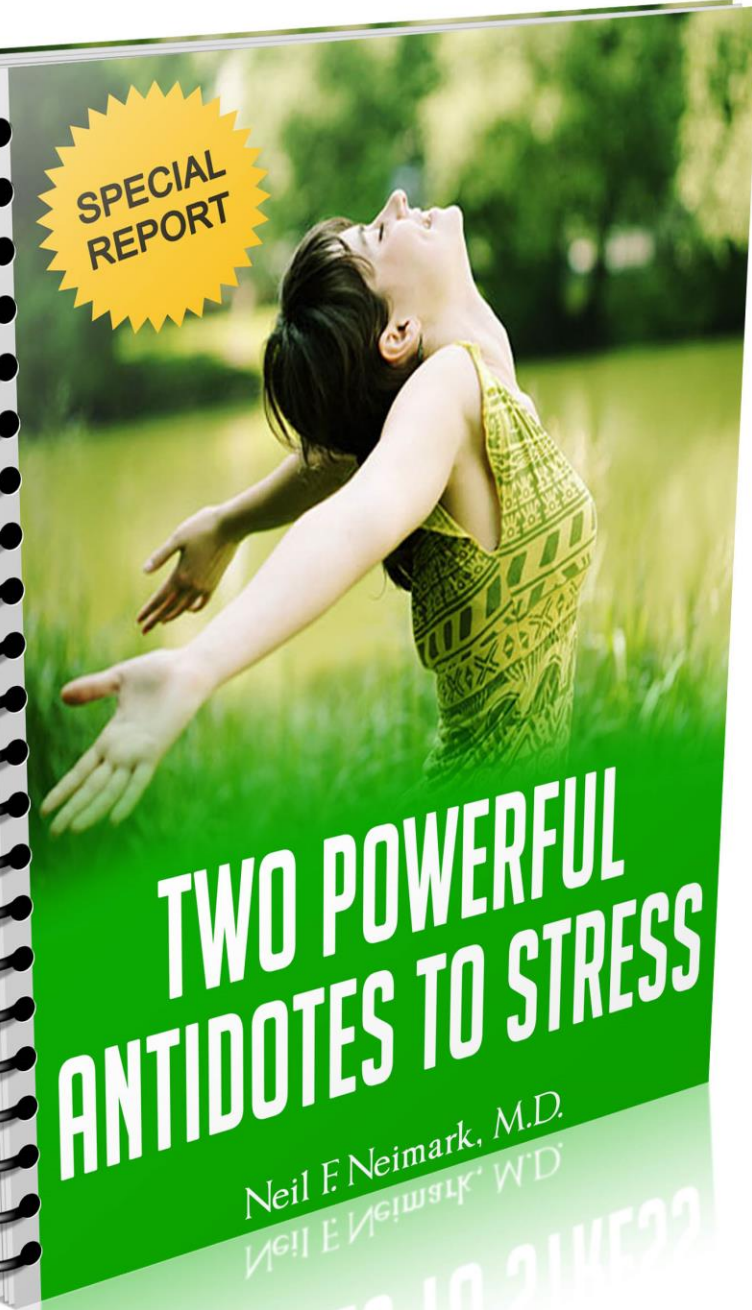


**SPECIAL
REPORT**



**TWO POWERFUL
ANTIDOTES TO STRESS**

Neil F. Neimark, M.D.
Neil F. Neimark, M.D.

Two Powerful Antidotes to Stress

The Relaxation Response & the Power of Positive Belief

© October 2016 by Neil F. Neimark, M.D

Welcome every problem as an opportunity. Each moment is the great challenge, the best thing that ever happened to you. The more difficult the problem, the greater the challenge in working it out.

Grace Speare

We already learned in the free email course *How to Journal Your Stress Away* that our inborn stress fighting mechanism, called the "fight or flight response" is *automatic, unconscious, and predictable*. In other words, at the mere perception of threat or danger, without even thinking about it, you can be in fight or flight!

This is a fantastic asset if you are actually in physical danger, because the immediate surge of physical strength and mental acuity that come from an activated fight or flight response can give you the edge you need to survive the danger. If, however, you are not in immediate physical danger, the chronic overactivation of your fight or flight response will lead to mental fatigue, physical exhaustion, depression and overwhelm.

What causes the overactivation of our fight or flight response? It is the chronic daily hassles of life: the deadlines, the

tasks on our "to do" list, toxic work environments, bills to be paid, strained relationships, rush hour traffic and the like. The common thread of all these experiences is that—in some way—we perceive them as a threat to our emotional well-being, mental peace of mind or spiritual happiness.

The problem is that our fight or flight response is designed to protect us from *physical danger*, **not** from *emotional, mental or spiritual danger*. In fact, in cases of perceived emotional, mental or spiritual danger, our fight or flight response usually makes the problem worse by increasing our anxiety and limiting us from seeing the choices that may free us from the stress. In cases of *non-physical, non-life-threatening danger*, fight or flight actually narrows our field of vision, limits our choices and constrains us from seeing opportunities for restoring emotional peace, mental equanimity and spiritual calm.

To see a man fearless in dangers, untainted with lusts, happy in adversity, composed in a tumult, and laughing at all those things which are generally either coveted or feared, all men must acknowledge that this can be from nothing else but a beam of divinity that influences a mortal body.

Seneca (3 BC - 65 AD)

The good news is that our mind and body come equipped with predictable and potent stress reducing mechanisms that can directly counteract the harmful effects of an overactivated stress response.

Unfortunately, as Murphy would have it, our body's physiologic antidotes to stress are *not automatic and not unconscious*. They require *conscious awareness and effort* to elicit, but once elicited, the beneficial stress reducing effects are *predictable*. That means, *we must exert a conscious effort* to elicit the stress reduction mechanisms that exist within each and every one of us.

The Dynamic Duo of Stress Reduction

What are these inborn stress reducing mechanisms that we all have? There are two main mechanisms or faculties that we all have to help counteract the harmful effects of excess stress on our bodies. These two methods are considered the "dynamic duo of healing" by noted author and mind/body

specialist Herbert Benson, M.D. They are:

1. The Relaxation Response: This is an *inborn, hard-wired, physiologic response*, which can be predictably elicited to produce a precise physiologic and biochemical antidote to the harmful effects of stress on our bodies.

2. The Power of Positive Belief: This is also an *inborn, hard-wired mental response*, which can be predictably elicited to produce a series of nerve cell firings and biochemical release that can counteract the harmful effects of stress on our body, mind and soul. In simple terms, our positive beliefs act as powerful biochemical prescriptions, which are sent to an *inner pharmacy* (somewhere in our brain and/or body cells) where these prescriptions are filled and the beneficial effects are released into our bodies, nervous system and tissues. Though the exact nature and pathways of this response are still being elucidated, the scientific results are clear: our mind and body respond beneficially to positive attitudes, honest emotions and positive beliefs.

What is the relaxation response?

The Relaxation Response, discovered by the inspirational author and Harvard cardiologist, Herbert Benson

M.D., represents a hard wired antidote to the fight or flight response. The Relaxation Response corresponds to a physical portion of the brain (located in the hypothalamus) which when stimulated or triggered, sends out the neurochemicals that almost precisely counteract the hypervigilant response of the fight or flight response.

When we follow the simple steps necessary to elicit the Relaxation Response, we can predictably measure its benefits on the body. These include: a decrease in blood pressure, diminished respiratory rate, lower pulse rate, diminished oxygen consumption, increase in alpha brain waves (associated with relaxation) and in many cases, an improved sense of mental and spiritual well-being.

Because the Relaxation Response is hard wired, *we do not need to believe it will work* any more than we need to believe our leg will jump when the doctor taps our patellar tendon with a little red hammer. The Relaxation Response is a **physiologic response** and as such, there are many ways to **elicit it**, just as there are many ways to increase our pulse rate (another physiologic response).

We must take the time to exercise our relaxation response “muscle.”

The solution to over-activation of our fight or flight response is simple: when we take the time to exercise our relaxation response “muscle” we will enjoy the beneficial physiological and biochemical effects. *These beneficial effects are measurable whether we believe in the relaxation response or not.* Some people do experience immediate emotional calm and tranquility when they learn to elicit the relaxation response, but others do not. We cannot measure the effectiveness of the relaxation response based on how it feels. Dr. Benson likens this to brushing our teeth. We know brushing is "good" for us, whether we feel it works or not. Feeling good is an added benefit. The most important thing is to actually ***take the time and exert the discipline necessary to elicit the relaxation response.*** Once elicited, the benefits to our overstressed physiology and biochemistry will be experienced.

All growth depends upon activity. There is no development physically or intellectually without effort, and effort means work.

Calvin Coolidge (1872 - 1933)

How do we elicit the RR?

There are many ways to elicit the physiologic benefits of the

relaxation response. The easiest way is with a simple two-step method described as follows:

1. Focus on a word or phrase that has a positive meaning to you. Such words as “one”, “love”, and “peace” work well. Phrases that work well include “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” “God, grant me serenity,” and the like.

2. Passively disregard any intrusive thoughts that enter into your mind, and return your focus to the word or phrase you chose.

Be aware that intrusive thoughts will enter your mind. This is normal. Just allow those thoughts to pass through your mind like a summer breeze passes through an open window on a warm summer day. The second step above is related to our ability to “let go” of intrusive thoughts or excessive worries. Dr. Benson says “to summon the healing effects of the relaxation response, you need to surrender everyday worries and tensions.” This gets our harried minds out of the way of our body’s natural ability to heal. It’s funny to watch the tricks our mind plays on us. It will try to tell us “This is stupid, why am I sitting here doing this?” “I hope no one sees me here meditating,” “This will never work,” “That’s it, I’m going to quit now,” etc.

When you realize you have wandered, just let go of the thought and return back to your word or phrase!

Remember, whether your mind wanders or your thoughts drift, simply practicing the two steps above will elicit the relaxation response and deliver the beneficial physiologic and emotional benefits as predictably as turning the light switch on causes the light bulb to shine.

The key to deriving the benefits of the relaxation response is to practice it daily. Dr. Benson recommends at least 10 to 15 minutes once to twice a day. This will produce the maximum benefit. Once again, I’ll repeat Dr. Benson’s dental analogy: treat the relaxation response the same way you treat brushing your teeth. Do it because you know it is good for you. Don’t worry whether you think you had a “good relaxation response” or not. You wouldn’t say to yourself: “That was a good tooth brushing!” would you? Whether you “felt” it was a calming, relaxing experience or not, the physiologic benefits of doing the relaxation response are measurable, predictable and repeatable.

I am convinced that the world is not a mere bog in which men and women trample themselves in the mire and die. Something magnificent is taking place here amid the cruelties and tragedies, and the supreme challenge to intelligence is that of

making the noblest and best in our curious heritage prevail.

Charles A. Beard

What is the Power of Positive Belief?

The second inborn, hard-wired stress-reducing response we have at our command, is called “the power of positive belief,” also known as “the placebo response.” This refers to any positive physical or emotional benefit resulting from a drug, treatment, procedure or change in the meaning or symbolic significance of an event that has no known chemical, biological or physiological effect. We often think of the placebo effect as a “sugar pill”, an inert tablet that confers positive healing effects only by virtue of a patient’s **belief** in the effectiveness of the pill or treatment. But, the expanded definition given by Howard Brody, M.D. in his book *The Placebo Response*, teaches us that the placebo response need not be related to a pill or a physical treatment at all. It can also be elicited by a change in the symbolic significance or meaning of an event. This is why therapy, social support and spiritual and psychological breakthroughs have such a profound healing effect on us—because they generate hope, trust, faith, optimism and mastery: all vital elements that activate the healing effects of the power of positive belief, through a change in the

meaning or symbolic significance of an event.

Positive beliefs seem to represent **written prescriptions**, which are delivered to our “**internal (in-house) pharmacy**,” located somewhere within our brain and/or body. When the in-house pharmacy receives these prescriptions, it is as if we have an **inner pharmacist** who fills the prescription by dispensing powerful chemical messengers (neuropeptides, neuro-transmitters, steroid molecules and hormones) into our bodies that deliver the beneficial biochemical and immune benefits of positive belief. When we find a doctor we trust and have faith in, it is as if that trust (**a positive belief**) represents a **written prescription** to our “**inner pharmacist**” who uncaps the “bottle” of trust and sends the healing **chemical messengers of trust** circulating into our body and brain, bringing about healing biochemical, immunological and physiological effects for our body and mind.

We must exercise not only our bodies but also our positive beliefs and attitudes.

Most early research on the placebo effect revealed that “sugar pills” work about 30% of the time. However, when the patient and doctor enthusiastically share a positive belief in

the medical treatment and in one another, the healing benefits of positive belief (the placebo effect) far exceed the usual 30%. In fact, studies reveal the beneficial physical effects can approximate 60 to 70%. What becomes clear is that in order to enhance our medical treatment and reduce the harmful effects of stress, we must exercise not only our bodies but also our positive beliefs and attitudes. A strong belief and trust in our doctors, family, friends and caregivers is stress-reducing and health-enhancing.

One study on the power of positive belief comes from Dr. Thomas Oxman at Dartmouth (Psychosomatic Medicine, 1995;57;5-15) who studied patients with heart disease requiring open heart surgery. Dr. Oxman found that those patients who received solace and comfort from their religious beliefs were 3 times more likely to survive than those who did not.

Another fascinating study on the power of belief was published in the British Journal of Clinical Psychology 25(1986) 173-183 by Dr. Carole Butler and Andrew Steptoe at the University of London. In this study, asthmatic patients were divided into two groups. Both groups were told they would be administered a chest-constricting chemical that would worsen their asthma. (This chest-constricting chemical was in

fact plain water.) One group, however, was also told they would be pre-treated with a powerful new drug which would dilate the bronchial tubes and counteract the constricting effects of the first drug. (This powerful new drug with which they were pre-treated was in fact plain water!) The results of the study showed that the group that was pre-treated with the bronchodilating drug showed no deterioration in their breathing when they were exposed to the chest constricting chemical. The group that was **not** pre-treated showed significant deterioration. This was a fascinating case in which bronchial constriction was both **caused by belief and prevented by belief!**

How can we maximize the healing benefits of positive belief?

There are three main elements that seem to maximize the healing power of positive belief (the placebo effect). They are:

1. When we have a strong positive belief or faith in a medical treatment, procedure or plan for growth and change.
2. When a caregiver, doctor, counselor or friend has a strong positive belief or faith in a medical treatment, procedure or plan for growth and change for us.

3. When the caregiver, doctor or friend has a strong positive belief in us, and we, in them.

Try this journaling technique.

If you are dealing with a difficult situation in life, ask yourself these questions:

1) How can I increase my faith in my treatment plan or in my plan for growth and change? What can I do to bolster my faith, my hope, my trust? What do I need to know to have greater faith or trust? What do I need to see to develop a positive belief in what I must do to heal, grow or change? What can I do to increase my faith?

2) How can I find someone who believes in me and supports me? Am I surrounding myself with supportive people? Am I letting go of those people that criticize me or create negativity in my life.

3) How can I build an even better relationship than I already have with those who support and care for me in life?

Fire is the test of gold; adversity, of strong men.

Seneca (3 BC - 65 AD), Epistles

Just as the power of positive belief can heal us, the power of negative belief can harm us.

No discussion of the power of positive belief (the placebo effect) is complete without briefly discussing the “nocebo” effect. Just as positive expectancy can generate the most possible in terms of our health or healing, so the “nocebo” effect can have a detrimental and even catastrophic effect on our health and healing. Larry Dossey M.D., best-selling author and internist, tells the story of a patient who was highly allergic to penicillin. This patient was given an inert sugar pill. Some time later, the patient was incorrectly told that the inert pill he had taken was penicillin. Within minutes the man became fearful, began to convulse and died promptly on the spot. This is an extreme case of how the power of negative beliefs can harm us. The patient is no less dead because he only *believed* it was penicillin. The power of our beliefs and the meaning we give them can indeed be life sustaining or life endangering.

We think so often in terms of “hard science” and biochemistry. Yet to our bodies and minds, *the line between reality and the perception of reality dims*. This story provides a perfect example of how the effectiveness of any given drug is a combination of its

chemical ingredients *and* the confidence we have that it will help us or harm us.

The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today; Let us move forward with strong and active faith.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

J.W. Fielding at the Department of Surgery (Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England) conducted another study on the power of our beliefs. 411 patients were told they could expect hair loss from a chemotherapy agent about to be administered. 30% of these patients unknowingly received a placebo instead of the chemotherapy agent. This “placebo” group suffered hair loss even though the pills they took contained no active medication. This is another powerful example of the “nocebo” effect.

The power of our positive beliefs *and* the power of our negative beliefs serve as profound confirmation of the work of the great scholar and humanitarian, Norman Cousins, when he said “the human mind converts our ideas and expectations into biochemical realities.”

Here’s a journaling technique to help you minimize the harmful effects of the nocebo response in your life.

We all tend to think negatively at times. This is normal. One way to counteract the negativity is to write down your negative thoughts and then, for each one, write a positive, healing counter-response.

For example, at the top of a piece of paper, you might write, “I will never find a satisfying career that brings me the fulfillment I am looking for.” Then underneath that negative thought, start writing all the positive responses that can help you overcome your negativity.

Try to focus on two different categories of positive counter responses: 1) those that counteract your negative feelings about a situation and 2) those that represent positive steps you can take towards overcoming your situation.

For example, statements that counteract negative feelings might be “I haven’t found the job of my dreams yet, but I know that I will because I am determined to do so,” or, “I am constantly learning about new things that inspire me and fulfill me and it’s just a matter of time until I find a line of work that brings fulfillment to my life.”

Statements that represent positive steps towards overcoming a negative circumstance might be, “I am going to sign up today for a course on career

counseling,” or “I am going to send out my resume to one new company that I would love to work for every day, until I find a job that fulfills me.”

Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

Frank Outlaw

With this journaling technique combined with your perseverance and determination, you will—with time—convert your negative beliefs into positive healing ones. You have the power within you to change and grow and live the life you were meant to live. But you must make the effort.

No matter how full a reservoir of maxims one may possess, and no matter how good one's sentiments may be, if one has not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act, one's character may retain entirely unaffected for the better. With mere good intentions, hell is proverbially paved.

William James (1842 - 1910)

You have learned two powerful techniques for counteracting stress in your life:

- 1) Practice the Relaxation Response daily
- 2) Practice and build your positivity muscle so that you can benefit by the healing power of positive belief.

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

Helen Keller

FOR MORE INFORMATION on powerful stress-reducing tips and inspirational support, visit us online at: www.NeilMD.com
