



Keep calm and conquer stress



By Rhea Wessel
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It may sound a bit odd to have a chat with yourself every morning, repeating phrases like, "My arms and legs are

heavy. My arms and legs are warm. My heart is calm and regular."

But these are precisely the kinds of statements repeated by people who perform autogenic training, or the practice of auto-suggestion to reduce stress and increase concentration.

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We have a great potential to heal ourselves. We just have to know how to tap and use it.

In 15-minute blocks, or sometimes less, people reflect on their different body parts and instruct muscles, such as those in the neck, arms and legs, to relax and re-oxygenate, using a pre-defined script. Experts believe if the person has been practicing regularly for years, he or she can fall into deep relaxation within seconds by concentrating on the area and saying, "My arms and legs are heavy."

If you're looking for a way to counteract psychological stress, shake-off feelings of uneasiness, or feel more in control of a hectic schedule, then autogenic training might be for you, says Katja Engelskirchen, who turned to autogenic training after a burnout and now teaches the exercises and stress prevention near Frankfurt.

First developed in the 1930s by Johannes Heinrich Schultz, a German psychiatrist who studied clinical hypnosis and Far Eastern meditation techniques,

autogenic training helps people to deeply relax within a short period of time because they have conditioned themselves to respond to their own verbal cues.

These mind-over-body exercises are often recommended for individuals coping with high stress, or for athletes looking to improve their performance. In Germany, the method is well-known and practiced, and children are even introduced to the idea while still in kindergarten.

Simple to practice

If you're feeling stressed, you can perform self-suggestion exercises at your desk, in a parked car or a quiet corner of your workplace to help regenerate quickly and tank up on energy.

One fan of the method who lives near Frankfurt says she has performed autogenic training several times a week for years. It helps her cope calmly with multiple requests from too many directions at work, she says.

Konstanze, who preferred not to give her last name, learned the technique as a child growing up in eastern Germany. At 16, she was having trouble breathing while playing sport. Her doctors recommended an autogenic training course.

"I remember saying, 'This is nonsense.' We had to sit on the edge of our chairs and plant our feet on the ground,

our arms hanging down. It was like sitting as a coach driver. The leader would then tell us where to concentrate — on our feet, toes, lower legs," she said. Now after decades of practice, Konstanze has been won over. "When I take this journey through my body, I notice that I'm much more relaxed and take things easier. I am energetic until late at night."

Leaving work behind

Another benefit Konstanze describes is being able to switch off her thoughts about the office when she's not there. "When I leave work, I'm not interested in my problems there. In autogenic training and yoga, you learn to cut off the thoughts that fill a racing mind by focusing on something banal, like your toes. If you're thinking about your big toe, then your thoughts cannot race to the undone laundry or shopping," she said.

Keep calm and carry on

An autogenic training dialogue:

My body is in alignment.

My head is in line with my spine and my tailbone.

My feet are planted firmly on the floor.

I feel balanced, as if my head and shoulders are held by invisible strings.

My breaths are full and relaxing.

Else Mueller, an author and specialist in stress prevention, says the 'racing mind' has become part of everyday life, and believes stress is a major public health problem. These are issues she addresses in the 17 books she has written about relaxation methods. Early in her career, Mueller developed her own iteration of autogenic training based on the techniques of Schulz,

I am relaxed...

Source: *Human Performance Resource Center*

"modernising" it and making it easier and faster to learn, she says. Over the years, she has trained people at companies from Nestle to Robinson Club and S Fischer Verlag, among others.

Her method, called Innovative Autogenic Training (IAT), differs from the Schulz approach because it combines visual imagery with auto-suggestion, using "classical" commands. The imagery fits with the desired muscular effect. For instance, when you want to feel heavy while sitting, you imagine a mountain. When you want warmth in your body, you evoke an image of the sun. In the third phase, when you want to create calm, you imagine clouds carrying away your thoughts.

"We send away our uneasy and racing thoughts with a cloud," said Mueller, who has successfully tested the method for herself and applied it at universities, in her own practice and at clinics. She added, "We have a great potential to heal ourselves. We just have to know how to tap and use it."

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Feelings want to be felt. Your body knows best

Not everyone is convinced, though. Isabel Bommer, a coach and motivational speaker, says all meditative techniques — of which autogenic training is just one — do not give you the full freedom for your body to respond with its inner wisdom.

how to release tension.

"All feelings are reflected physically, and if you direct them with too many meditative techniques, you don't experience your true feelings," Bommer said. "Feelings want to be felt. Your body knows best how to release tension. It does not need to be directed like you do in autogenic training."

For instance, if you find yourself crossing your legs in a meeting, standing on your tiptoes, or clicking your pen, that is your body intuitively performing compensating movements, she said.

Still, academic research proves that autogenic training can improve performance. Helen Gibbons, a psychologist and the founder of the **Autogenic Training Institute** in Australia, says autogenic training is backed by multiple clinical studies and is an accepted way to combat stress and fatigue. She points to one study by NASA that indicated that autogenic training may improve pilot performance during emergencies.

The benefits can be accurately measured, for instance through neuro-imaging and blood pressure readings, Gibbons wrote in an article published last year called **The 6 Hour Solution to Work Stress**.

In the end, Gibbons and others believe learning to self-regulate your psycho-physiological responses can create

profound changes in the mind and body that improve health and performance.

So the next time you overhear someone talking to her arms and legs at the office, don't be quick to judge, she may just become your next CEO.

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