

CHILLIN' OUT

Are Stress, Worry, and Freak-Outs Getting the Best of You?

There may not be a day that goes by where you are free of stress and worry, and where things don't get to you. When these things happen, your body and your mind start working against you, feeding these feelings and making them worse.

How Do You React?

Frequently, with these feelings, your breathing becomes rapid and shallow. Your heart rate will increase to the point that you can feel it beating, even feel like it's beating out of your chest. Your blood pressure will increase as well. When your worries become consistent and ruminative, so that it seems like you can't get the worry off your mind, it's hard to think about anything else. As stress gets worse, fears of being overwhelmed and feelings of hopelessness set in. At the worst, you believe irrationally that there is nothing you can do to change the circumstances and that you are completely out of control. Bummer!!!

What to do? What to do?

The Quieting Reflex (QR) technique is designed specifically to address these symptoms. Using QRs can bring calm and can help you focus attention back to where you feel more relaxed, more at peace, and more in control.

How Do I Develop QRs?

Practice, practice, practice when your stress is minimal and your circumstances are relatively calm. At first, QRs are conscious deep breathing. The letters begin as a *quieting response*, which, with practice over time, becomes a *quieting reflex*. With practice, QRs become reflexive and unconscious. They are automatically available to you in high stress times as you begin having symptoms of stress.

QRs are a Two-Part Calming Event

Clinically, QRs are a psychophysiological event for you. The physiological, or body part event, involves changing how you are breathing. Most people, breathing naturally, take about three seconds per respiration (breathing in and out). During a QR, you are consciously deepening your breath, so that it takes about six seconds per respiration.

“...BREATHE...”

Try to make your breath even, deep, and consistent. Inhale slowly and fully, until your lungs are completely expanded. Without holding your breath at the top of your intake, immediately and slowly exhale until your breath is completely released. With this slower, deeper breathing pattern, your blood

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system is working better for you, carrying more oxygen to your brain so you can think more clearly. You are also lowering your heart rate and reducing your blood pressure by breathing more deeply.

The QR is also a psychological event designed to slow your racing thoughts, increase your control, and reduce your stress.

As you are breathing deeply, first smile inwardly and with your eyes. Everybody knows how to smile with your mouth. Your eyes?? What is actually happening is that you are changing your focus from what's out there (in the world, in front of you) to what is in here (internally, in your mind). Simply smiling inwardly and with your eyes stops racing thoughts. It focuses your attention on internal events and thereby diminishes the perceived threat of external events which are beyond your control.

Next, be curious about your circumstances and your body function. Worry is fueled by "what if" questions your brain is forming under stress. Calm and comfort is fueled by "I wonder" statements. For example, "What if my head explodes?" is replaced in your mind by "I wonder when I will notice my heart rate slowing down." The "I wonder" curiosity focus on the positive presuppositions about upcoming events. "What ifs" create tensing, constricting, and withholding sensations in your body. "I wonders" generate relaxing, expanding, and creative sensations.

Finally, while breathing deeply, find a picture in your mind of something that is calming, relaxing, and peaceful. It can be an experience you have had in your life, or one that you imagine would fill the bill. For example, imagine soaking in a hot tub of water. Imagine being curled up in a blanket in front of a crackling fire on a cold winters' night. Imagine walking on the beach and listening to the rhythmic sound of the waves. Imagine being in the presence of the Lord and experiencing his gift of "peace that passes all understanding.

Make it Real for You!

If you have specific situations where you have consistently been stressed, worried, or panicked in the past, and you are using QRs to work on these situations, you need to make it real for you. That is, rather than just think about QRs when you need them, practice them when you don't need them. Rather than rely only on your efforts in the moment to calm down, take time to write down a list of the five most frequently occurring "What ifs." Then counter each "What if" question with a paired "I wonder" statement, complete with a presuppositional phrase that encourages the good thing you want to happen. Also, take time to write down a one-page, five sensory description of your calming, peaceful event, real or imagined.

Give yourself time to practice QRs when not stressed at least 50 times per day. While that seems like a whole lot of time, remember that a QR, both deep breathing and the change in thinking, only lasts about six seconds. Fifty times six seconds is only five minutes of practice per day. Also, QRs are a private event that can occur even in a public place or when surrounded with friends and relatives. Nobody but you knows that you are taking a deeper, more rhythmic breath. Nobody knows your quieting thoughts as you are having them.

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With practice you will gradually develop a quieting reflex, and your body will start calming at the slightest hint of stress or upset. Over time, all you will actually notice is that you are breathing more deeply and more rhythmically. The psychological parts of the QR will begin to happen more automatically in response to perceived high stress or upset. With practice of QRs, you will feel more hopeful, more in control, and more calm and relaxed. You will be better able to cope with whatever adversity or difficult life event that presents itself to you.

Say What? A Quick Review

QR stands for quieting response, which becomes a quieting reflex with practice over time. A QR is a six second, deep breathing respiration, involving roughly six seconds of breathing slowly in and an equal six seconds of breathing slowly out.

During this deeper breathing, focus your thoughts on three things:

1. Smiling inwardly and with your eyes,
2. Being curious about what is happening, changing “what if” questions into “I wonder thoughts, and,
3. Finding and focusing on a positive, calming, relaxing visual image in your mind.

Now, practice chillin' out.