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Autogenic Training for Sleep©

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This is the fourth article in a series on better sleep. Please check out *10 Solutions for Better Sleep*, the *Underestimated But Crucial Role of Sleep in Mental Health*, and *Mindfulness Can Help You Sleep Better*. A related article that pertains to sleep, but has wider usefulness is *Quieting the Anxious Unquiet Mind*. In this short paper, we will show you a practice, Autogenic Training, you can use to promote sleep.

In a study of hypnosis, Johannes Schultz found patients experience feelings of heaviness and warmth. Breathing slows down. The body calms. So, he researched directly producing those sensations without the need for a hypnotic induction. He also determined one could accept suggestions, just as in hypnosis, by using affirmative statements, such as "I am at ease" or "I am relaxed." Schultz developed the practice, which has been researched over decades, called Autogenic Training (AT). Remember self-hypnosis is called Auto-hypnosis, so Autogenic means a self-created state. Wolfgang Luthe modified the technique and it began to be known in the US after they published their research about 1970.

It's a simple exercise. The more you practice it during the day, the better it works to calm the unquiet mind. It provides a focus that slows down the body to a state more conducive to sleep. Think of AT as retraining or reconditioning your sleep routines so they direct you way from concerns of the day and more towards rest.

One client, whom I will call Jesse, found it a challenge to fall asleep. He would get physically comfortable. But he could not get mentally comfortable. He hit upon the method of creating elaborate fantasies of success in some endeavor. The result was a sense of being more at peace with himself. It took him 20 to 30 minutes to fall sleep. Sometimes, he was aware of needing to get up early. Then, he was anxious that the delay in falling sleep would mean his total sleep for the night would be shorter than he hoped for. He worried about oversleeping or being tired the

next day. These worries meant his mind was too revved up for sleep. After learning AT, he practiced the 3-5 minute basic exercise during the day. After just a few days, he could sink rapidly into the comfortable autogenic state. He felt heaviness. He could concentrate on the exercise. Other thoughts fell away. He notice a greater awareness of the quiet stimuli around him that he otherwise tuned out. After doing this exercise for just a couple of weeks, he started to fall asleep in 5 to 10 minutes most nights.

AUTOGENIC EXERCISE

1. **Position.** Take a *completely* comfortable position. If you're *lying* on your back, support your shoulders, neck, head, lower back, and knees on pillows. Hands are relaxed, just away from your sides.

If *sitting*, sit at the edge of the chair, with knees bent about 90 degrees, knees spread, arms hanging down between knees but not touching, and elbows just resting lightly on thighs, but without placing pressure there, head dangling forwards.

All movements, breathing and self-talk are done very slowly and rhythmically. For instance, "I am relaxing" is stated mentally as "l...aaam...re...lax...iiiiing." "I am at ease" is stated mentally as "l...aaam...aaat...eeeeasssse."

2. **Close eyes and** Deep inhalation, on count of 4-6, completely expanding abdomen and chest.

Very slow exhalation on slow count of 8-10 while thinking: *I am relaxing*

Deep inhalation, on count of 4-6, completely expanding abdomen

Very slow exhalation on slow count of 8-10 while thinking: *I am relaxed*

Repeat this 1-3 more times until noticing build-up of relaxed feeling throughout body.

3. **Transition from Relaxation to Visualization**

Deep inhalation, then very slow exhalation while thinking: *I am at ease*

Repeat this 2-3 times, slowly.

4. **Re-Conditioning**

Continue slow breathing.

Mentally connect with right arm.

Think slowly:

My right arm is heavy.

My right arm is heavy.

My right arm is heavy.

I am at ease.

My right arm is heavy.
My left arm is heavy.
My left arm is heavy
I am at ease.

Both arms are heavy.
Both arms are heavy.
Both arms are heavy.
I am at ease.

My right leg is heavy.
My right leg is heavy.
My right leg is heavy.
I am at ease.

My left leg is heavy.
My left leg is heavy.
My left leg is heavy.
Arms and legs are all heavy.
I am at ease.

Both legs are heavy.
Both legs are heavy.
Both legs are heavy.
My arms and legs are heavy.
I am at peace.

5. **Closure.** Deep inhalation and slow exhalation while thinking:

I am at peace

Repeat 2-3 times

If you intend to resume waking activities:

Think, slowly, exhaling slowly:

I am slowly coming back to normal. I am back to normal

Open eyes, big breath, stretch.

If you intend to sleep, and you have practiced the basic exercise over some days, you may have fallen asleep by this point. If not, the exercises in our paper "Mindfulness Can Help You Sleep Better" would be appropriate at this point.

6. **More Advanced.** If you want to go further into this process, add these additional steps. After feeling heaviness, now repeat the entire set of statements while adding feelings of warmth. Then continue on to feelings in the torso and forehead. Imagine a source of warmth, such as the sun, shining on your body.

My right arm is heavy and warm.
My right arm is heavy and warm.
My right arm is heavy and warm.
I am at ease.

My right arm is heavy and warm.
My left arm is heavy and warm.
My left arm is heavy and warm.
I am at ease.

Both arms are heavy and warm.
Both arms are heavy and warm.
Both arms are heavy and warm.
I am at ease

My right leg is heavy and warm.
My right leg is heavy and warm.
Both legs are heavy and warm
Both legs are heavy and warm.
I am at peace.

At this point, turn attention into the torso.

My heart beat is strong and regular.
My heart beat is strong and regular.
My heart beat is strong and regular.
I am at peace.

My breath breathes itself, comfortably.
My breath breathes itself, comfortably.
My breath breathes itself, comfortably.
I am at peace.

My belly rises and falls softly.
My belly rises and falls softly.
My belly rises and falls softly.
I am at peace.

My forehead is cool, like a cool breeze.
My forehead is cool, like a cool breeze.
My forehead is cool, like a cool breeze.
I am at peace.

7. Self-Suggestions

All the statements above are self-suggestions. You can add statements that are meaningful to you. Like any affirmation or suggestion, the statement should be about a desirable state you experience now or that would like to experience. It should be stated as a positive, not as something to cease or with a negative in it. So, affirmative suggestions can be aspirations. For example:

I accept myself gladly and easily.
My mind is settled and at ease.
I feel ever-increasing well-being.
My concentration is strong and focused.
I am comfortable in _____ (situation).
Instead of, "I stop procrastinating," a negative, "I start projects and enjoy my efforts."

Like the other affirmations, the more you can visualize the state you are suggesting, the better. The more you repeat it with feeling, with connection to the experience, the better.

There is no need to complete the whole exercise! If you fall asleep, wonderful. If you are practicing and you have only two minutes, just do heaviness.

You may notice you feel your heartbeat in your hands or the swaying of your torso. It reminds you how strong your heart really is.

Remember, taking time to just feel heaviness in your arms is sometimes enough to reinforce your practice. For that, you can be anywhere, Just rest your forearms gently on your thighs and sense the heaviness. You can be in the theater, watching TV, waiting in a waiting room.

We hope our series on sleep has given you plenty of tools for better sleep.

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