

Autogenic Methods

A self-directed program to elicit the relaxation response.
To be used with the guidance of a clinician.

Western Center Health Group

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INTRODUCTION

A seventeen-year old girl is on her way home from school one Friday evening. It has been a good day and she is happy and relaxed as she sits on the bus, looking forward to the evening. Suddenly she remembers that she has to take her driver's test the next morning. She knows that she is not as well prepared as she could be. Suddenly, her heart beat speeds up, her breath shortens, her stomach tightens, her shoulders tense and her hands become cold and clammy.

The girl has experienced a typical stress reaction, one which is shared by most of us. It is physiologically built in to all mammals, including humans, and in medicine it is called the "fight or flight" response.

In the young woman's case, it is clear that her mind is affecting her body. She is obviously not in any actual or present danger as she sits on the bus; her reaction has been caused by her *thoughts*.

Most people know that we can cause ourselves stress by thinking of something threatening. What is not so well known is that we can reverse the stress reaction in the same manner; that is, just by thinking about it. This reverse process triggers the "relaxation response" which is, like the fight or flight reaction, a built-in physiological response.

By working through this booklet you will learn about "autogenics", a simple technique for eliciting the relaxation response. Merely sitting at home resting does not have the same effect as engaging in a relaxation program. Extensive studies have shown that it is necessary to use a specific technique to elicit the relaxation response voluntarily.

Part One briefly describes the origin of the word "autogenic" and the physiological basis for the technique. Part Two, takes you through five stages designed to help you master the technique quickly and easily.

Autogenic Training is one of several methods for achieving the relaxation response. Other methods are discussed in different booklets in this series.

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This booklet is designed to be used by a client and clinician working together. Please do not try to use it by yourself. The autogenic technique is very effective, but it must be used with caution where certain medical conditions exist. Discuss the matter first with your clinician. When you have done so, follow the instructions carefully. As you learn the technique, fill out all the checklists, and discuss each session fully with your clinician, before and after practice.

We hope that you will find the sessions an interesting and rewarding experience.

PART ONE: THE PHYSIOLOGICAL BASIS OF AUTOGENIC TRAINING

Historical background

The fact that we can bring about relaxation of our bodies by thinking in a certain way was noted by several physicians at the beginning of the twentieth century. Johannes H. Schultz, a German doctor, became particularly fascinated with the relationship between the mind and physical relaxation. He devoted many years to developing a simple technique that could be used by virtually anyone. It was he who coined the word "autogenic", which means, literally "self-generating".

Dr. Schultz's technique consists of simple sentences that people repeat to themselves at particular times and places. The value of the technique has been carefully researched and fully demonstrated; autogenics has seen wide use in Europe, in the United States, in Japan, and in Canada. Dr. Wolfgang Luthe has been the most notable proponent in Canada. In the last fifteen years, great impetus has been given to the use of autogenic techniques by the development of "biofeedback" instruments, which measure physiological changes that occur when the relaxation response is elicited.

The physiological basis

The autogenic technique that you will learn here employs sentences built upon three physiological states: a sensation of heaviness in the limbs; a feeling of warmth, and easy, natural breathing.

HEAVINESS

Special sets of nerves in the muscles of our arms and legs tell the brain the position of our limbs. These nerves are called *proprioceptors*. They are so sensitive that they can detect the pull of gravity on our limbs when we are sitting, or lying down, relaxed. Most of us are unaware of this sensation unless we decide to concentrate on it, but the sensation is one of a slight heaviness.

In the course of research into autogenic training, it has been discovered that this feeling of heaviness can be induced by repeating

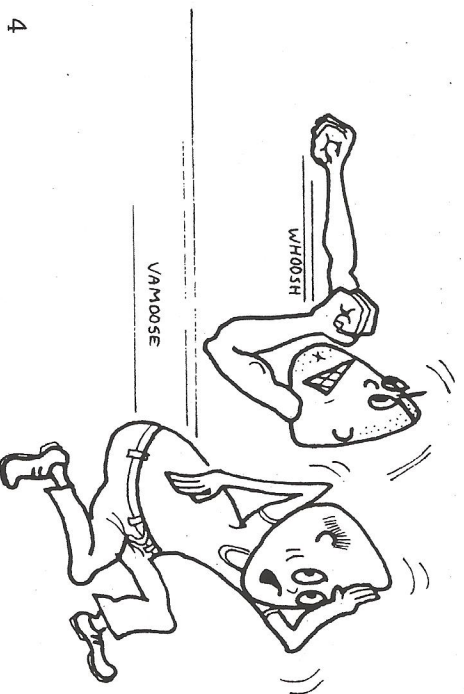
a simple phrase such as "My arms and legs are heavy". Such phrases are at the core of the autogenic method. When repeated several times they cause the person to become relaxed.

It has also been found, however, that about 10% of people do not experience the feeling of heaviness. They are in fact benefiting from the relaxation response without being aware of the usual sensation. Such people may still use the technique effectively for they will feel relaxed; they may have other sensations of their own, such as lightness.

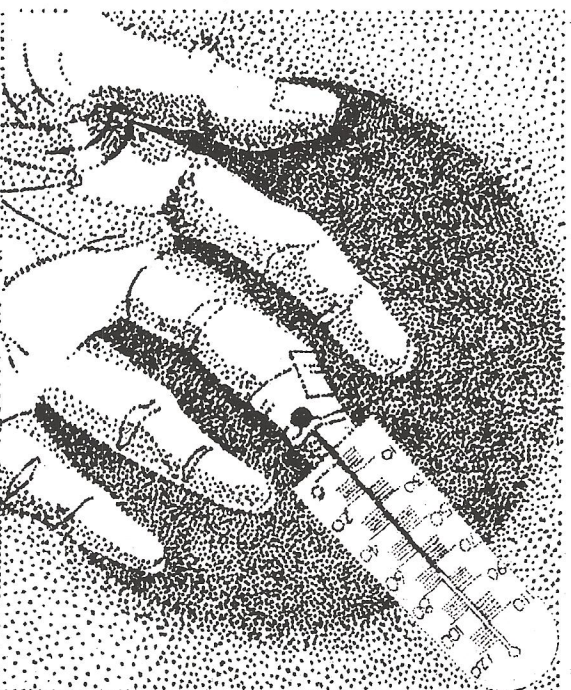
WARMTH

At some point in your life, you have probably become aware that your hands have suddenly become cold, or "that you are getting the shivers". This is frequently dismissed as poor circulation. Usually, though, it is a stress response, perhaps to a stressor of which you are unaware. Popular sayings have sometimes noted this effect in nervous lovers — "Cold hands, warm heart!"

The reason for the cold hand syndrome in a stress situation is quite simple. When the "fight-or-flight" response is activated, blood is redirected to the large muscles of the body in order to prepare them for action. The supply of blood to other areas therefore is restricted. Small blood vessels in the periphery of the body (the skin) and in the extremities (the hands and feet) start to clamp down and coldness results. As the tension passes, the blood flow returns to its normal balance, and skin, hands, and feet start to warm up.



This warming up is the kind of physiological reaction that can be measured with the biofeedback machines we referred to earlier. A simpler method, one that you may like to use in your sessions, is to attach a thermometer to one of your fingers and to take a reading of your skin temperature before and after you elicit the relaxation response.



AUTONOMIC AND SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Autogenics helps you control your "autonomic" nervous system. For many centuries it was believed that the autonomic system was automatic and outside conscious control, as opposed to the "motor" or voluntary nervous system, which we can command at will. For example, if you think, "Kick, leg", it kicks!

It is now known that we have more control over the autonomic system than was previously thought, although the system continues to function automatically if we ignore it. Thus, if you say "my legs are warm", the phrase serves as a mild command to your body and small blood vessels will relax, causing an increased blood flow that warms the limbs.

BREATHING

Breathing is another part of our physiology that functions automatically as a rule, but can be consciously controlled.

Breathing also is affected by stress. When the fight or flight response is activated, breathing is immediately quickened to supply the body with more oxygen in case sudden exertion is called for. Breathing also can become shallower as the chest muscles tense to prepare for action, or as stomach and chest muscles tighten to control rising fear or panic. If the reaction is extreme, a person can breathe too fast — hyperventilate — which can change the chemistry of the blood and cause dizzy spells or fainting.

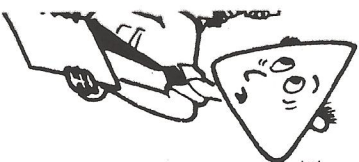
In a normal, relaxed state, breathing is deep, slow and regular. In our third practice session we will be showing you how to use a simple sentence that will help you restore your breathing to its normal functioning. This will reinforce the relaxation brought about by the use of the other autogenic phrases.

BENEFITS

Autogenic training can be of benefit to anyone who wishes to use it. In the busy, difficult lives that most of us lead, it is extremely helpful to have such a technique on hand. The method also has been shown to be beneficial as a medical treatment for such conditions as insomnia, migraine and tension headaches, irritable bowel problems, ulcers and anxiety states or phobias. Again, we emphasize that it should be used with care in some medical conditions, so please discuss any medical problems you may have with your clinician.

VISIT TO CLINICIAN

This overview probably will have left you with a number of questions. Please raise any that you may have with your clinician. This booklet is intentionally incomplete in some areas, because certain kinds of knowledge are better imparted in a discussion. This is a workbook, to be read and used jointly with your clinician. Some technical material has been excluded from the text in order to keep this booklet brief. Your clinician may add details that pertain to your particular situation.



PART TWO: THE PRACTICE SESSIONS

Getting ready

TIME

We recommend that you practice three or four times a day. It would be best if these sessions were in a variety of circumstances. If they are, you will become aware of the tension that builds during your daily activities. Plan the sessions in advance and put them high on your list of priorities.

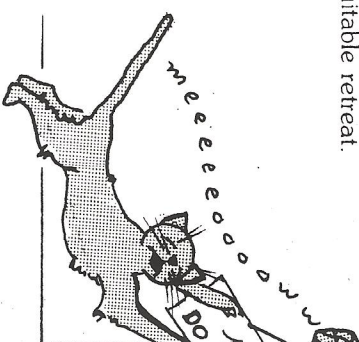
Times which have worked well for others include: in the morning before getting out of bed, just before breakfast, at coffee break, at lunch time, before supper, late evening, and in bed before sleep.

PLACE

You will need to find places that are private, comfortable, quiet and free from distractions. You need somewhere that allows you to close the door so that family, pets, friends, or co-workers will not interrupt in the middle of a session.

DISTURBANCES

The less you are disturbed the better. Therefore you might want to take the phone off the hook, make sure that TV and radio will not be turned on and make an agreement with your family that they will leave you undisturbed for a while. If the necessary privacy is difficult to obtain at home, you might like to consider staying at work after hours or going to the reading room of a library. Some people find that the bathroom or washroom is a suitable retreat.



ATTITUDE

It is important to have a relaxed, almost passive attitude towards the exercises. Do not approach them like an athlete in training. Rather, imagine you are sitting down for a regular chat with a dear old friend. An analogy may make the idea of passivity clearer. Suppose you went into a room. Then, after you had left it, someone asked you if there was a light on in there. You would be able to answer "yes" even though you had been looking for a book and had not actually noticed the light, lamps or switches. You were merely passively aware of light.

DISTRACTIONS

While you are doing the exercises, you will probably find — particularly when you first start — that your mind will wander away to other thoughts, feelings, or minor disturbances. When you notice that you have wandered in this manner, simply let go of the distraction and return your attention to the exercise. Do not try to push the thoughts or feelings away, or get impatient with yourself. It is perfectly normal and all right if distracting thoughts arise. All you need to do is let your attention return to heaviness when you notice that your mind has drifted somewhere else, and to continue bringing it back whenever this happens during the entire period of the exercise.

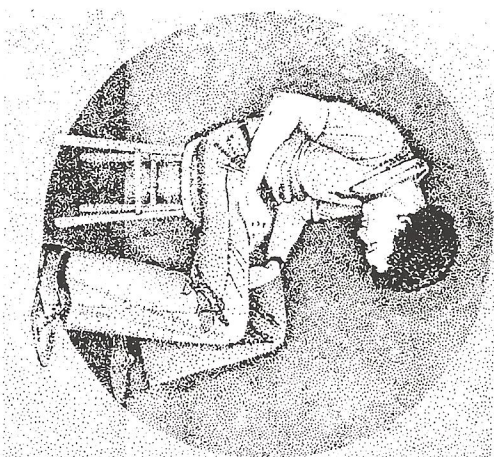
THE PHRASES

Don't become too involved with the actual meaning of the autogenic phrases. It is the process which is important rather than the word content itself. For example, while repeating "my arm is heavy", you may experience feelings of lightness. That is fine, and a not uncommon experience. But don't feel that something has gone wrong. For most people this is merely an occasional reaction. As we have said, it is the process which is most important. The phrase is a tool, a way in.

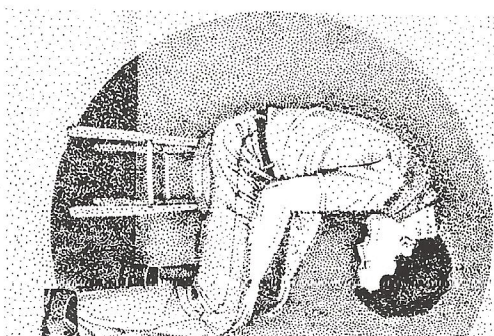
POSTURE

The two main conditions for correct posture are that your body is supported evenly and that both right and left sides are equal (symmetrical). These conditions are met in the recommended postures as demonstrated in the following illustrations. Some of the reasons for paying particular attention to posture are as follows:

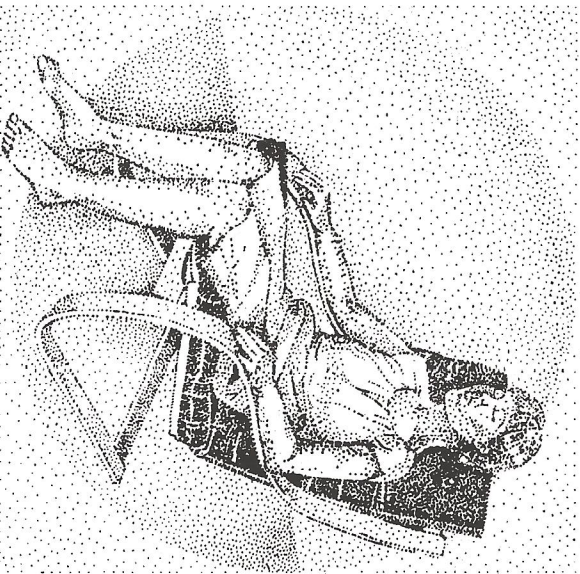
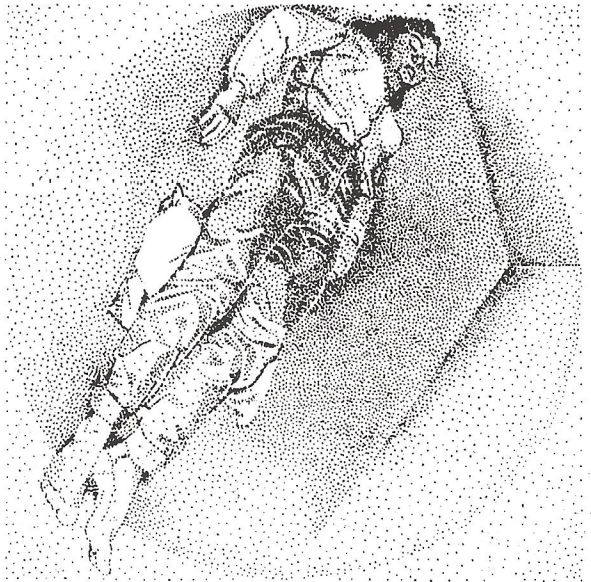
1. In the indicated positions your body is able to relax completely, your weight being evenly distributed.
2. No pressure areas can develop in these positions. With legs crossed, for example, you can develop a sensitive, even tender, pressure point.
3. Even distribution of pressure reduces the sensory data going to the brain and aids relaxation.
4. The arms and legs are partially bent, and supported allowing for full relaxation.
5. A variety of positions allows you to practice in a variety of places.



Wrong position



Right position



You probably will find it helpful to practice all the postures in various places before you actually begin doing the exercises.

CLOTHING

Loose comfortable clothing is important; a kaftan or kimono would be ideal. If you are wearing office clothes, take your shoes off and loosen your belt, necktie, shirt cuff, buttons, etc., or anything that may cause constriction.