

Relaxation and Heart Disease

By Steven Coward, ND

Imagine that a new therapy was developed that reduced blood pressure, cholesterol and the risk of death from heart disease. Imagine that it also helped people cut back on smoking. Imagine further that it had absolutely no negative side effects. Really. Such a therapy would be front page news. It would be heavily marketed. It would be a block buster. Or would it?

A study¹ conducted in Great Britain in the early 1980s tells the story of an immensely powerful therapy for cardiovascular disease that is both unrecognized and underutilized. The therapy is relaxation. In the study, 192 volunteers were identified as having two of the following risk factors for heart disease:

- Blood pressure above 140/90
- Cholesterol greater than 243
- Smoking more than 10 cigarettes per day

The volunteers were randomly split into two groups. Both groups were educated about stopping smoking, reducing animal fats in their diets, and the importance of reducing blood pressure. But only one of the groups was given additional training in the form of a weekly one-hour session with breathing exercises, meditation, relaxation techniques, and advice on managing stress. These sessions continued for just eight weeks.

At the end of eight weeks, the participants in the relaxation training had significantly reduced their:

- Blood pressure
- Cholesterol
- Number of cigarettes smoked

These measures were all still significantly reduced after eight months. Note that the training did not continue beyond eight weeks, but the benefits did.

At the end of four years, the cholesterol and smoking numbers were not significantly different between the two groups. However, what was different was staggering. The relaxation group four years after its eight weeks of training still had significantly lower blood pressure than the control group. In addition, in the four years following the training, the relaxation group had significantly lower incidences of:

- Angina
- Treatment for hypertension and its complications
- Ischemic heart disease

- Fatal heart attacks
- EKG evidence of low blood flow to the heart

Imagine that a drug was developed that could report such benefits. Imagine the drug had no adverse side effects. Imagine looking at TV or a magazine, or walking into any doctors office, and not hearing about what a great new discovery this is!

1. Patel, et al, *British Medical Journal*, April 1985.