**Relaxation exercises: Do’s and don’ts**

By Gerard Feller

**De-stressing is a hot topic!**

Sick leave, due to stress has increased explosively in recent years. According to ArboNed (Dutch Service for Employers and employees) (1), it costs trade and industry close to 2 billion euros annually. Numerous illnesses are also stress-related. It is clear to everyone that psychological stress is also translated physically and can lead to sick leave. In this article I don't want to go into all kinds of causes and consequences of stress, but more into a means that is generally recommended to de-stress, namely breathing and relaxation exercises. The most common relaxation exercises that are practiced are: muscle relaxation exercises or progressive relaxation, suggestive relaxation exercises, autogenic training, mindfulness or 'Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy' (MBCT), breathing exercises and various yoga techniques. In addition, there is a multitude of different mix-forms. I will try to discuss the pros and cons of the most important relaxation exercises.

**Context of physical exercises**

Every physical exercise only acquires meaning through the context in which it is offered. Take, for example, the following exercise: Put the palms of your hands against each other and bend the fingers of both hands backward and raise your elbows. For example, you can interpret the usefulness of this exercise (the context) in two ways:

* This is a stretching exercise for the flexor muscles of the hands, and as you stretch these muscles, as a reaction you will gain more muscle length and relaxation of the flexors, partly due to the improved blood flow in the muscles.
* This is an energy exercise: you can visualize your energy in both body halves, and if you visualize this energy through legs and trunk, you can send it off to the arms and send it off to your surroundings through the hands.

The physical execution of the exercise is completely the same in both cases, yet the impact is completely different. What many people do not realize is that exercises acquire meaning not only through the action or movement itself, but especially through the meaning implicitly or explicitly given to the exercise. This meaning and experience have everything to do with the image of man that is used. In psychosomatics the eyes through which one looks at the complaints are indeed largely determining how one feels and behaves.

**Breathing exercises applied in mindfulness**

Mindfulness is an attention training that is developed by Kabat-Zinn (2) a molecular biologist from Massachusetts. In the western world, mindfulness is considered a ‘neutral’ training method. In addition to meditation techniques, much emphasis is put on the breathing exercises. Here, the observation plays a major role. Although Kabat-Zinn describes the physiological, diaphragm breathing extensively in his book Full Catastrophe Living (a Manual for meditative relaxation) (3), the real training is not applied here. On the contrary, in the breathing techniques the ancient yoga techniques of the Prana breathing are used again. On page 75 of above-mentioned book it reads:

“It is possible to direct your breath with great precision to various parts of your body and in such a way that it will penetrate the areas and soothe regions that are injured or in pain, at the same time it calms and stabilizes the mind”.

This thought supports the Hindu and Buddhist idea that the cosmos that surrounds us, exists of energy (Prana, or in the Taoist thinking it is called Chi), which we could inhale through our breathing and in this way direct our body, in order to empower us, to deify us or heal the spiritual energy stations through chakras. On page 96 also, Kabat-Zinn makes his trainees breathe in through an ‘imaginary hole’ to their crowns. Here, the Prana breathing, which must be directed through the chakras (crown chakra), comes to the fore again. You must learn to direct and focus your ‘energies’ in such a way that your inner growth and healing will be influenced most effectively. The seven setting factors to be worked on during the eight-week anti-stress course include: not judging, patience, endless starting, trust, not striving, acceptance and letting go.

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn the seven above mentioned intentions when meditating are not separate. They overlap, influence and supplement each another. However, it also applies to the criticism that you may have of these seven kind of influential factors. In each element there is an exercise aspect that can be useful in another context in which the exercise is offered (see context in introduction), but which becomes an 'explosive mixture' in the mix of the other influencing factors. In this mix of a changed consciousness someone is increasingly exposed to the influences of the fallen spiritual world, even if it's not explicitly offered that way.

From the Buddhist background of Kabat-Zinn, the senses must be turned off by observation, taking distance, so that our being can be reflected in a smooth mirror. The first thing people learn in Buddhism is ‘the sending of the spirit’ in ‘still water’, so that the reflection becomes possible. The purpose of this meditation in oriental mysticism is the merging of the individual in the ‘all’, the world spirit. As earlier said, the individual ends up in a sliding scale of passivity at an increasing intension of this exercise. The loss of physical awareness leads to non-reality. The purpose of relaxation here is: meditation. In this meditation it is about yourself, every person who imitates another person is on the wrong path, according to Kabat-Zinn. That's where the big difference lies with Christian ‘meditation’: Christians do not focus entirely on themselves, but are primarily focused on the presence and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, Who is omniscient, but also dwells in us (Rom. 8:9-11, Jn 14:26). In the Bible we are exhorted by the power of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ and the apostles (1 Pet. 2:21; 2 Tim. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:16). Our basic confidence and our intuition do not lie in ourselves, but are based on Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Kabat-Zinn much more sympathizes the conceptions like ‘Tao’ (Chinese mysticism) and ‘Dharma’ (Hindu mysticism), which are expressions of a conscious spiritual attitude and practice.

However, there is a much better alternative which I would like to address at the end of this article.

**Autogenic training** (6)

A.T. is a method of self-hypnosis developed through systematic exercise from the self (autogenous). It is a method of exercise through gradual self-relaxation by the means of concentrated self-hypnosis and specific formulas. A.T. was developed around 1910 by Professor J.H. Schultz in Berlin. He based the method on a number of oriental mystical roots, namely yoga is from Hinduism and transcendental meditation as well as Buddhist Zen, these are also called the border areas of the Autogenic Training.

A.T. consists of 2 stages: the lower stage for beginners and the upper stage.

The method consists exactly of the exercises prescribed by Professor Schultz with the corresponding formulas, which are nowadays extended by his successors of more than an hour. The second stage usually starts half a year later.

**The attitude of a AT-practitioner**

A lot more than with other courses, the following is very important. Each trainee has to be inwardly prepared in advance and must have an open and positive attitude towards the trainer. The participation of a poorly interested person is eliminated in advance. Any doubt about himself, about the method, but also about the course leader disrupts the training. External influences should be avoided as much as possible. The student must set himself/herself to a formula that puts him/her in the right mood. The formulas should be short, melodic, positive, rhythmic, rhyming and practical, so that the trainee can imprint them well on the memory. Schultz’ successor, Dr. K. Thomas, makes his trainees repeat the formula 3 to 5 times. The basic exercise consists of 6 phases of ‘heaviness’ and ‘warmth’. It is a suggestive and auto-hypnotic exercise, in which a feeling is suggested rather than actually felt. They are similar to the first step to the mantra formulas from the transcendental meditation.

**Hypnosis**

Self-suggestion and autohypnosis give rise to vegetative, uncontrolled physiological reactions.

After a session, the hypnosis must be broken by the course instructor through counter-suggestions or counter-assignments, which also happen by pronouncing the formulas. If this does not happen, the consequences are often incalculable. The hetero-hypnosis from the trainer to the trainee must be reversed and converted into autohypnosis. After repeated exercises, the trainee is able to control this self-hypnosis to some extent.

In the follow-up course of A.T. they go even further. This upper phase starts about 2 to 3 months after the trainees have mastered the basic exercises. An important exercise is the so-called 'Verzenkung', a deep autohypnosis. They randomly twists the apple of the eye inwards and upwards, a glance at the middle of the forehead. This exercise is taken directly from transcendental meditation and advanced yoga. The trainees become 'limp', start to 'see' colors, and 'see' abstract concepts and become clairvoyant. Sometimes they hear voices and they can start asking questions to the so-called subconscious. We therefore see clear parallels between this so-called upper phase and Spiritism.

A.T. is in fact a meditation practice, but wrapped up in a scientific ‘jacket’. It is not neutral and cannot be separated from its humanistic, oriental, mystical roots. It strengthens the belief in man, in his own hidden powers in a self-redemption technique, which is very similar to yoga and T.M.. The second course in particular can adversely affect the conscience and the ethical sense. It goes beyond mere relaxation. It involves the disconnection of one's own mind and leads to compulsive thoughts and compulsive performances. It leads to passivity of will and behavior. It means that a person opens up to the forces of darkness as a result of lowering the level of consciousness (cf. yoga). And certainly not least an important factor, it harms the spiritual life of a born again Christian. And it opens the door to the adversary and shuts the door to inner fellowship experience with the Holy Spirit. The prayer life, bible reading and the searching of fellowship with other believers will be reduced.

**Guided imaginary relaxation exercises (7)**

Guided fantasy is often used in psychiatry as a method whereby the patient is led into an imaginary world, in which stress can be processed and/or the ego of a human can be strengthened.

Guided fantasy seems like an innocent-sounding name for far from innocent hypnosis techniques. A quick glance at the hypnosis literature already shows that ‘phantasy journeys’ are a scientifically recognized introduction to hypnosis. They are used by hypnotherapists when they want to put their patients into a state of trance. Patients need to relax and imagine being in a different place (meadow, beach, mountain) than where they are at that moment with their bodies. They say that, when you step out of your body in such a way, you experience the intensity of the traumatic physical responses less. What in fact happens, is that in this way they break the creation order of the unity of spirit, soul and body and in that sense you also become an easy prey of the fallen spiritual world. Because it’s about wanting to break what God has bound together, guided fantasy is biblically seen, also to be considered as witchcraft!

Guided fantasy is also offered as a teaching method in education. With the help of 'fantasy journeys', ignorant and defenseless children and adolescents are hypnotized during their lessons at school respectively in a state of trance, without this being communicated to them and without their parents and educators knowing about it!

But fantasy journeys are much more: they are techniques of astral projection, i.e. they give rise to journeys of the soul outside the body (exits) and even to astral journeys. The aim is to leave one's own body to fly and travel to another world or time. Whoever takes note of the relevant literature of esotericism (the inward looking reality), will undoubtedly have to agree: 'fantasy journeys' are in reality astral journeys, i.e. journeys that take place outside the body.

This is also apparent from the applicable formulations of the authors.

When they talk about the ‘return journey’, they ought to come back ‘here in this space’, ‘in the group’, and nowadays they don't hesitate to speak of "returning to your body’.

After all, you can only do that when you've left it first! There is much similarity between guided fantasy and magic and witchcraft but also with shamanism. In the literature of witches, the factors like a deep physical relaxation, a calmed mind and the desire to travel are the ones that come to the fore in many successful projections.

The art of leaving the body is generally attributed to witches, sorcerers and shamans.

Indeed, the phenomenon of traveling outside the body is discussed again and again in the literature on witches, magicians and shamans.

It also tells what someone who wants to take a journey outside the body has to do.

**Yoga**

There are many forms of yoga. Sometimes the exercises are called yoga exercises, while they have nothing to do with yoga. There are many differences between one and the other yoga exercise. That often depends on the yoga teacher. There are many yoga teachers, who don't even know exactly where yoga originally comes from, what the real yoga poses are and with what goals they are practiced. These are yoga teachers who, under the name of yoga, just do some innocent physical exercises. Here, however, the question is whether these are sufficient to remove mental stress and complaints.

But make no mistake, sometimes the exercises have an implicit meaning (see the introduction of this article). The kind of yoga we’re mainly talking about here, is based on a yoga teacher who is well aware of the goals behind the technique of yoga. So, where yoga really is yoga. Not just innocent exercises, but a technique accompanied by a philosophy that influences the way and purpose of life.

And we are talking about Hinduism, because that is the religion from which yoga originates.

It is about the good works (karma) that man has to do, to connect his own self (Atman) with the universe (Brahman) and so merge into the infinite universe, into nothingness, into everything (Nirvana).

Hinduism does not believe in a creation as we read in the Bible. Hinduism does not believe in a personal God, not in a redemption by Jesus Christ nor in a further life after death in heaven, the dwelling place of God.

That's why yoga is also based on very different principles. It doesn't stop at innocent exercises, but yoga is one of the means used by Hindus to be able to meditate better.

Meditation that should lead to better self-knowledge and to uncover the Divine within oneself. The yoga poses are used for this. For many of these poses are poses through which Hindus or practitioners of yoga identify with their deities.

Moreover, from a remedial therapy point of view the so-called yoga exercises are also inadvisable.

The exercises are too static and the pose and musculoskeletal system is often overloaded. Static means that the bone and muscle systems are unilaterally and continuously overloaded.

Also the breathing exercises are not aimed at the natural, physiological breathing. So if doctors refer people with mental problems to yoga teachers, and these people end up with a 'real' yoga teacher, the question is whether they will actually be helped, because the goals of the yoga teacher are very different.

More likely, such a person is made familiar with the principles of Hinduism. And that is why it is so important to get to know 'the backgrounds of yoga in a biblical perspective'.

**Some remedial therapy objections against yoga exercises (physically)**

The most important objection is that the breathing exercises are not physiologically correct.

a) They say, that the breathing doesn’t stop at the lungs, but that the breath (energy) would flow through different organs and limbs (but that is suggested).

b) During the breathing exercises, the ’belly breathing’ (diaphragm the middle part) is mainly emphasized, there is no physiological overflow of abdominal flank and chest breathing.

c) The breath breaks last unnaturally long, and the need to breathe is not taken into account (individually and dependent on the strain).

d) The (wrong) breathing is practically only taught statically (it is not functional).

e) The aim is not to increase the vital capacity of the lungs, but to attenuate the vegetative, which puts the patient in an unstable equilibrium (parasympathetic-sympathetic), with all its consequences.

f) The patient does not have a good sense of the contents and course of breathing, and will therefore not benefit from it practically (on a daily basis). It becomes an art exercise, not a daily exercise in work and activities.

g) Also the starting poses (static) do not aim to hinder or facilitate the breathing function, but have their function in astrological considerations. The aim is vegetative influence.

h) Finally, these breathing techniques are even dangerous in the case of numerous lung diseases, organic complaints, partly as a result of the frequent pressing (see below) during the exercises.

**ASANA’S yoga body- exercises**

Also in these exercises, the most important objection is that they are not physiologically constructed. Here too, astrological considerations play an important role. The asanas, the poses are static (isometrically tensed), in which the pose and musculoskeletal system is strained due to the long duration.

Especially capsular and joint lesions occur. In the long run there is even a risk of accelerated Osteoarthritis and Chondropathies (painful disorders of the cartilage) due to unilateral strain. Different parts of the physiological movement/pose, such as mobility and muscle strength, are not practiced in a coordinated way. Individual muscle balances or posture/movement problems are not taken into account.

The purpose of the exercises is to bring the body to a 'meditation pose'.

The static, isometric exercises, which are held out in the same pose, often lead to an overload of the circulation system.

As a physiotherapist I am often dealing with yoga practitioners who are struggling with complaints due to wrong exercises.

Pressing with hypertension occurs, but sometimes also a collapse due to a vagus shift (a lability and instability of the nervous system.) (8) during breathing exercises. The 'head position' is also notorious. Often also practiced by untrained people. People with (dormant) complaints of the pose/movement system will get injuries (often without correction) due to one-sided exercise. The dangers described above apply to the 'real' yoga exercises. Yoga literally means yoke, connection. The goal of the yoga teacher is to connect with the 'gods' in the cosmos through exercises and meditation. The spiritual dangers that we have identified in mindfulness and autogenous training are also very much present here.

**What are the good exercises?**

The context of the relaxation exercises (see the beginning of this article) should be understood from the point of view of stress physiology (learning how tensions work physically and mentally).

This is the measurable objective reality to which feelings of tension can be related. This is not a philosophy or virtual reality in which one has to flee, where one needs to have the feeling of floating on a bed on the Mediterranean Sea, but such exercises can be useful when we are fully conscious, especially during our daily activities.

It is better to function as economically as possible in terms of muscle tension, pose, movement and breathing during the day than, for example, to function incorrectly all day long, i.e. to overstretch and then try to do something about it in the evening through exercises. That is in fact putting the cart before the horse.

Of course, a good sleep behavior and exercise are also important. The problem is that many people are totally alienated from their body and body feelings.

They are anxious about every tension signal of the body or they have become completely numb to tension signals and therefore go far beyond the limits of tension that the body indicates, and can therefore develop many complaints and even illnesses.

Every breathing and relaxation exercise will therefore first have to be given meaning from the point of view of physiology. This will have to be explained on different levels because the explanation for a child is different than for an adult (and of course every adult is different). A therapist will have to be trained to explain the meaning in different ways in a simple or more detailed way and to adapt to his client. The correct use of words and the state of mind are important here. The quality, the result of the exercise depends to a large extent on it.

So not only learning the exercise, but also explaining the context.

A second important factor is that learning an exercise requires guidance and correction in the first instance, so that one can practice independently afterwards. This, too, must be adapted and, above all, dosed. People with increased tensions tend to do the exercises incorrectly, for example not dosed properly with all kinds of compensations and little attention to the right subtle feelings of tension (the increased residual value of muscle tension).

So it is very important to recognize and influence the different tension signals, rather than ignoring them and fleeing into another reality.

**Observation**

Before exercising with muscle relaxation or a breathing technique, observation is first important. How do I breathe, what happens in terms of movement, sequence, frequency and depth? That is indeed an attention exercise, not focused on the outside of the body but on the signals that the body indicates (if you understand that as mindful, that's fine). The muscle tension (of the muscles that can be influenced consciously) can also be observed. There are also exercises that a therapist can use to make people aware of the different levels of tension.

Also for example with pairs in a group (4). If you call this a body scan, that's also fine, as long as the feelings are implicitly or explicitly indicated from the stress physiology.



**Relaxation exercises of the conscious pose and muscles of the movement.**

Muscle strain is a normal and essential phenomena in the body.

Objectively speaking, total muscle relaxation cannot be achieved. It is much more about the increased residual tension that occurs in muscles during chronic stress. When exercising, we have to distinguish between muscles that we can influence directly with our will (the 'transverse' muscles, mainly muscles of pose and movement) and muscles that cannot be influenced directly (the 'smooth' muscles, for example in organs and blood vessel walls).

The point of application of the smooth muscles was found especially in poor techniques such as autogenic training and yoga. The principle that causes the most fatigue, muscle pain, cramps, acidification, etc. in case of stress is the chronically increased residual tension of the muscle.

The problem is that most people with chronic stress no longer feel this (subtly) increased tension because they have become accustomed to high muscle tension. Precisely for this purpose the relaxation exercises are now needed to regain the feeling of muscle tension so that one can deal with everyday activities as economically and as relaxed as possible throughout the day.

After exertion, one can also relax more quickly if he has gained such an improved muscle sensation. Muscle relaxation is a powerful tool which ultimately also has its positive influence on the total body and the functioning of organs as I described in my book 'Biblical stress management' (Bijbels omgaan met stress) (4).

**Exercise technique**

In order to regain the feeling of losing muscle strain, we must do exercises according to the right technique and discipline. Thereby the emphasis must not be put on doing the exercise as often as possible, but it’s about the *quality* of the exercise. This quality lies mainly in learning to feel the different tension situations of a muscle. This is especially difficult for someone with increased stress, because you are also confronted with the real tension that is there, and which you do not immediately master in its subtleties.

Exercising the muscle sensation of a muscle or muscle group consists of 3 levels of exercise:

1. First tighten one muscle as much as possible and then in ten seconds try to gradually let go of the muscle tension you feel. As it is said, the emphasis of exercise is mainly on slowly releasing the muscle tension.
2. If that goes well, try the second exercise in which you tighten only half the muscle tension level of the first exercise and then gradually release it again in ten beats. You will notice that it is quite difficult to relax the muscle gradually in ten beats at first. Even if that doesn't work out at the same time, you are already training the feeling of muscle control.
3. If you succeed with exercise 2, you can try to minimally tighten a muscle in such a way that you don't even see the muscle move (you are then below the so-called trigger threshold of a movement of a muscle). Then release in five seconds. If you master this exercise after a number of times, you will be able to reduce the increased residual tension at any level or to perform a posture or movement less stressful. Then it's a matter of observing yourself several times a day and where necessary reducing the residual tension (for example just a little too much tightening up your shoulder muscles).

**The most important muscle exercises are (alternately left and right):**

1. Bend the arms (elbows, biceps)
2. Move the shoulders straight up in sitting position (trapezius muscle)
3. Move the shoulders straight forward in sitting position (pectoral muscle)
4. Press the head down in the supine position (neck muscles)

 5. Retract and 'let go' of abdominal muscles in a sitting or supine position

 6. Tighten the thigh muscles (stretch the knee) (4-ceps).

On the website of Promise you will find many other muscle exercises including face exercises (9). Once again, the quality of the exercise lies in learning to feel the chronically increased residual tension in order to reduce it in our daily functioning.

On our website you will also find a detailed description of the correct physiological breathing for relaxation (9). This, together with the detailed description of muscle relaxation exercises, can be read and downloaded by subscribers. If you are in doubt whether you are doing the exercises properly, you can ask for help from a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or breathing therapist who has experience with the above method.

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Translated by Ursula Moestapa

Notes

[**https://www.werkenbijarboned.nl/Nieuws-Updates/Verzuim-door-stress-op-steeds-jongere-leeftijd**](https://www.werkenbijarboned.nl/Nieuws-Updates/Verzuim-door-stress-op-steeds-jongere-leeftijd) (Absenteeism by stress at an increasingly younger age)

[**https://stichting-promise.nl/body-mind-methodes-en-occultisme/aandachttraining-mindfulness.htm**](https://stichting-promise.nl/body-mind-methodes-en-occultisme/aandachttraining-mindfulness.htm) (body-mind methods and occultism/attention training-mindfulness)

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Handboek meditatief ontspannen (Manual meditative relaxation) Uitg. Altamira- Becht Haarlem 2007 (5e druk).

Gerard Feller, Bijbels omgaan met stress, deel 1. (Biblical stress management Pt. 1) Lichamelijke aspecten (Physical aspects), Promise 2002 Oudewater ( 2e druk). Aandachtgerichte cognitieve therapie (Attention-oriented Cognitive Therapy), vertaald uit het Engels-Mindfulness-gebaseerde cognitieve therapie is een benadering van psychotherapie die cognitieve PMPMgedragstherapeutische methoden gebruikt in samenwerking met mindfulness meditatieve oefeningen en vergelijkbare psychologische strategieën. [**Wikipedia (Engels)**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness-based_cognitive_therapy) (Translated from the English Mindfullness-based cognitive therapy. It is an approach of psychotherapy that uses PMPM behavior methods in cooperation with mindfulness meditative exercises and similar psychological strategies)

**[https://stichting-promise.nl/lichaamswerk-occultisme-en-genezing/autogene-training.](https://stichting-promise.nl/lichaamswerk-occultisme-en-genezing/autogene-training.%20%28Bodywork-occultism.and.healing/autogenic-training%29htm)** [(Bodywork-occultism.and.healing/autogenic-training)](https://stichting-promise.nl/lichaamswerk-occultisme-en-genezing/autogene-training.%20%28Bodywork-occultism.and.healing/autogenic-training%29htm)

**[htm](https://stichting-promise.nl/lichaamswerk-occultisme-en-genezing/autogene-training.%20%28Bodywork-occultism.and.healing/autogenic-training%29htm)**

[**https://stichting-promise.nl/eigentijds-occultisme/sleutelen-aan-het-bewustzijn. htm**(Modern.occultism/tinkering](https://stichting-promise.nl/eigentijds-occultisme/sleutelen-aan-het-bewustzijn.%20htm%28Modern.occultism/tinkering)**.the.consciousness**

De term ‘vasovagale syncope’ (synoniemen: flauwvallen, vasovagale reactie; Engels: ‘vasodepressor syncope’) beschrijft een plotseling en voorbijgaand verlies van het bewustzijn als gevolg van een afname van de bloedstroom naar de hersenen.

<https://stichting-promise.nl/brochures/array/0/gallery/0/flat.htm>

The term ‘Vasovagal syncope’ (synonyms: to faint, ‘vasodepressor syncope’) describes a sudden and transient loss of consciousness as a result of a decrease of the blood flow to the brain.