

Can Relaxation Harm You?

A doctor I once worked with claims that relaxation can kill you! He is a cardiologist who studies and interprets heart rate variability – the variances between each individual heartbeat and the patterns that these variances cause. Apparently, these patterns can tell him not only about our overall health, but about our emotions and thought patterns as well. The heart rate variability (HRV) he says is also the greatest predictor of early death. But what has that got to do with relaxation, you may well ask. Well just about everything!

We all have a general idea that ill health is linked to some form of stress. And, traditionally, we think of relaxation as a key ingredient in counteracting stress. So therefore relaxation should be a good thing, right? Not necessarily. Our level of arousal – whether we are relaxed or not - is *not* the critical factor in how stress manifests. It is the underlying emotional state that is the key.

Our levels of arousal and relaxation are driven by the autonomic nervous system, also linked to our heart *rate*. Our emotions on the other hand are linked to our hormonal system, and our heart rate *variability*. It is this pattern, this *variability*, which is the root of our health and well-being. If this variability pattern is chaotic (which it is when we are stressed or upset), it sends disordered signals to every cell in the body. If on the other hand the variability pattern is coherent and harmonious, (which it is when we feel good), its signals are also coherent, resulting in greater levels of health & well-being.

When we are in a high state of arousal as well as a negative emotional state, the common approach is to attempt to bring down the level of arousal – i.e. to try to calm down and relax. However, this may merely lower the level of arousal. Unless you are also able to alter how you feel, to shift your emotional state into a positive one and activate the release of beneficial hormones, the heart rate variability pattern will remain chaotic, and stress hormones such as cortisol will continue to poison your system, lowering your immune system and speeding up your journey towards an early grave. Conversely, if you are able to alter your emotional state, find a way to feel more positive about a situation, the cortisol poisoning will stop and instead, beneficial hormones such as DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone, otherwise known as the youth

hormone), Dopamine, Serotonin, or Oxytocin will begin to release into your system, boosting your immune system and ultimately slowing down the ageing process.

I experienced some profound examples of all this while living on the island of Kauai in Hawaii a few years ago. Many people moved to that beautiful island seeking peace, harmony and yes, relaxation. Meditation groups, yoga classes, and relaxation seminars abounded. And there seemed to be more massage therapists on the island than there were palm trees! In my counseling and stress management practice I experienced many clients who were remarkably proficient at relaxation, but alas, they were stressed and often depressed. Many spent up to several hours a day practicing various forms of relaxation, yet sought me out regularly. Clearly the relaxation did little to help, - until they learned to become more aware and take charge of their emotional state. When they did, their relaxation methods soon became more effective, and their challenges easier for them to handle. Over the years I have known many people who, having learned this information and implemented it in to their lives, experience huge transformations!

Sadly, there are also many who believe they are taking adequate care of themselves, yet slowly slide into permanent depression and ongoing ill health. These people practice relaxation routinely and some even take medication, which may work to stifle their levels of arousal and make them appear in control, in contrast to someone who is overt in their stressful state or even openly hostile. Those, we intervene with and help, or their obvious state of distress leads them to seek help that hopefully is effective. The quietly stressed however, often maintain their low-grade stress levels and may, according to my doctor friend, eventually meet a premature demise as a result. And many agree with him. Relatively recently, research studies on both sides of the Atlantic have shown conclusively that relaxation *must* be coupled with emotional awareness and the ability to regulate emotions, to make a significant contribution to our health and well being.

An afterthought; if like me you are an avid meditator and wish to look at this subject from a more spiritual perspective, I can refer to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who says; *'The real measure of spiritual development lies in how a person manages disturbing emotions.'*

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