plato who was talking about this stuff 2,500 years ago: *"The greatest mistake physicians make is that they attempt to cure the body without attempting to cure the mind; yet the mind and the body are one and should not be treated separately!"*

So, know this: Mind body approaches work!!!

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

"I knew that it was essential for Caroline to be convinced that this new concept to which I was introducing her—the use of mind body healing to control her pain—was rooted in scientific fact. Many hundreds of scientific studies have shown that an inner conviction, which the medical community has linked to the phenomenon called "the placebo effect," can help produce healing for scores of diseases and medical complaints. The placebo effect is a mind body mechanism that may bring about healing through a person's expectation and belief that a certain treatment will work."

Benson talks about the fascinating origins of the placebo effect and describes the importance of our expectations and beliefs.

Fact is, the BELIEF that something will work greatly influences its effectiveness. We know this SCIENTIFICALLY. And, we KNOW that mind body practices are powerful.

So, believe in the power of this stuff and go out and rock it.

And, enjoy the positive benefits, yo! :)

HOW POWERFUL ARE EXPECTATION AND BELIEF?

"You can restructure your thinking processes to expect good health rather than bad. With that expectation, your mind will more likely influence your body in a healthful direction."

~ Herbert Benson

"Scientific research now shows that the "miracles" of the self-healing powers of the mind and body are no less significant than the "miracles" wrought by many drug and surgery treatments. These well-designed scientific studies make it clear that it is at least as reasonable to believe in the healing power of the mind as it is to believe in the healing power of a given drug or surgical procedure."

As I just mentioned, Benson talks about the power of positive expectation a *lot.*

It's actually quite surprising (for me at least) to see a super conservative Harvard scientist talking about just how powerful our positive expectations are.

Here's one amazing study he shares:

"But is there any scientific foundation for placing expectation and belief on such a high pedestal?"

"The better you understand how these mind body clinical studies have improved hypertension, chronic pain, depression, angina pectoris, and many other health conditions and complaints, the more clearly you will see how these findings can be applied to treat your medical problems."

~ Herbert Benson

More specifically and personally, just how powerful can your personal beliefs and expectations be in the healing process? Let's allow a 2002 study in the New England Journal of Medicine to suggest an answer.

In this study, conducted by scientists at the Baylor College of Medicine, 165 patients with osteoarthritis (wear-and-tear arthritis) of the knee randomly received one of three treatments: arthroscopic debridement (removal of dead tissue inside the knee); arthroscopic lavage (washing-out of the knee joint); or placebo "sham" surgery. Arthroscopy involves the use of a fiber-optic device that is inserted to permit observation of the inside of a joint and to facilitate surgical procedures inside the joint. In this investigation, the placebo surgery involved having a physician make a surface skin incision on the knee and simulate a debridement without insertion of an arthroscope. The researchers assessed the outcomes of the procedures over a 24-month period. The results were startling: The investigators reported that at no point did the patients who had the real surgery have less knee pain or better physical function than the placebo group. The sham surgery worked as well as the real surgery. The researchers concluded that there was no clinically meaningful difference among the three groups. In fact, they said, at some points during follow-up, objective physical function of the patients was significantly worse in the debridement group than in the placebo group!

This study is by no means an isolated example of the power of belief and expectation. Hundreds of other investigations, involving a wide variety of diseases and health problems, have demonstrated the power of the human mind over disease. The treatment principle might be summed up this way: Just as an antibiotic drug may stop an infection or surgery may eliminate a malignancy, so the mind—your mind—has the capacity to treat or even cure many of your serious physical and emotional complaints."

That's pretty stunning.

As Benson reminds us again and again throughout the book, our EXPECTATION that a certain procedure or activity will benefit us is a key component to *receiving* that benefit.

When we bring it into the realm of developing our own meditation practice, we want to KNOW that the practice of inducing the relaxation response is HUGELY beneficial for us. This expectation and belief combined with the actual activity has the potential to yield remarkable results.

So, again, let's rock it, yo!!!!

MIND BODY PRACTICES ALTER OUR GENE EXPRESSION

Quick context: Benson tells us that we all have ~54,000 genes. Scientists can map these out and see whether each gene is expressing itself positively/healthfully or negatively/unhealthfully.

Benson and his team of researchers wanted to see if mind body practices influence our genetics. So, they ran a study and discovered that mind body practices do, in fact, influence the expression of our genes. In their study, 2,209 genes were expressed differently (and more healthfully!) in the mind body practitioners than in the non-mind body practitioners. That's powerful.

What's even more powerful is the second half of their study. As Benson says: "We continued our investigation by posing these questions: "What would happen if the participants in Adam's group—those with no experience with the relaxation response—were instructed in appropriate mind body techniques and then applied them in their daily lives for a few weeks? In that short time period, would they show any of the same positive, anti-stress gene-expression changes that the highly experienced mind body practitioners had shown?"

Awesome question, eh?

Here's what they found: "The results and comparisons for the final part of the study were

startling and significant. First, we discovered that when we compared specific sets or signatures of gene expression, or activity, in Adam's group before and after their relaxation response training, 1,561 genes changed expression from the first test to the second. Again, the probability of this being due to chance was less than five in 100. Even more striking, when we compared Adam's group after their training with the experienced mind body group (9.4 years of practice), we found that 433 gene expression signatures were similar in both groups. The eight weeks of training had caused the gene expression signatures in Adam's group to move close to the gene expression signatures in the group with more than nine years of mind body practice. The significance of these results came home to us dramatically when we considered how likely (or unlikely) it would be for these changes to have happened by chance in both parts of the experiment. We determined that the probability of the same gene signatures being involved accidentally in both groups in both experiments was less than one in 10 billion. It was virtually impossible that the similarities in gene activity of the experienced practitioners' group and Adam's group occurred by chance."

There were many times when I said, "Wow!" as I read this book. This was definitely one of them.

I'm blown away by a number of things here: First, the simple fact that we can actually count, map and individually analyze each of our 52,000 genes is stunningly cool to me. Second, it's amazing that we can influence the expression of our genetic code by engaging in mind body practices. And, third, it's incredibly inspiring that we can significantly (and measurably!) alter these genes in as little as 12-15 minutes of daily meditation for 8 weeks.

How awesome is *that*?!? :)

Kinda makes you wanna go get your Relaxation Response on, eh? :)

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Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you'll probably like...

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About the Author of "The Relaxation Revolution"

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Herbert Benson, MD, is the Mind Body Medical Institute Associate Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School. He is the author of the mega-bestselling book, *The Relaxation Response*, as well as ten other trade books. His groundbreaking work established the modern field of mind body medicine. Dr. Benson is the Director Emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. (from **SimonandSchuster.com** where you can learn more!)

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is a lover of wisdom (aka a "Philosopher") and a passionate student of life who's committed to inspiring and empowering millions of people to live their greatest lives as he studies, embodies and shares the universal truths of optimal living. He harts his job.