

Relaxation Is a Skill

Dr. Ron Kaiser January 23, 2014 No Comments

Relaxation Is a Skill (Transcription)

Hi this is Dr. Ron Kaiser with your March 2012 podcast from The Mental Health Gym. Since this is March it means that daylight savings time will soon be here and the official end of winter will also soon be here. In the Philadelphia area we've had real mild winter after having a couple of tough ones. I hope all you who lived around here were using our techniques and thinking about what can go right all winter long and I'll admit that sometimes that really does work out.

Anyway I think that we are ready to move on to the spring season and to do so I'd like to introduce a concept that I've kind of been implying on the website, but haven't really spoken about much until now, and that's the skill of relaxation. Now I know that some people are quite shocked when they begin to hear me speak of relaxation as being a skill. A lot of people think hey! That's an actual state of affairs.

I know how to relax, or I would know if I had the time or something like that. The reality is that sure, it is a skill that all of us have within us, but some of us have learned the bad habit of avoiding relaxation as we've been committing ourselves to doing a whole lot of other things in our lives and justifiably so in a lot of cases, a lot of us can justify combining things like work, and raising a family and having an obligation to, in some cases ageing parents or other people that we may be caring about in some cases we add to that an act of social life and so on.

In addition some people feel that it's something that's either innate or you don't have it, some people take pride in the fact that hey I just don't know how to relax or I just can't relax or I'm a type of

personality and I probably shouldn't be relaxing. Let's try and address that right at the start. Relaxation is something that everybody can do just as everybody can learn to use the computer, everybody can learn at least a basic ability to swim or dance or do some artwork, some of us are never going to be as good at any one of these activities as people who make the living at it or who seem to have a more natural talent for it. And the same holds true with relaxation.

Some people will undoubtedly have a little more difficult time relaxing than others, both from a physiologic standpoint and from a learned standpoint but it's something that everybody should do because there's a lot of evidence that suggests that relaxation is a critical element in reducing stress and the reduction of stress is a critical element in a lot of health behaviors. Chronic overstimulation of the sympathetic nervous system which is what happens when we're staying under a considerable amount of stress over a period of time, really leads to a number of health problems.

It can contribute to heart disease, hypertension, anxiety, sleep problems, dysfunctions of the immune systems and problems that contribute to abnormal and unhealthy ageing. That's a pretty good set of reasons to try and look at having some impact on stress reduction. It's hard to be stressed and relaxed at the same. It's hard to be anxious and relaxed at the same time and consequently if we can take some measures to reduce stress and anxiety we can help ourselves from the health standpoint as well as learning a skill that is you know kind of fun.

Those of who you aren't used to relaxing may not recognize that when people are just taking some time to do some deep breathing, enjoying nature, doing things at their own pace can really be quite fun and well not necessarily actively stimulating at the time, can contribute to a very stimulating lifestyle. Now you may have noticed

that among the products on the product page at the Mental Health Gym we really have only two paid products at this time. Now that we are in our second year we'll probably be adding some more but we have our three free products and two paid ones.

One that I've spoken at some length about my eBook, what can go right, but we also have a relaxation download. It on their partly because we use it frequently with our patients the Jefferson Headache centre who are learning Bio-feedback and then download the series of relaxation exercise but also its on there because I feel that it's very important to convey the fact that relaxation goes along with positive thinking in developing the appropriate mindset to lead to improved positive mental health and the achievement of goals. So what I'd like to do today is just kind of briefly outline some of these strategies that you can utilize in learning and doing relaxation.

Of course if you do utilize the download this is pretty well spelled out for you but what I'm outlining now is kind of a do it yourself way of bringing relaxation into your life if in a formal way if it's not done, normally by you and in this way you can build another skill and a rather important one into your repertoire. I like to think of about five steps in the process of building the skill of relaxation.

The first one is to take some time each day and just enjoy doing nothing. At this stage I'm not concerned about specific skills such as deep breathing or how many breaths a minute or things of this nature, but I just want people to get into the mode of saying you know every day, for about fifteen minutes before dinner or as I'm lying down before bed time or even at the start of the day, I'm going to take fifteen just want my mind wander, just not worry that the end of the fifteen minutes of what I've been able to have accomplished or what ideas or problems I've solved. Just building in the time itself is

a rather important step on the way to relaxation training. So that's step one.

The second step is I'd like to have people begin to do some breathing. Deep breathing is generally done on a basis of single digits per minute. In other words without making it too much of a task, you may want to at some point along the way kind of time yourself if you've got a clock or watch or clock with a second hand and just see over the course of a minute how many breaths you're able to take. When I say how many you're able to make I'm actually saying how few were you able to take, this shouldn't be a task. You don't wanna be holding your breath; it should be kind of a normal phenomenon to be able to slow down the breathing because in relaxed state you're doing something different than you're in active state.

There's no question that you may have to summon more breaths and probably shallower breaths than some normal activities but probably for some of you, you do that more than you need to. Learning how to slow it down, ideally ten breaths a minute, and my preferred way of doing things, particularly when I'm working with headache patients is to think in terms of about ten minutes twice a day at roughly the same times each day so that you're treating your breathing like your body is on medication.

Now if you're doing this as a do it yourself project, I would strongly encourage you to not be intimidated by a specific time frame. In other words I said in step one, do nothing for about fifteen minutes. Step two I'm talking about ten minutes deep breathing. But, you know, if you're not used to it, two or three minutes may be enough at the start or five. Don't make it a task, it's kind of a paradoxical to think in terms of working at relaxing, that's not our goal but after you started dealing with some of the deep breathing I think it'd be very

important to begin and put one of your hand down, in the area of your stomach and diaphragm and just make sure that the breaths are getting there deeply enough. Some of you'd be surprised at how hard it is in beginning and you'll also be surprised that how second nature it becomes once you're good at it.

Third step is kind of a formal meditation practice where you're actually setting up specific times once or twice a day to go through a process of meditation. Again, I have no problem with ten minutes, twice a day, I really don't have a problem once a day unless somebody is a headache patient because I do think that the most effective work is done if you do it in two chunks of ten to fifteen minutes at roughly the same times each day but if you're just learning it as a relaxation technique, I think that that's fine to be able to do it you know once a day, regular times each day , but this is where we introduce meditation, where we try to only concentrate on the breath, or there are techniques where you concentrate on a particular word, or so on, I just always have found it easier to concentrate on the breath to kind of bring yourself back to it if you lose the sense of concentration, don't be critical of yourself , but just stay focused on the breathing.

One of the hottest new disciplines in the psychology related field is mindfulness which is a technique of meditation that comes out of eastern philosophies and religions and it's a formal program that you can get trained for. The basic emphasis on mindfulness is again concentrating on the breathing, not being self critical if you lose your concentration but gently bringing yourself back to the breathing and to continue to practice in a systematic way staying very focused on the errand now.

There's lots of information about mindfulness in books, on the internet, so on. Again, on a do it yourself project I' be less concerned about

the specific type of meditation that you're doing as much as that would be that you're doing. Now the next step, the fourth step might be to introduce a systematic method of relaxation. One of the things that I like to do in working with patients is to ask them to sit comfortably or lie comfortably and then begin to concentrate on relaxing each part of their body from their feet on up. There are methods that actually involve tensing and then relaxing the muscle.

That's called progressive muscle relaxation and the basis of that is if you tighten the muscles in your calves or thighs or upper arms or forehead and then relax it, you can notice a clear difference between the tension and relaxation. Because I work with patients in pain, I don't really encourage tensing and relaxing the way that I might if I were working with people whose only problem is anxiety and not physical issues. At the same time I can say that I've found it to be particular disadvantage to have people to concentrate on actual relaxation. So when I tell people, now concentrate on feet and let your feet, relax, concentrate on your ankles, watch your ankles, relax, and I work up from there. I've never found it to be too disadvantageous them to tense and relax.

So anyway, fourth step would be to add a systematic, kind of way of relaxing, covering the entire body. And the fifth method would be an optional one but that's one of, close to what's called guided imagery but not with a lot of guidance. I generally will encourage people, once they've gone to relaxing their entire body that could they find a place to go where they would be perfectly relaxed if they had, say a long weekend and could get there almost instantly, probably more people pick out a beach scene than any place else, but I let them pick out the scene b'cuz beach scene may not be very relaxing if you're afraid of the water.

Just as mountain may be very relaxing for some people but if people have problems at higher altitudes that may not be relaxing for them. And you know, I think once you have various techniques, you can actually alternate them so that you're doing meditation or concentrating on the breathing some time, doing a relaxing scene, either in conjunction with the deep breathing or on its own, you know, I think there're lots of ways of working this out.

The most critical step is actually the first step of finding a time each day to devote to relaxation, to say that relaxation is not something that I can't do and in fact it's something that I want to do, I can do it and it's really a necessary part of maintaining good health both from the physical and emotional stand point. I should point out that people who begin to really utilize relaxation as a daily way of life, often get breathing rates that are down around five breaths a minute and some people who do relaxation or meditation may do it for twenty or thirty or more minutes a day.

So the ten or fifteen minutes that I talked about earlier should be kind of thought about as a starting point but if some people if they got time and the interest will do it for much longer. Anyway hopefully this has given something for you to think about and maybe even something to relax about.

This has been Dr. Ron Kaiser with the March 2012 podcast from the Mental Health Gym. As always I'd be glad to hear from you with any though you have about this podcast anything else that emanates Mental Health Gym and we'll be speaking again next month.