

there has been an accelerating interest in stress-management and relaxation approaches. A wide variety of such approaches have emerged. In this discussion the emphasis will be on approaches to alleviating stress and achieving relaxation that clinicians can employ without the use of special equipment; in other words, approaches that they “always have with them.”

Mechanism of Action According to Its Own Theory

The techniques in this discussion are of three main varieties: refocusing techniques, conscious breathing, and body awareness. Each type is discussed separately.

Refocusing Techniques

These techniques are based on the principle “What you focus on is what you get,” or “Energy follows attention.” There are an unlimited number of ways that any of us can choose to tell the story of our life or any part of our life. How we choose to frame that story—what we tell ourselves about how we are, how life is, and how the world is—actually has a major impact on our health and well-being. The relevance of perceived meaning can be summed up in the following short verse:

*All that there is
is what you tell yourself
about all that there is.*

It is useful to listen to patients' reports in the perspective of the reports are really stories about how they have chosen to view their current circumstances and that the practitioner's role is to help patients select alternative stories that would better support them in getting the results that they truly want.

Conscious Breathing and Meditation

Conscious breathing is a way of reducing stress by reintegrating mind and body. It is a time-tested method of achieving profound relaxation. Concentration on the breath, with or without the use of a specific sound or *mantra*, is central to many meditation practices.

To benefit from relaxation and meditation techniques of conscious breathing, patients must learn to turn their attention away from the mental flow of ordinary thinking and focus it instead on the breath or mantra. What ensues is a self-generated vacation from the clatter of “monkey mind” and a “tuning in” to the naturally calming flow of breath.

In meditation techniques, the goal often is to develop a fuller awareness of the individual's self and place in the universe. Relaxation is a byproduct of meditation. However, many relaxation techniques that are not meditations in the strictest sense (for example, the relaxation technique that is presented in this discussion) also serve as an antidote to stress.



Courtesy Barry Sultanoff, 1999.

Body Awareness

Our culture is excessively focused on the mind. Every day we are expected to figure things out, make sense of things, and come up with ideas. In school, at work, and even in our personal relationships, we are acknowledged and rewarded for coming up with the right answers and the correct solutions to problems.

We spend much of our waking lives “lost in thought”—worrying, planning, judging, day-dreaming, and second-guessing ourselves. Effective stress management must then include ways of reconnecting or coming home to our bodies again.

When we do come home consciously—when we learn to integrate mind and body—we feel calmer and more relaxed, steadier, and safer. When we learn to consciously feel the body that is our earthly home, we can tap into the innate wisdom of our bodies and feel more balanced and at peace in our daily lives.

As patients achieve greater mastery with these techniques, they develop a greater sense of self-empowerment and self-sufficiency. They feel safer as active participants in life and more connected with the living earth. In essence, they develop a more comfortable, harmonious relationship with other people and with all of life.

Biologic Mechanism of Action

The techniques in this discussion primarily work through their capacity to activate the relaxation response. This is a physiologic response or healthy syndrome in which the auto-