

The Faith Factor: The Relaxation Response Plus Faith

A simple technique I use to bring out, or elicit, the Relaxation Response consists of four steps: (1) finding a quiet environment; (2) consciously relaxing the body's muscles; (3) focusing for ten to twenty minutes on a mental device, such as the word one or a brief prayer; and (4) assuming a passive attitude toward intrusive thoughts.

A number of years ago, I thought that this approach was all that was required to elicit benefits from the Relaxation Response. And it's true that the basic procedure is as valid as it ever was for helping individuals reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and otherwise enhance their physical and mental well-being. But now I've come to understand that the effects of this simple technique, combined with a person's deepest personal beliefs, can create other internal environments that can help the individual reach enhanced states of health and well-being.

This combination of a Relaxation-Response technique with the individual's belief system is what I call the Faith Factor. It's by no means an entirely original concept; rather it's a new kind of "package" that contains two powerful but familiar spiritual vehicles: (1) prayer or meditation; and (2) a deeply held set of philosophical or religious convictions. My function in exploring and describing this Faith Factor is to serve as a bridge between two disciplines: traditional faith and meditative practices, and scientific observation....

Not only did my research -- and that of my colleagues -- reveal that 25% of people feel more spiritual as the result of

the Relaxation Response, but it showed that those same people have fewer medical symptoms than do those who reported no increase in spirituality. It became clear that a person's religious convictions or life philosophy enhanced the average effects of the Relaxation Response in three ways: (1) People who chose an appropriate focus, that which drew upon their deepest philosophic or religious convictions, were more apt to adhere to the Relaxation Response routine, looking forward to it and enjoying it; (2) affirmative beliefs of any kind brought forth remembered wellness, reviving top-down, nerve-cell-firing patterns in the brain that were associated with wellness; (3) when present, faith in an eternal or life-transcending force seemed to make the fullest use of remembered wellness because it is a supremely soothing belief, disconnecting unhealthy logic and worries.

I already knew that the Relaxation Response could "disconnect" everyday thoughts and worries, calming people's bodies and minds more quickly and to a degree otherwise unachievable. It appeared that beliefs added to the response transported the mind/body even more dramatically, quieting worries and fears significantly better than the Relaxation Response alone. And I speculated that religious faith was more influential than other affirmative beliefs....

Let faith, the ultimate belief, heal you....

The next time you're faced with a major decision, medical or otherwise, ask yourself, "What feels like the right thing to do?" or "What would I do if the choice were entirely up to me?" I'm not suggesting that you make decisions based on this factor alone, but at least let belief be a player. Honor your convictions and perceptions enough to make them a part of a hearty intellectual argument.

