

Autogenic Training

Overview

Autogenic training (AT) is a relaxation technique developed by German psychiatrist Johannes Heinrich Schultz and was first published in 1932. Since that time, it has been widely used in clinical practice and research to foster the mind's ability to produce relaxation in the body. Autogenic means self-generating, or produced from within. This reflects the ability to self-produce a relaxed feeling of warmth and heaviness throughout the body by saying various verbal phrases aimed at encouraging a state of physical relaxation and emotional calm. It is considered a form of self-hypnosis and is used to increase relaxation and restore balance in the body. It is a technique often recommended when a health issue is present and when stress is a contributing factor to producing or maintaining health issues.¹

What It Is

AT involves learning specific phrases that are repeated several times as silent thoughts to oneself. These phrases are performed in a detached way to encourage the body to produce a relaxed feeling of warmth, heaviness, and emotional calm. The core of AT is standard exercises that focus on six physical manifestations of relaxation in the body:

1. Heaviness in the musculoskeletal system
2. Warmth in the circulatory system
3. Awareness of the heartbeat
4. Slowing down the breath
5. Relaxing the abdomen
6. Cooling the forehead

Exercises are built up weekly, in sequential order, starting with relaxing the peripheral extremities, then later adding practice with regulating the heart and circulatory system. Relaxing the respiratory system comes next and is followed by a focus on the visceral organs (the solar plexus area), and then, cooling the forehead. There is a final phase of feeling overall peace in the mind and body.

How It Is Taught

AT can be taught in individual sessions, and it is frequently used in group treatment. Training is best done while sitting or lying in a comfortable position, as it allows the mind and body to switch off the sympathetic fight/flight/freeze stress response and restore the parasympathetic rest, recuperation, and recovery response. It is recommended that a person learn AT with a licensed professional. They can help explore positive relaxation responses experienced with AT, process any possible negative initial relaxation responses, and examine ways to enhance motivation for practice. It typically takes several training sessions to master AT, and without regular practice, it is not likely to have an effect. Success with AT requires motivation and commitment to practice regularly.

Research

There is a large body of empirical data related to the psycho-physiological model of change in AT. A meta-analysis of 60 studies was conducted by Stetter and Kupper, who found significant positive effects of AT treatment when compared to the control for clinical outcomes related to a number of diagnoses, including tension headache, migraine, mild to moderate essential hypertension, coronary heart disease, bronchial asthma, somatoform pain disorder, and Raynaud's disease. Research has also been done on AT and treatment of anxiety, mild to moderate depression, and functional sleep disorders.¹ AT has been found to be useful in the treatment of IBS by enhancing self-control.² It can also be used as an important adjunct in reducing symptoms associated with Parkinson's disease.³ Krampen found that patients receiving both AT and cognitive therapy for treatment of moderate depression showed the best outcome at follow-up.⁴

Considerations

AT should not be considered as an alternative to cognitive-behavioral treatment or psychopharmacological treatment for the disorders it is used to treat. AT is contraindicated for people with psychotic disorders.

Autogenic Training Exercise

To help develop relaxation during the AT time, please make yourself comfortable so that you can relax and feel supported. Take precautions to ensure that you will not be disturbed during this training, so that you can concentrate on your experience. It is recommended that you keep your eyes closed and wear loose clothing. Repeat each phrase listed below four times, as a general rule, saying it slowly and silently to yourself. Try and maintain passive concentration and a relaxed pace. Take about five seconds to make the self-statement. Then, pause for three seconds before beginning the next statement. If you have any problems with completing this activity, please talk with a health care professional.

Some individuals find that it is helpful to tape record the autogenic sequence, and others practice each set one at a time until they have memorized the entire sequence. You may also create your own autogenic phrases. Practice at least once a day. It can be helpful to practice at bedtime. You may find that by using some of the last few sets you can achieve a pleasant and calm autogenic state under any circumstances.

Use a breathing warm-up before every AT practice session. You can do this by starting with a few minutes of deep breathing. Breathe in deeply and try to lengthen the outbreath to be longer than the inbreath. Find and maintain a rhythmic breathing pattern that feels comfortable to you. Do this for several minutes before transitioning to the autogenic phrases.

If you say the phrase and don't actually feel the results of what you are saying, take the time to repeat the phrase. It may take some time before the effects begin to manifest.

Set 1: Heavy

- My right arm is heavy
- My left arm is heavy
- Both of my arms are heavy



- My right leg is heavy
- My left leg is heavy
- Both of my legs are heavy
- My arms and my legs are heavy

Set 2: Warmth

- My right arm is warm
- My left arm is warm
- Both of my arms are warm
- My right leg is warm
- My left leg is warm
- Both of my legs are warm
- My arms and my legs are warm

Set 3: A Calm Heart

- My arms are heavy and warm
- My legs are heavy and warm
- My arms and legs are heavy and warm
- I feel calm
- My heart feels warm and pleasant
- My heartbeat is calm and regular

Set 4: Breathing

- My arms are heavy and warm
- My legs are heavy and warm
- My arms and legs are heavy and warm
- I feel calm
- My heartbeat is calm and regular
- My breathing breathes me

Set 5: Stomach

- My arms are heavy and warm
- My legs are heavy and warm
- My arms and legs are heavy and warm
- I feel calm
- My heart feels calm and regular
- My breathing breathes me
- My stomach is soft and warm

Set 6: Cool Forehead

- My arms are heavy and warm
- My legs are heavy and warm
- My arms and legs are heavy and warm
- I feel calm
- My heartbeat is calm and regular
- My breathing breathes me
- My stomach is soft and warm



- My forehead is cool

Formula for calming the mind

- I am calm and relaxed
- I feel quite quiet
- I feel quiet, relaxed and comfortable
- My mind is quiet
- I am at peace
- I feel an inward quietness
- I am at ease
- My mind is serene and still

Author(s)

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Shilagh A. Mirgain, PhD and by Janice Singles, PsyD (2016).

References

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