

2031 Frontiers of Healing: The Relation Between Spiritual & Medical Healing

Dr. Herbert Benson, Harvard Medical School and President of the Mind Body Medical Institute

Dr. Herbert Benson, groundbreaking mind/body researcher and author of numerous books about the Relaxation Response, spoke to an enthusiastic crowd of over 500. His research, which began by validating the use of meditative techniques in healing, has moved in recent years to include studies of prayer in medicine. In his introduction, the Rev. Thomas Mikelson of First Parish in Cambridge (UU) Remote Link said, "If researchers like Dr. Benson take career risks in this frontier of healing, how can we in liberal religion not support him?" Benson's latest book is *The Breakout Principle: How to Activate the Natural Trigger That Maximizes Creativity, Athletic Performance, Productivity and Personal Well-Being* (co-authored with William Proctor).

Benson provided an overview of how his thinking evolved regarding the mind/body connection. He came to mind/body research with "trepidation and foot-dragging," said Benson. "What right did a young cardiologist have to try to bridge the gap between science and religion?"

Health, Benson said, is like a three-legged stool, and is supported by three types of treatments: pharmaceuticals, surgery, and self-care. Most of us believe that we need only two of these legs, and neglect our own self-care. In fact, 60% to 80% of doctor's office visits are poorly treated by drugs or surgical procedures. Not that the third leg is all we need: ten years ago, as the result of a bad fall, Benson related how he broke five ribs and would have died from collapsed lungs and internal bleeding if not for surgery. Over half of the audience raised their hands when he asked how many would not be here today if it weren't for drugs or surgical intervention. The third leg needs to be integrated with the first two — it cannot stand on its own — for true health care.

Many people confuse self-care with alternative medicine, Benson reported, but they are very different. Self-care has been scientifically proven to be effective (as he went on to explain), while alternative therapies have not. (When they are, they cease to be alternative.) Self-care is something you do for yourself, while alternative medicine (like conventional medicine) is done to you. And self-care is inexpensive, while we spend billions each year on alternative therapies.

The third leg – self-care – includes the Relaxation Response, nutrition, exercise, stress management, and belief in spirituality. These methods can be integrated, and then combined with drugs and surgery for a truly integrated approach to medicine.

Many years ago, said Benson, for many of the patients he diagnosed with high blood pressure, he prescribed drugs, and then found that he had over-prescribed, ending up with blood pressure that was too low. Was the stress of the blood pressure test itself inducing high blood pressure? To find out, he taught squirrel monkeys to increase their blood pressure (in some cases, to the point of death), and then taught them to lower it again. Could this finding apply to humans?

At this point, practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (<http://www.tm.org/>) approached Benson and asked him to study their ability to affect their bodies through thought. This was in 1968, when stress was rarely studied, and the idea of studying meditators was novel, to say the least. He would have turned the TM groups down were they not so insistent, and even when the studies started, Benson scheduled them after hours. His group measured various indicators of bodily activity, including oxygen consumption, carbon dioxide elimination, respiration, heart function (ECG), and brain function (EEG). After hooking up measurement equipment, each TM practitioner had an hour to get used to the equipment, and then spent some time just thinking, some time meditating, and some more time just thinking. Each of the indicators dropped during TM, and rose again during "just thinking." They had a significant decrease in oxygen consumption, with breath rates dropping from an average of 16 breaths per minute to 10 or 11 (in Tibetan monks, respiration rates as low as 1 per minute have been measured).

What was going on? The only known alternative states at that time were sleep and hibernation. Sleep involves a dip in respiration, but the change is slow, over hours. A meditator's breath rate drops in minutes, and the EEG during meditation differs from sleep. What about hibernation? Animals in hibernation show a huge decrease in body temperature, which TM doesn't show. (Benson noted that bears' winter temperature doesn't drop much, so bears actually sleep, rather than hibernating all winter — and commended the courage of the researchers who ascertained this armed only with rectal thermometers.) No, the meditative state was neither sleep nor hibernation.

Ironically, Benson's research took place in the same rooms in which Dr. Walter D. Cannon identified the "fight or flight response," in which danger causes an increased heart rate, breathing, and blood flow. Stress evokes the fight or flight response, but in the modern world, we rarely either fight or run away. Instead, our response causes anxiety, depression, cardiac arrhythmia, and a lowered pain threshold, which causes a vicious cycle of increased stress-induced pain. The fight or flight response also relates to insomnia, decreased sperm count and sexual response in men, and increased hot flashes, PMS, and infertility in women. And bad medical news can create stress, which causes the fight or flight response, which worsens the patient's state.

The meditative state, which Benson named the Relaxation Response, is the opposite of the fight or flight response. The Relaxation Response isn't a technique: it's a state evoked by TM. Benson doubted that TM was the only way to achieve this state, and found that the Relaxation Response is easy to evoke. You need two things:

1. Repetition of a word, sound, prayer, thought, phrase, or activity.
2. Passive return to repetition when other thoughts intrude.

(The Relaxation Response is described more fully in Benson's book of the same name.) Benson discovered that every culture with written records has found these same two elements:

- * The Upanishads (7th century BC) say to achieve the presence of God, focus on your breathing and repeat words from the Vedas.
- * During the period from the 4th century BCE to 1st century CE, Judaism included the practice of squatting in a fetal position and rocking while chanting the name of a magical seal. In 14th century Spain, Jewish mystics repeated the name Adonai.
- * In early Christianity (in the 2nd to 4th century CE), the Desert Fathers knelt, focused on their breathing, and repeated Jesus name, discarding other thoughts. In the Middle Ages, monks repeated "Christe eleison." In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 19th century monk described similar meditations.
- * Shinto, Confucianism, and shamanistic religions include prayer repetition, counting breaths, chanting, dancing, and drumming.

Outside of religion, others described the same techniques. The Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson and philosopher Henry David Thoreau would fixedly gaze at the sunlight on a leaf, discarding other thoughts. Wordsworth meditated on falling water, and Tennyson repeated his own name while walking on the beach.

Benson tested the Relaxation Response with student testers, asking them to count their breaths up to 10, and then starting again at 1. The tests failed! The students would lose count, panic, and stop. When the testers were told to repeat the number 1, the tests worked perfectly (and may also have proven that Harvard students can't count past 1). By repeating "one" with each breath, the students evoked the same Relaxation Response as TM. Testers who repeated prayers had the same results. Recent technology has corroborated these findings with new types of brain scans.

Measurable, repeatable, and predictable — reliable ways to evoke the Relaxation Response were scientifically established. Benson's team had begun to construct the third leg of the three-legged stool to complement the other two legs of conventional medicine. Specifically, to the extent that a condition is caused or made worse by stress, the Relaxation Response is an appropriate therapy. It can work for anxiety, depression, hostility, hypertension, cardiac arrhythmia, pain management (although not the pain itself), insomnia, PMS, infertility, the nausea and vomiting of chemotherapy, the symptoms of cancer, and the stress-related aspects of auto-immune diseases — always in conjunction with appropriate drug and surgical therapies.

Patients can choose their own word, phrase, or action, reported Benson. Yoga, drumming, and the pre-suggestion stage of hypnosis also work. Eighty percent of patients choose prayers appropriate to the religion, including "Hail Mary Full of Grace," "The Lord Is My Shepherd," "Om," and "Om Mane Padme Hum."

Interestingly, people reported that they became more spiritual if they regularly evoked the Relaxation Response, for from 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day. What does this mean, wondered Benson. Jared Cass, the dean of Leslie College, and his team found that people meant two things by "increased spirituality," regardless of the words they used:

1. They felt the presence of god or a higher power.
2. The presence was close to them or in them.

Most interestingly, said Benson, those who reported feeling increased spirituality had fewer symptoms.

For the last few years, Benson has led Harvard Department of Continuing Education "Spirituality and Healing in Medicine" conferences. This fall, the conference will concentrate on forgiveness.

Dr. Sarah Lazar compared Sikhs repeating animal names to repeating prayers, and found marked differences in their state of quietude. In this state, the autonomic nervous system and amygdala (which controls emotions) became more active, making the person open to new ideas. In church, what usually follows the meditation? The sermon! This openness following meditation can be misused; think of Nazis repeating salutes and chanting "Heil Hitler," or Jim Jones in Guyana. However, we can use this moment of openness to foster our own creativity, athleticism, or enhanced spirituality.

Benson expanded on the idea of the meditative state followed by a break-through state, with a four-phase model:

1. Struggle phase, when you work at the issue
2. Release phase, when you back off (the Relaxation Response provides this, too)
3. Break-out phase, when you are open to peak experiences
4. New normal state

This cycle has been documented since Moses doubted God and then parted the waters through to the present.

In summary, Benson emphasized that he hasn't discovered anything new. He's now describing in scientific language what people have known for millennia. William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* said, "An athlete ... sometimes awakens suddenly to an understanding of the fine points of the game and to a real enjoyment of it, just as the convert awakens to an appreciation of religion. If he keeps on engaging in the sport, there may come a day when all at once the game begins to play itself through him — when he loses himself in some great contest. In the same way, a musician may suddenly reach a point at which pleasure in the technique of the art entirely falls away, and in some moment of inspiration he becomes the instrument through which music flows ... so it is with the religious experience of these persons we are studying."

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