

The Science Of Relaxation

Jennifer R. Bloome

Relax? I need to relax? But I'm on bedrest, aren't I relaxing all the time? Even though you are resting your body 24/7, your mind is still on high alert. What about the dishes, the laundry, the bills, getting the children to their activities, the physical pain, the worries about the baby, the guilt, the "what ifs", the sadness, the anger&. Your mind and your body are intertwined - what happens to one happens to the other.

When you experience stress, whether it is a short-term event (we don't have any milk and I can't get to the grocery store), a long-term event (how are we going to be able to live on just one paycheck for the next 5 months), whether it is a physical event (contractions) or mental event (generalized worry or fear), your body releases hormones. These hormones affect all the organs in your body. This comes in handy when you need to have a final burst of energy to meet a deadline, but it wrecks havoc on your uterus. Sometimes the level of hormones is enough to irritate your uterus to cause contractions, or send your blood pressure sky high.

Your mind is an incredible organ. However, it doesn't know the difference between an actual event and one that you are "just thinking about." The same areas of your brain are engaged whether you are looking a red ball, or if you close your eyes and think about that same red ball. The same is true for stress. Your mind knows what you tell it.

The physiologic opposite to your body's response to stress has been termed the Relaxation Response. During this response your breathing, heart rate, blood pressure and metabolism all slow down. Short-term effects of inducing this response include feeling more in control, feeling refreshed. The long-term effects of inducing this response on a regular basis include improvement in concentration, energy level, self-acceptance, and inner peace. The most important long-term effect is that your body becomes less responsive to the stress hormones. The stress hormones no longer have the same effect on the organs of your body.

Scientific studies have proven that women who use the Relaxation Response for 20 minutes a day have longer pregnancies and heavier babies.

What do you need to do to elicit this response? There are many ways, some more conducive to bedrest than others. Yoga, prayer, meditation, relaxation techniques, and imagery are all ways to induce the Relaxation Response. The basis of inducing the response includes repetition of a word, sound, prayer, thought, phrase, or muscular activity and the passive return to that repetition when other thoughts come into your mind. The repetition can include focusing on your breath. Any activity that you do that incorporated these two principles will help you induce the Relaxation Response.

Try these activities:

1. Close your eyes and begin to focus your attention inward. Begin to lengthen out your breaths, keeping them as deep and as slow as is comfortable. Just focus on your breath. As you breathe in, say to yourself, "in", and as you breathe out, say to yourself "out." If you find yourself thinking of other things, just let those thoughts slip away and return your attention to your breath. Start by trying to do this activity for 5 minutes, working your way up to 20 minutes.
2. Close your eyes and begin to focus your attention inward. Again, begin to lengthen out your breaths, keeping them as deep and as slow as is comfortable. As you breathe in, picture the air that you are breathing in is a cool shade of blue or green. Imagine that you are filling your lungs with this relaxing color. Imagine that as you continue to breathe in this air that the colorful relaxing air is going into your bloodstream, being carried throughout your body. Your bloodstream eventually comes to your baby. Imagine the relaxing air circulating around the outside of your uterus, massaging the muscles and quieting them, and then circulating inside your uterus, around your baby, filling your baby's home with peace and relaxation. Try to keep this image for 5 minutes initially, working your way up to 20 minutes.

These activities will help you induce the Relaxation Response. Notice how you feel before you try the activity and how you feel afterwards. You will find that it gets easier to focus the more you practice. Many relaxation recordings are available to help you focus your thoughts if you have difficulty doing it on your own.

These activities are a gift that you can give yourself and your baby. They are one tool that you can use to complement the care you are receiving from your healthcare team. Schedule a specific time in your day to induce the Relaxation Response. Try to minimize all distractions during that time and concentrate just on yourself and your baby. Using the Relaxation Response can improve your day-to-day quality of life and help to support both your health and the health of your baby during your time of rest.

References:

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- Jennifer R. Bloome is the owner of Anji, Inc., a company specializing in serving women's needs from preconception through birth and beyond. Jennifer is an Occupational Therapist and a Health and Wellness Educator. She works with women to teach the mind/body connection and its positive effects on both Mom and Baby during pregnancy. Jennifer provides both custom recordings and a line of relaxation recordings designed specifically for women with preterm labor as well as enhancing pregnancy. For more information, you may reach her at 888-770-2770, Jennifer@AnjiOnline.com, or by visiting her website www.anjionline.com.