



Opening the Door to the Ancestral Mind

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The Relaxation Response

To explore the natural rhythms of sleep and wakefulness, Dr. Thomas Wehr of the Psychobiology Branch at the National Institute of Health conducted a series of experiments attempting to replicate the experience of sleep as ancestral man might have known it.

In setting up his study, Wehr tried to re-create conditions in the latitudes inhabited by early man, latitudes in which a midwinter night lasted for about fourteen hours. He surmised, based on anthropological evidence that our ancestors would have remained in the safety of their caves, campsites, or sleeping bowers during that entire fourteen-hour period. Wehr therefore had his experimental subjects stay in darkness from 6:00pm to 8:00am every night for an entire month. With no artificial light, schedules, or alarms, these subjects were able to enter a cycle of sleeping and waking based on nothing other than their own internal, physiological cues.

What Wehr found was that, during the fourteen hours of darkness, his subjects lay in a state of quiet rest for about two hours before falling asleep. Then they slept for about four hours, awakened from dream sleep into another two-hour period of quiet rest, and then fell asleep again for four hours more. Each morning, the subjects awoke around 6:00am from their dream sleep, then spent another two hours in quiet rest before arising at 8:00am.

Wehr concluded that ancestral man, with no choice but to endure the darkness, and following no schedule but his own natural rhythms, slept for eight hours, as we do, but that his sleep, like that of the experimental subjects, was noncontinuous. It was interspersed with another six hours (in three two-hour blocks) spent in a state that was neither fully asleep nor fully alert and active, a state that Wehr described as "quiet rest with a physiology all its own."

This pattern is similar to the sleep routines of many mammals. Its technical name is *polyphasic sleep*, and it is the pattern we experience early and late in life. Babies sleep in multiple periods during the day, and older adults likewise tend to sleep noncontinuously at night and nap during the day. Evidently, this alteration met an evolutionary need.

Modern life, as dictated by the Thinking Mind, has not acknowledged a role for this state of quiet wakefulness through much of the night, yet it lies dormant within our physiology, part of our genetic makeup. Instead, we use artificial light to stay active and remain awake well into the evening, then consolidate our sleep into one seven-to eight-hour block form most of our adult life.

What this sleep pattern achieves, however, is to cut us off from the significant periods of deep relaxation – up to six hours in the winter months – that our ancestors likely experienced throughout their evolution. Noting that these phases of quiet wakefulness usually occurred immediately after dream sleep, Wehr speculated:

One wonders whether dream sleep might have had a greater impact on our ancestors. At some time each night they would have awakened from dream sleep and entered and extended period

of quiet wakefulness in which the effects of dreams might reverberate in conscious awareness ... It is tempting to speculate that in prehistoric times this arrangement provided a channel of communication between dreams and waking life that has gradually been closed off as humans compressed and consolidated their sleep. If so, then this alteration might provide a physiological explanation for the observation that modern humans seem to have lost touch with the wellspring of myths and fantasies.

Wehr describes "quiet wakefulness" – what we might call "daydreaming" or "reverie" – as a deeply relaxed, nonverbal, and more receptive mode of mental functioning, akin to what psychologists call "primary-process." This form of mental activity, at which the Ancestral Mind (AM) is so skillful, makes sense of information not by logical, formal rules but by greater conceptual flexibility and intuitive connections, which combine information into meaningful schemes via images and emotions.

You've experienced reverie if you've ever lost yourself "drifting off" while lying on the couch, staring at breaking waves at the ocean, or gazing into the crackling logs of a fireplace. The consequent reduction in the normal barrage or sensory input into the AM relieves the "pressure" of sensory stimulation and makes unconscious emotional stimuli more accessible. Even if these stimuli are not experienced consciously (because our level of alertness is generally reduced), the reticular formation and thalamus are now less active and the release of emotional stimuli is cathartic. Deep relaxation dissipates the mental and physical tension caused by the unconscious emotional arousal that accumulates beneath the level of awareness and affects our behaviors, moods, and health. As a result, we restore energy and feel renewed and refreshed.

More than a hundred years ago Freud devised his method of "free association of ideas" to enable the conscious mind to gain access to unconscious emotional information. He called it a "relaxation of the watch upon the gates of reason, the adoption of an attitude of uncritical observation." But free association as practiced in psychoanalysis is a process of the Thinking Mind, a way of trying to understand and interpret the meaning of associative mental activity using the conscious mind. It is not the truly relaxed, free-flowing mental state of reverie, which is property of the Ancestral Mind alone.

When individuals enter the deep wave patterns (alpha EEG is a "relaxed wakefulness" brain wave; theta EEG is more common during states of deep relaxation, such as the transition from wakefulness to sleep). Because the Thinking Mind "lets go" of its usual volitional control over conscious thought processes, individuals who are awakened from this state report an abundance of rich imagery, thought to represent the spontaneous emergence of unconscious feelings. This is called *hypnagogic imagery*, and it is typically described as dreamy, drowsy, floating, wandering. Many have compared the experience to being a passive spectator at a movie or play. The imagery appears as disconnected "snapshots", as opposed to the usual form of dreams, which are characteristically longer and better organized.

We experience hypnagogic imagery every night just before we fall asleep. When we close our eyes, we first spend a few minutes in a state of relaxed wakefulness that is characterized by drifting thoughts and alpha brain waves. Our thoughts gradually wander until the body begins to relax. We next pass through what's called *stage 1 sleep*, which is really the same thing as reverie – the drowsy, relaxed state between waking and sleeping. Activity decreases in the reticular formation and thalamus, so our awareness dims. Our bodies become more relaxed: muscle tension lessens; respiration and heart rate decrease; slow, rolling eye movements occur; and theta brain waves are generated as alpha waves begin to disappear. Because we enter deeper stages of sleep after only a few minutes in stage 1, we typically don't remember the hypnagogic imagery that passes through our minds.

In our waking lives, deep relaxation, reverie, and hypnagogic imagery can become a source of creativity and an aid in problem-solving. Many scientists, artists, and writers have reported the essential role of reverie in the initial stages of the creative process. Perhaps the most famous example is the chemist August Kekule, who derived the idea of the benzene ring from a hypnagogic image of a snake biting its own tail that appeared to him in a dreamlike state. Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Louis Stevenson all incorporated into their work the results of spontaneous imagery summoned up during reverie.

Accessing the Ancestral Mind – which means suspending the operation of the Thinking Mind – is valuable to problem-solving because in reverie, the intuitive model of hypnagogic imagery yields combinations of ideas that precede the logical working-out of a proof. This is precisely the sort of mental playfulness we often call intuition or a “hunch”, a playfulness that allows the organization of ideas into new structures.

The Relaxation Response

The benefits of deep relaxation are so profound that it has become a cornerstone of mind/body medicine as it has developed over the past thirty years. The physiology underlying every phenomenon we’ve just discussed – from our ancestors’ hours of quiet rest, to creative reveries, to our stage 1 sleep each night – has been exhaustively studied under the rubric of “the relaxation response.” This research not only has revealed the specific details of how and why our bodies enter into this state, but also has enabled us to perfect the techniques that allow us to enter this state at will. The relaxation response is the Ancestral Mind’s inborn calming mechanism, an adaptive response refined through millions of years of evolution. As a method of promoting health, it is safe, has been proven effective, and is absolutely free.

We know how stressful stimuli activate the circuitry of negative emotions in the amygdala, thalamus, and hypothalamus, triggering the “fight or flight” response, which included a rise in levels of stress hormones, more rapid heart rate, greater muscle tension, and so on. We also know how all these stress reactions can occur completely outside the range of our awareness.

In the world created by the Thinking Mind, the stressors we encounter are seldom acute, well-defined physical threats that require fight or flight. More often they are chronic and psychological, and the negative emotions are not subsequently balanced by positive ones. Because our stressors don’t require a concentrated burst of energy, there is no natural dissipation of the physical arousal of the stress response. The stress response says “switched on,” which leaves us in a chronic state of mind/body arousal, with greater readiness to experience emotions like anxiety or hostility, and with myriad stress-related health problems.

The key to confirming the existence of the relaxation response was biofeedback. Physiologists had always assumed that we had no voluntary control over the autonomic nervous system, the branch of the body that governs basic functions such as respiration and heart rate. But biofeedback experiments developed in the late 1960’s changed those perceptions. Researchers were now able to use electronic instrumentation to measure physiological data such as brain waves and heart rate, which were then fed back to a subject using auditory tones or visual signals. In this manner, an individual was given precise information about his or her own unconscious physiological process.

With these methods scientists discovered that, by having subjects alter their mental activity (whether thoughts, images, concentration, or attention) and use the biofeedback signal as a “mirror”, those subjects could change such “autonomic” functions as brain waves, heart rate, blood pressure, blood flow and skin temperature, and muscle tension. This discovery opened the

door for exploration of techniques such as meditation, long claimed by adherents to provide precisely this kind of inner control.

It was Harvard Medical School cardiologist Herbert Benson who dubbed the underlying mechanism the relaxation response (RR). As Benson defined it, the components of the relaxation response include:

- slower brain wave patterns and mental quieting
- reduced secretion of stress hormones
- reductions in heart rate and breathing rate and, in some cases, blood pressure
- increased blood flow to the extremities
- relaxation of the muscles throughout the body

Benson also pioneered the development of explicit techniques to make this form of deep relaxation readily achievable. He isolated four key elements to bring it about:

- a quiet place with eyes closed to minimize distractions
- a comfortable position and muscular relaxation
- a mental focusing device such as breathing, a word or phrase, or an image with which to shift the mind away from everyday thoughts
- passive disregard of everyday thoughts

Research has proved that the RR is an effective treatment for a variety of health problems, including anxiety disorders and panic attacks; headaches, back pain, arthritis, cancer pain, and other chronic pain conditions; gastro-intestinal problems, such as irritable bowel syndrome; hypertension, angina, and heart disease; menopausal hot flashes, premenstrual syndrome, and infertility; and nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy. The RR can also be used to stabilize blood sugar levels in diabetics and speed recovery from surgery. It is routinely employed to reduce the length of labor and discomfort of childbirth and has been shown to strengthen the immune system and increase defenses against upper respiratory infections.

Although the relaxation response has become a standard treatment in mind/body medicine, until recently our understanding of its therapeutic effects has focused on its ability to counter the stress response in the body. But my own research on brain wave changes has demonstrated that the relaxation response also dampens neural activity in the frontal cortex, which is not only the site of the TM's self-monologue but also part of the AM's circuitry of emotions. In precise terms, it's the "beta EEG", and alertness brain wave, that decreases during the relaxation response. In other words, the RR may exert its therapeutic effects, in part, by "quieting" emotional activity and the internal monologue in the frontal lobes.

When people practice the RR regularly, they can achieve deeper states of relaxation. Studies of RR techniques such as meditation have consistently found that, during the RR, brain waves slow as measured by heightened alpha and theta EEG activity. Alpha activity typically rises during the first few minutes of the RR, followed by increases in theta level. (Some studies have found that, if the individual exhibits high amounts of alpha activity prior to beginning the RR, then only theta activity increases during the RR.) Several researchers have established a direct relationship between the length of time subjects practiced the RR and the degree of EEG changes: Those with years of experience always exhibited increased theta activity during the RR.

In one study, I used more precise, computerized analysis of EEG activity in the frontal and temporal (side) brain regions to assess the effects of the RR in subjects who had been practicing the RR for only eight weeks. I found that, compared to a control condition, theta activity

increased during the RR while alpha activity decreased. This suggests that theta is, in reality, the key brain wave that changes during the RR. The ability to produce increased theta activity was a function of practice; the greater the number of weeks of practice the subjects practiced RR, the greater their increase in theta activity during the RR.

The appearance of slower brain wave patterns like theta waves indicates that the reticular formation and thalamus are reducing the arousal level of the cortex so that the cortex can relax, take a break from its normal processing of information, and conserve energy. The fact that regular practice of the RR resulted in increased theta waves suggests that the RR exerts its calming effects by quieting the brain. (These findings are consistent with studies that have demonstrated that, because the resting state of the human brain is highly activating due to the energy required to inhibit the constant barrage of sensory input into the brain, focused attention deactivates brain regions such as the cortex.) These quieting effects are likely the basis for the positive feelings of well-being that are commonly reported for the RR and, ultimately, the reduction in stress responses that is associated with improvement in stress-related health problems.

In summary, then, the primary effect of the relaxation response is not just in quieting responses in the muscles or in the cardiovascular system, but in acting on some of the structures that make up the Ancestral Mind itself. Its effects include:

- Producing states of mental and physiological quiescence that diminish mental activity in the frontal cortex (the site of the TM's monologue). This effect is probably achieved by focusing attention on some repetitive stimulus that interrupts the TM's internal monologue.
- Lowering the AM's level of arousal by inhibiting the flow of sensory information from the reticular formation and thalamus, providing instead monotonous sensory stimulation. The constant stimulation of daily life bombards the AM endlessly. By directing attention inward, the RR helps us to close out the distractions of the outer world and achieve lower arousal states that quiet negative thoughts and emotions and heighten feelings of relaxation.
- Reducing physiological input from the body by relaxing the muscles. The AM receives ongoing feedback from the musculature about emotional processes, which can influence stress reactions in a cyclical fashion. By relaxing the muscles, the RR assists the AM to turn off the stress response.
- Diminishing sense of self-reflective awareness by reducing sensory input to the orientation association cortex and working memory.

Besides quieting the brain, the RR may have another fundamental therapeutic effect in opening the channels of communication with the AM by suppressing the TM's normal, rational thinking processes. This allows us to gain access to stressful emotional stimuli that have been registered unconsciously in the AM, as we saw was the case for reverie and primary-process states. The aim of many systems of meditation is, in fact, to permit the individual to gain awareness of feelings and emotional stimuli that have previously been inaccessible. Meditation frees our attention from distracting sensory stimuli in order to focus on the more subtle stimuli, particularly emotional ones that unconsciously shape our perception and behavior.

Siesta Time

The RR and our predilection for quiet rest may also be linked to our innate propensity to need an afternoon nap. Although many people believe the familiar slump in mood and performance in

the early afternoon is the result of eating a heavy lunch, it actually occurs because the Ancestral Mind was programmed by evolution to perform better with mid-afternoon rest.

The napping of toddlers and the elderly, and the afternoon nap of siesta cultures, have led sleep researchers to the same conclusion: the brain intended that we take a nap in the middle of the day. The tendency for grogginess in the afternoon is present even in good sleepers who are well rested. If we don't always notice this is true, it's probably because we're running around too fast or we've stoked ourselves up on caffeine.

Because the midday nap is an integral part of so many cultures, particularly those near the equator, the practice may be part of an evolutionary mechanism not just to reduce stress but to get us out of the hot midday sun. Nonetheless, at least one study has found that stress has the strongest negative effect on our mood and on our immune systems in the afternoon.

The urge for a nap is not as strong as the need for nighttime sleep, and can therefore be suppressed. As naps conflict with work timetables, they are becoming less common. The irony here is that, because the rigid scheduling demands of the TM prohibit naps, they actually cause a decline not just in mood, but in energy, alertness, and performance.

Research suggests that an afternoon nap even as short as ten minutes can enhance all these factors, especially after a night of poor sleep. In one study, pilots on long-distance airplane flights who were allowed to take a break from the controls for a brief nap in the cockpit were less fatigued, more alert and vigilant, and performed far better. There is also some evidence that naps may have other health benefits. In a study conducted in Greece, daily naps were correlated with a 30 percent reduction in the incidence of coronary heart disease.

Other findings have shown that shorter naps of less than one hour comprise a significant amount of wakefulness and light sleep, including stage 1 sleep, so napping may be more similar to the RR than to the deep sleep of nighttime. But the benefits of a nap don't appear dependant upon reaching any specific stage of sleep. What is significant is attaining deep relaxation in the middle of the day to counter the typical afternoon surge in stress.

The Restorative Power of Sleep

While the previous sections have, I hope, demonstrated the value of naps and of learning the relaxation response, there's probably no substitute for a good night's sleep. After all, nature has seen to it that we spent at least one-third of our entire evolutionary history sound asleep.

Among the reasons that sleep has such an important impact on our health and well-being are:

- Deep sleep (which is characterized by delta brain waves, or what sleep researchers call slow-wave sleep) affords the Ancestral Mind a period of reduced blood flow and energy metabolism, which appears crucial for restoring energy and optimal neural functioning. Activity in the reticular formation, thalamus, limbic system, and prefrontal cortex is also significantly diminished. Energy, joy, optimistic thinking, coping with negative emotions, and positive moods are all dependant on getting enough deep sleep.
- Some sleep researchers view dream sleep as the brain's system for maintaining emotional homeostasis by processing emotions, routinely accessing emotional memories, and regularly suppressing self-consciousness. The reticular formation, thalamus, and limbic system all become very active during dream sleep, with increased blood flow and energy metabolism, so dream sleep may be therapeutic to the AM in discharging emotional arousal.

Nonetheless, and particularly in light of the stress of the TM's modern life, half of adults complain of disturbed sleep. Stress is the most common precipitator of insomnia, and many of us have a harder time sleeping on stressful days. When you're stressed during the day, your stress hormones remain elevated even much later, when you're trying to sleep.

Dozens of scientific studies have shown that the RR is an effective treatment for insomnia. When practiced during the day, the RR counters stress responses, leading to lower levels of stress hormones at night. The RR also improves sleep itself because, when practiced at bedtime or after waking in the night, it can produce the brain wave pattern that is similar to stage 1 sleep. In other words, the relaxation response can take you to light sleep, which is your portal to deep sleep and dream sleep.

Throughout our evolution, the relaxation response has been our constant companion. It mitigates physical stress, and it calms us before and after sleep. It improves mood and energy and enables us to open the channels of communication with the AM. It is part of our genetic makeup and, as we'll explore later, is linked to our need for nature, solitude, and other calming stimuli. Reconnecting with the relaxation response is a readily available way to reestablish a link to with the Ancestral Mind. And it's not at all hard to do.

Learning to Elicit the RR

There are three simple steps to eliciting the RR:

Step 1: Consciously Relax Your Muscles – Let Go of Tension

Relax the muscles throughout the body. This is accomplished by allowing relaxation to spread gradually throughout the body. The feelings that result may vary from warmth, heaviness, or tingling to nothing specific.

Step 2: Belly Breathing

Establish a relaxed breathing pattern. When we are in a state of calmness or sleeping, we breathe with the abdomen, which relaxes the body because carbon dioxide is expelled and oxygen inhaled efficiently. Under stress, we tend to breathe inefficiently, using short, shallow, irregular chest breaths, which strain the body and cause waste products to build up in the blood, which in turn makes us feel anxious.

You can demonstrate successful abdominal breathing to yourself by placing one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. Now focus on your breathing. If you are breathing abdominally, the hand on your stomach will rise and fall as you inhale and exhale. But if you are chest-breathing, you will notice that the hand on your chest will move as you breathe.

Step 3: Focus – Imagine a Bubble Releasing Each Exhale

Direct your attention from everyday thoughts by mentally repeating a neutral word – a word like "one", or "relax", or "peace", or "heavy" – with each outbreath. Assume a passive attitude. In other words, let relaxation occur at its own pace; don't "try" to relax, and don't worry about whether relaxation is occurring. If distracting thoughts occur, disregard them and return attention to the mental focusing device.

When you're ready to try it for yourself, you may want to tape-record the following, more detailed instructions – read them aloud very slowly – and play them back when it's time to relax:

Sit in a chair or lie on a bed or floor and get comfortable. Close your eyes and direct your attention to the toes and feet. Begin to imagine a wave of relaxation moving through them. You may notice a sensation of warmth, tingling or heaviness there, or you may simply feel your feet against your shoes or the floor.

Now, visualize this wave to relaxation moving up through your calves, and then up to your thighs. Take time to appreciate how warm and good it feels. Let it come at its own pace. Now, feel it move up to your stomach, your chest, and then over to your back. Your upper body is becoming more and more relaxed.

Feel the relaxation moving out to the hands, where once again you may notice warmth, tingling, or heaviness. Perhaps you feel your hands resting against your body or your chair or bed. Visualize the relaxation spreading up to your forearms, upper arms, and shoulders. Take a moment to truly experience the good feeling of the relaxation. Next, let the relaxation flow to your neck and jaw, your cheeks, then your eyes and forehead.

Relaxation has now streamed throughout the entire body. Every inch of you is becoming more and more relaxed. Again, take a moment to feel how truly relaxed you are.

Focus your attention now to breathing. Note that it is becoming more rhythmic. As you inhale, feel your stomach expand; as you exhale, it contracts. Inhale, it expands. Exhale, it contracts. Take a few moments to focus your attention on your abdominal breathing. If your mind drifts back to everyday thoughts, simply let the thoughts go and return your attention to your breathing.

Visualize a balloon in your abdomen. As you inhale, the balloon fills with air; when you exhale, it gets smaller. Stay focused on your abdominal breathing.

By now you are breathing even more rhythmically, imagine a bubble releasing and floating upwards on your out breath. It may help to pick a word to repeat silently to yourself each time you exhale, a word such as "one" or "relax". This word will serve as a focus of attention to direct your mind away from any other thoughts. Continue to focus your breathing and the word.

Whenever it feels right, take a slow, deep breath, and then slowly open your eyes.

What was your experience like? When people first elicit the RR, they usually report a sense of physical relaxation, as their breathing slows. During deep relaxation, you may feel that you are neither really awake nor really asleep. You may lose awareness of surroundings, thoughts, or the mental focusing device, and enter a state similar to stage 1 sleep.

Your mind may wander at first. That's normal. With practice, though, your ability to focus your attention will improve, and your thoughts will slow and begin to drift pleasantly.

At first, the feelings of relaxation you derive from the RR may be only temporary. Some of the beneficial effects of the RR are immediate and obvious; others occur only over longer periods of time and are more subtle. Friends may begin to notice that your fuse is not as short. Within as little as a few weeks, the body's stress hormones become less reactive. Your unconscious

emotional activation is reduced, and the calming effects of the RR begin to “carry over” and extend throughout the day. As a result, you may begin to observe:

- An increased awareness of tension when it does occur, decreased stress reactions, and a greater ability to counter the tension by summoning relaxation quickly and automatically.
- Less anxiety, anger, frustration, and stress-related symptoms, leading to a generally improved daytime mood.
- An increased sense of control over stress, which leads to greater confidence in your ability to control your mind, body, and emotional reactions.

Guidelines for Establishing Daytime RR Practice

The more consistently you practice the RR, the greater the benefits to your sleep, your health, and your daily life. If you miss a day or two a week, don't become concerned, but remember: Practicing just a few times per week is usually not sufficient to counter the daily effects of stress on the mind and body.

The most difficult part of establishing regular RR practice is finding the time to do so. The tyranny of the Thinking Mind tells you that the day is too busy for relaxation, and will try to make you feel guilty or “unproductive.” Think of the RR as something that will improve not just your mood and your health but your performance as well. It is something that you need and deserve. If you still can't find time for the RR, you are probably one of those who need it most.

Here are some additional guidelines to help you realize the many potential benefits of the RR:

- Allot ten or twenty minutes per day for the RR. Most people simply can't relax and quiet the mind in less time. As you gain more experience, you'll reach a greater degree of relaxation more quickly.
- Practice the RR in a comfortable position and quiet place where you are least likely to be disturbed by noises, telephones, children, or pets. Most people practice the RR at home, but it can be practiced in a library, conference room, or office. If you practice in the same place regularly, you'll begin to associate the RR with that place and you'll more easily make it a habit.
- Experiment to find the time of the day that works best, then designate that time as your regular RR period. By practicing at the same time each day, you'll make the RR part of your habitual routine. Some find it helpful to start the day with the RR; others discover that practicing later in the day, when stress responses have accumulated, is more effective. Afternoon RR practice may also satisfy the biological need for a mid-afternoon counterbalance to afternoon stress.

Minis: Eliciting the RR Anytime, Anywhere

Finally, there's actually a way to elicit the relaxation response in situations where you only have a few seconds available. We call it a “mini”, and it allows you to significantly reduce your stress at a stoplight or in a traffic jam; during an argument; while waiting in line; just before giving a speech; or as you walk into a crowded room.

A mini involves taking a few moments to relax the muscles in the body (particularly the neck, shoulders, and face), then practicing abdominal breathing and mental focusing techniques. You can do this sitting or standing, with your eyes open or closed.

Take a moment now and try it.

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