

Original Research Reports

The Development of a Patient-Centered Program Based on the Relaxation Response: The Relaxation Response Resiliency Program (3RP)

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Background: Chronic daily stress has significant physical, emotional, and financial implications; levels of stress are increasing in the US. Dr. Benson highlighted how the mind and body function together in one's experience of the stress response and proposed the existence of the relaxation response (RR). **Objective:** The current paper describes the foundation and development of an 8-session multimodal treatment program for coping with chronic stress: the Relaxation Response Resiliency Program (3RP). **Methods:** We review the past decades of RR research, outline the development of the 3RP treatment, and provide an overview of the program's theory and content. **Results:** Extensive research and clinical work have examined how eliciting the RR may combat stress through down-regulation of the sympathetic nervous system. Related to this work are the multidimensional constructs of resiliency and allostatic load. The

3RP is based on principles from the fields of stress management, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and positive psychology, and has three core target areas: (1) elicitation of the RR; (2) stress appraisal and coping; and (3) growth enhancement. An 8-week patient-centered treatment program has been developed, with the purpose of assisting patients with a variety of psychological and medical issues to better cope with chronic stress. **Conclusions:** Mastery of the RR is theorized to maximize one's ability to benefit from multimodal mind body strategies. The goal of the 3RP is to enhance individuals' adaptive responses to chronic stress through increasing awareness and decreasing the physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects of the stress response, while simultaneously promoting the effects of being in the RR.

(Psychosomatics 2013; 54:165–174)

Chronic daily stress has significant physical, emotional, and financial implications, and levels of stress are increasing in the US. The 2012 American Psychological Association report, *Stress in America*, documented that approximately one-fourth of Americans surveyed experience extremely high stress, and almost half of Americans reported that their stress levels have increased over the past 5 years.¹ There is significant need for interventions that combat the negative effects of stress. The Relaxation Response Resiliency Program (3RP) is a comprehensive, multimodal treatment that was designed to

promote adaptation to stress and enhance resiliency. This program is rooted in the elicitation of the relaxation response (RR). Four decades of empirical studies by Herbert

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Relaxation Response Resiliency Program

Benson and other researchers have characterized the effects of eliciting the RR on genomic, structural, physiological, psychological, and functional outcomes.²⁻¹⁸ Together with advances in our understanding of stress, coping, and post-traumatic growth, this work has contributed to an integrative intervention model for promoting resiliency.

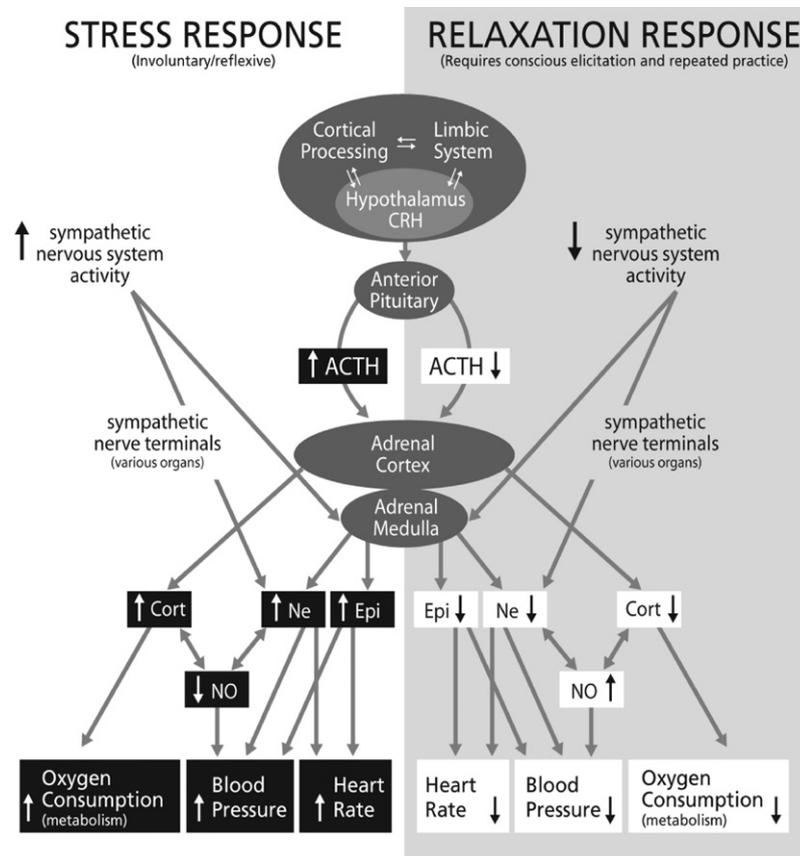
THE STRESS RESPONSE AND THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

Stress is the process through which environmental demands tax or exceed the adaptive capacity of an organism, resulting in distress. Distress may manifest as psychological and/or biological changes that place individuals at risk for disease. Hans Selye defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand,”¹⁹ and stated that distress occurs when stress is overwhelming or persistent and not dealt with in a positive manner. Related to stress is the stress response, described by Walter B. Cannon as

the “fight-or-flight” response,²⁰ which is a cascade of coordinated physiological changes that occur when animals, including humans, perceive threat. These changes involve several structures within the brain and a redirection of neural activity from the “self-regulating center” to lower regions within the limbic system, which causes an increase in stress hormones and a resulting increase in metabolism, blood pressure, and heart rate. Researchers studying the long-term effects of a prolonged or severe stress response have concluded that it may lead to harmful physiological changes such as increasing the risk for heart disease or diabetes.²¹

A converse to the stress response, the RR is a physiological state characterized by decreased arousal of the sympathetic nervous system²² (Figure 1). The term “relaxation response” was first described in humans as a “wakeful hypometabolic state.”²³ This state, the foundation of the 3RP model, is used to combat maladaptive responses to stress and guide an individual’s attainment of an optimal stress level. The rationale for eliciting the RR

FIGURE 1. Stress Response and Relaxation Response. Dusek and Benson (2009) *Minnesota Medicine*.



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