Imagery-Related Techniques in Autogenic Training

DON H. PARKER

The main distinguishing characteristic of man from other animals is his ability to form images from words. Conversely he can translate images into words and describe to others and to himself, what he sees, hears, feels, or otherwise senses -- be these images of such concrete objects as chairs and tables or of a walk on the moon.

The human can image an event and thus make it possible. I have had a personal, medically proven healing event made possible by the use of imagery induced through Autogenic Training (AT). I am uncertain how much of it was caused by verbalizing, or by simply visualizing, or whether, indeed, one can occur without the other. AT does not waste time with analyzing the extent to which either is beneficial in bringing about a healing. At the outset, it begins with words to induce imaging through the use of our several senses. While it seems to rely mainly on the sense of sight, hearing, kinesthesia, and temperature experiences, it could just as easily utilize our sense of smell and taste, and whatever subsenses the synesthesia phenomenon can elicit.

My experience with imagery through AT began with the healing (shrinking) of my nasal passages so a larger volume of air could pass. After 35 years of being a slave to a Vicks nose drop bottle and various nasal potions, by a lucky accident AT literally fell into my lap. By this time, I almost dreaded bedtime: the initial filling my nose with drops, sleeping a few hours, only to wake up three or four times during the night to repeat the process.

Here is how it happened. My nose was on fire, as I lay there in the early morning light, to breathe seemed like trying to move a mass of hot mud through my nostrils. I was suffering backlash from a 35-year overuse of medication: Vicks nose drops, Drisdan pills, sprays and inhalers, Benzedrene, and for the last 3 days, a prescription by my physician. Weary from a night's struggle to
get enough air to survive by alternately sitting up and trying to breathe lying down, I phoned Dr. K. "I've got to stop taking this prescription," I told him, "and my nose is about to burn up." He offered one small comfort, the alternative he had posed several times before: an operation on my nose, broken in early childhood, which "may or may not be successful." I could see myself heading for the operating table. Then I discovered AT.

That very day I was moving a bookshelf in my office when one of the books slipped and fell to the floor. It was Relieve Tension the Autogenic Way, by Hannes Lindemann. Actually, I had casually read the book 2 years earlier. "Some interesting ideas," I had thought, and shelved it to gather dust in my professional library. Now, a drowning man grasping at a straw, I sat in the middle of my sorted book piles and began to read. Now the book spoke to me. But my reaction was still, "What a bunch of Simple Simon stuff." Yet I was willing to try anything to get even some relief and avoid going under the knife.

Less than 3 weeks later, I was sleeping soundly the whole night through -- no waking up, gasping for air. "My nose is learning how to stay open all night so I may sleep soundly and awaken refreshed." This was the "resolution" I had programmed into my organism, using my conscious mind to tap the unlimited powers of my subconscious mind. This is what autogenic training does, and anyone can learn it.

Since my own "miracle" -- actually only a very normal learning experience -- I have taught AT to over 300 people. Those who have contacted me, have reported a high degree of success in dealing with a number of problems, ranging from anxiety, tension and insomnia, to high blood pressure, constipation, skin problems, and breathing.

I would much prefer now to simply refer you to the book, Relieve Tension the Autogenic Way, but since the book is out of print I feel obligated to give you at least enough background to make the whole process believable and enough actual instruction to make the AT system useful.

Autogenic training is a system of very specific autosuggestive formulas to relax tensions and alleviate psychosomatic disturbances. It has been used successfully in Europe by thousands of people in every walk of life for 30 years. Even European universities and hospitals teach it. Almost anybody except young children can learn it by reading and applying a relatively simple set of exercises. Most people become proficient in a matter of
weeks by practicing two or three times daily for 5 to 10 minutes. No special skills are required. AT works without paraphernalia, gurus, or physical exertion. It is self-generated in your mind. The procedure is not very difficult to learn or to apply, but attention to detail is required. In many conditions it may be the only treatment necessary to achieve satisfactory results (Luthe, 1963).

The father of autogenic training is Johannes Heinrich Schultz, M.D., a German psychiatrist, who died in 1970 at the age of 86. More than 400 articles and books testify to his great energy and genuine concern for his fellow man. As early as 1919 in Breslau, Dr. Schultz worked with hypnosis. It was during this period that his interest was aroused in a field known today as psychosomatic medicine. In an article he published in 1920, "The Stratification Levels in the Hypnotized Psyche," his basic concepts of AT are evident. Schultz said that people under hypnosis regularly experienced two conditions: "A peculiar heaviness, especially in their limbs, and a peculiar warmth." Many years of experimentation led to formalization of the present AT method as the most economic way of invoking healing images in the subconscious and focusing healing energy in the area to be treated (see Schultz & Luthe, 1959).

For the extension of Dr. Schultz's work into the medical profession, especially in North America, we are indebted to Wolfgang Luthe, M.D. of Canada, whose six volumes (Luthe, 1969-1973) and years of lecturing have brought AT's benefits to thousands. I have been fortunate to hear Dr. Luthe lecture during an international conference on biofeedback in Colorado Springs in 1975, and his range of application and refinement of technique were inspiring.

But perhaps the one who has done the most to make AT understandable and available to us is Hannes Lindemann, M.D., in his book, Relieve Tension the Autogenic Way. After World War II, his work in a Hamburg clinic brought him in close touch with Dr. Schultz. Lindemann yearned to sail single-handedly across the Atlantic Ocean. This had been done before, of course, but never in a 10-foot canvas boat! He made the trip in 72 days, enduring extreme privations and hardships. He did it by programming himself to come through deadly storms, hunger, thirst, loneliness, and even disorientation by the rigorous use of autogenic training before he embarked and through his 72-day odyssey. Through such resolutions as, "I can do it," and "West-keep west," he kept going. For accomplishing the feat, he was Life coverman in July 1957. "There is no way I could have accomplished the voyage without AT," said Dr. Lindemann.
Because of my own success with the method and my desire to help others learn to use AT, I devised a presentation to become a part of my workshop on "Mind Power." I provide my participants with a fundamental working tool they take home and use to refine AT's application to the mental and physical health problems that seem to come along with the business of living. What follows has been distilled from many pages of Dr. Lindemann's book (1973). The extreme lef-hand column indicates the number of days to be devoted to learning each phase. It can be seen that 16 days will be required to learn the complete set of exercises and thus gain the deep relaxation necessary to actively receive the trainee's resolution.
Abbreviated version:

Calm - heaviness - warmth
Heart and breathing completely calm
Abdomen flowingly warm
Forehead pleasantly cool
Resolution formula
Canceling: Arms firm, breathe deeply, open eyes

NOTE: If you tend to fall asleep during your morning or mid-day training, begin your training session with "I stay free and fresh while training." However, during your evening training you may wish to let yourself fall asleep at the end of training. Then you need not cancel.
DESIGNING YOUR OWN RESOLUTION FORMULAE

NOTE: Your resolution formula should be thought of, perhaps written down, before you begin using the 6 steps beginning with Day 16, so you can use it immediately following the last step (My forehead is pleasantly cool).

The first rule: Resolution formulae must be brief. Lindemann's ocean-crossing resolutions were extremely brief: "Keep going west," "I can do it." Brief orders have considerable advantages, but lengthy resolutions can also be used.

The second rule: Resolution formulae should be positive, if possible. Instead of "I can't give up," it is better to use, "I shall pull through." Ultimately, of course, personal feelings and taste should decide.

The third rule: Resolution formulae should be to the point; state exactly the result you want.

Rhythmic resolutions are generally more effective too, because we can better identify with a rhythmic sentence. It is easier to focus on, and its effect is more intense. This is also true for resolutions in rhyme form, and it does not matter if they sometimes sound somewhat forced.

Resolutions can be made even more effective if they are alliterative, for instance, "Words work well." In this formula the "W" should be emphasized and lengthened to make it more effective.

It is particularly important to follow a rule established by Dr. Schultz which tells us to choose attitudes of indifference rather than attitudes of fight and tension. "Cigarettes are unimportant" is better than "I will no longer smoke." This formula of indifference is especially advisable during unusually intense emotional states.
NOTE: Pains Requiring Attention

Relaxation leads to pain reduction. Anyone who wants to use AT to reduce pain must know the origin of such pain.

If one is not clear about the cause of a pain, one must consult a physician. Many serious illnesses begin with insignificant pains, and it would be dangerous to cover or overpower them with AT.

The medical profession is now saying that perhaps 75% of all illness is psychosomatic or functional, something one does to one's self. Autogenic training alleviates such disturbances and often effects cure.

Some examples of resolutions to be used at the end of the 6 steps of AT

For headaches: Left/right side of forehead is pleasantly cool and pain free.

Food addictions: Alcohol (sweets, etc.) is completely immaterial.

Bowel regularity: Bowel movement will be a half hour after arising (or whenever you wish). Colon retains (for diarrhea).

Remaining asleep: I sleep deeply and soundly until I awake at 6 (or whatever time) and I wake at 6, fully rested.

Personal-social: Neighbors are also people, I please them, they please me. Respect for my neighbor will make me well.

Ordering your life: I am completely calm, happy, and free: I can be free only when there is good order.

Sexual tensions: In the act of love I am free, active, and relaxed. My wife (husband) is pretty nice. I am a man and love as a man as long as I can.

For difficulty in night breathing: My nose is learning how to stay open all night so I may breathe freely and awaken refreshed.
It is strongly suggested that you photocopy the foregoing exercises in convenient form and read from them while lying on your back during each session, until you have memorized them in detail.

In addition to the above, the following hints and observations quoted from Dr. Lindemann's book will be useful as you progress in the learning of AT.

Dr. Schultz repeatedly pointed out that "only a systematic and precise procedure could bring the full effect and benefit of this method." In other words, the beginner should follow the instructions as closely as possible. A certain freedom of action may sometimes be justified, but for the majority of those who learn AT it is better to be quite systematic from the beginning.

Everyone will discover for himself the best time for exercise. Generally, the last exercise period of the day is best done before going to sleep. As we shall see, that has many advantages. To exercise every evening is absolutely necessary.

To begin the day with AT has also become a source of psychic well-being for many people. Anyone who thinks he can't afford these five minutes cheats himself; it is merely an excuse, or perhaps a sign of already excessive tension. Particularly in the morning a person can prove that he is not driven by his false ideas. To engage in AT in the morning will help you attain and maintain your perspective. Several people have reported that they go back to sleep during their morning exercise. They were told to repeat the following formula during their exercise:

I stay free and fresh while training.

This formula should also be used when you are doing your training in the office or anywhere you do not wish to fall asleep.

The afternoon session is really only for those who are already somewhat more advanced. Done properly, it takes the place of a coffee break: after finishing the exercise, you will feel refreshed. The exercise can also help overcome the drowsiness that follows a meal.

Initially, a person should allocate about one minute for the
first exercise. Once he is more advanced, he should use about five minutes per exercise. If he adds a verbal formula incorporating certain resolutions, one exercise may take as much as ten minutes, but these ten minutes are an investment in health.

Generally, the student should practice three times a day. Once he is satisfied with his first successes, he will automatically move on to a "maintenance dosage" -- the minimum being to exercise twice a day.

If it can be arranged, the exercising should take place in a slightly darkened and not overly warm room. The windows should be closed in order to eliminate disturbing noises.

It is not easy to train on a full stomach. The consumption of coffee will also generally make it difficult to concentrate -- and the ability to concentrate is essential.

Sometimes the student can help himself and make the training easier by imagining that he has just returned from a long walk and now feels pleasantly tired.

There are as many reasons as there are individuals for the inability to collect one's thoughts. Some students state that they find it more difficult to concentrate on their training in the evening when they have consumed alcohol. Others found the same to be true after they have drunk tea or eaten particular foods. People who take drugs have reported that smoking hashish made concentration more difficult; on the other hand, it has been reported that the consumption of a glass of beer facilitated the exercises.

It should also be considered that the student will not be able to exercise with the same success every day. Still, the more experienced the trainee is, the less will he be sidetracked by internal or external disturbances.

If your mind begins to wander, the formula can be repeated more quickly. And even mindless repetitions can be effective.

Many students have a sensation of heaviness during their first session, and some even experience the feeling of warmth. Others need several days or even weeks before they experience the feeling of heaviness. Still others require three to four weeks before they are successful. Very rarely
the sensation of heaviness fails to occur until very much later. Imagining that you are carrying a very heavy briefcase has been helpful in quite a few such cases.

It could be argued that even initially the student might aim at inducing the feeling of heaviness in both arms simultaneously. However, that makes it difficult to fixate his thoughts on a particular limb, a matter of considerable importance in the beginning of AT.

INDUCING HEAVINESS

To do this exercise, you sit or lie in a completely relaxed state.

The first training formula is:

My right arm is very heavy.

Left-handers should use the left arm, of course, because they can relate better to it; their formula is, therefore, "My left arm is very heavy."

Obviously, you must try to concentrate deeply and totally on the training formula. Sudden ideas, thoughts, inspirations, or memories inevitably and unavoidable will appear. When this happens, it is important not to lose patience, but to redirect your thoughts to the training formula, without an effort of will. If you cannot concentrate at all, it may be advisable to begin the exercise again. In those instances in which even a second attempt is not successful, it is better to stop for a while.

"My right arm is very heavy" should be repeated in your mind about six times. Then "I am completely calm" is inserted, to be followed by "My right arm is very heavy" six times more.

The time required to repeat the formula six times varies from person to person; many students need about fifteen seconds for the six repetitions. The formula designed to induce heaviness -- repeated approximately eighteen times in every exercise during the first week -- and the additional sentence "I am completely calm" together require about one minute. Should there be any kind of unpleasant feeling during the exercise, the training should be stopped with the
proper "canceling." The other five exercises are conducted in like manner.

WHY "CANCEL"?

As we already know, ideas and thoughts, but even more so resolutions, have a tendency to materialize. If we use the first training formula, "My right arm is very heavy," certain changes will take place in that arm that can be undone by "canceling." This must be done, according to the instructions given by Dr. Schultz; even if one has felt nothing, one must "cancel" the formula.

The formula for "canceling" is:

Arms firm, or stretch and bend arms
Breathe deeply and open eyes.

The arms should simultaneously be bent and stretched vigorously, but stretching and relaxing the arm muscles isometrically several times will suffice. "Canceling" does not work as well if the eyes are opened before the arm muscles are relaxed, because the feeling of heaviness or some other sensation may then persist in the arms for some time. Some students have reported that a feeling of heaviness has lasted for several hours, even days. They probably did not "cancel" correctly.

The more determined and conscientious the "canceling" the more effective it will be. Should the student fall asleep while exercising, he need not "cancel." Some students have difficulty understanding this and wake suddenly at night, feeling guilty about not having "canceled."

The same is true when the trainee is suddenly interrupted during his exercise, by the telephone or the doorbell, for example. In such a case he will suffer a brief shock that makes it unnecessary to "cancel."

It is my firm belief that almost any individual, having once proven mastery of AT through self-administered healing or relief from a symptom, is in a position to teach others to use the method. That one has formal training in psychology or psychotherapy is, of course, highly desirable. Dr. Lindemann has this to say:
As I have said, this book can teach you the AT method without outside assistance. But the application of the method does have limitations, which will be self-evident when you encounter any of them. Since AT is still not widely known outside Continental Europe, I recommend that you show this book to an experienced psychiatrist or clinical psychologist and ask for assistance with any problem you encounter.

It is becoming more and more acceptable to believe that energy generated through one's own mind power can take many forms, depending on whether it derives from positive, negative, or other feelings. It can, of course, be experienced by the individual. But amazingly enough, it also can be seen and photographed!

Over a period of 4 years, in my Big Sur photopsychography laboratory, I performed scores of experiments, using the Kirlian effect, to photograph energy coming out of the fingertips of individuals as they put themselves in the seven sentic states, as postulated by Dr. Manfred Clynes: anger, hate, grief, love, sex, joy, and reverence. My work also took me to several groups participating in workshops at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. Dramatic differences in energy patterns occurred as the subject put himself/herself in each of the several sentic states, then signaled the experimenter (the author) and had his/her feelings captured on film (see Figure). Surely then, here is proof that the thoughts and feelings we put into our subconscious minds, influence our bodies to respond with physical symptoms of stress and dis-ease, or with healing of these conditions. Here is living proof that the energy generated through the use of AT produces bodily changes.

In computerese we say, "GIGO -- garbage in, garbage out." In the language of body-mind-spirit, we say, "What your conscious mind puts in, your subconscious mind goes to work on, giving you back a bodily manifestation -- either desirable or undesirable." Physicians are now saying that perhaps 75% of the complaints they deal with are psychosomatic, caused by programming or letting in "the wrong stuff."

Here are some closing thoughts from my own experience which may prove of further help. After you have progressed through all the exercises over a period of 16 days and begin to use your resolution, you will come to appreciate the wisdom that came from the years of Dr. Schultz's careful experimentation. You will recognize how the particular areas of the body he finally selected for
THOUGHT-GENERATED ENERGY FROM THE FINGERTIP OF A FEMALE SUBJECT CAPTURED ON FILM BY THE PROCESS OF PHOTOPSYCHOGRAPHY (KIRLIAN)

1. IMAGING ANGER

2. IMAGING HATE

3. IMAGING GRIEF

4. IMAGING LOVE

5. IMAGING SEX

6. IMAGING JOY

7. IMAGING REVERENCE

Originals, taken as color slides on Kodak ASA 400 film, show dramatic differences among the seven sentient states not discernable in black and white.

From the work of the author, Don H. Parker, Ph.D., in his photopsychography laboratory in Big Sur, California, 1971-75.
AT focus do, indeed, induce complete relaxation and receptivity
of the body-mind-spirit to the resolution you feed into your sub-
conscious.

You also will note that the resolution actually provides a
learning experience for your body, transmitted there by your
mind. My resolution was, you recall, "My nose is learning how to
stay open all night so I may breathe freely and awaken
refreshed!" I set the goal, confident that my body-mind would
learn how to achieve it.

The very nature of AT is learning. The body can unlearn
"unprofitable" ways of reacting to stress and dis-ease. Like-
wise, it can learn beneficial reactions. You invite your body to
learn. You have confidence that your body can learn. You are
opening doors for natural things to happen. The natural direc-
tion of the body is lifeward, toward health, not toward sickness.
Health, both mental and physical, is a natural state. Your own
resolution carefully thought out by you, will drive out negative
thoughts, attitudes, and bodily stresses that can cause bodily
malfunctions. In my case, it actually changed the physical com-
position of my nasal passages so more air could pass through.

Occasionally my nose seems to need a memory jog to remember to
remain open as I lie down. At such times, I simply begin with
"My right arm is ...", and most often, before I have moved
through the first one or two exercises, repeating each one only
three times, my nose gets the message and opens up.

I am blessed with good sleep but on that rare occasion when sleep
does not follow within moments of lying down, my use of AT brings
immediate slumber. Most often, I do not get past a few repeti-
tions of the "heaviness" and "warmth" sequence, before sleep
overtakes my conscious mind. Again, if I awaken at 4:00 or 5:00
o'clock in the morning with good sleeping time still ahead of me,
I can, instead of tossing and turning, induce sleep through AT.
Sometimes I have to go through the whole six exercises, repeating
each three times, but the 2 or 3 minutes spent assure me restful
sleep the remainder of the night.

As a parting gift to my reader and in line with the theory and
practice of AT, I offer a sort of "maintenance dose" which I feed
into my subconscious mind each morning when I finish my exer-
cises, completely relaxed and still lying on the floor. I also
try to say it to myself before falling asleep, but often I do not
make it through to the end before falling completely into the
arms of Morpheus. These words could be considered as an all-
pervasive "resolution" to cover one's entire body-mind-spirit with a sort of shield against the slings and arrows to which we seem continually exposed. I quote now from Dr. Joseph Murphy's book, _The Power of Your Subconscious Mind_ (1981), which is in its 32nd printing.

My body and all its organs were created by the Infinite Intelligence in my subconscious mind. It knows how to heal me. Its wisdom fashioned all my organs, tissues, muscles, and bones. This Infinite Healing Presence within me is now transforming every atom of my being, making me whole and perfect now. I give thanks for the healing I know is taking place now. Wonderful are the works of the Creative Intelligence within me.

Actually, I had been using this wonderful affirmation for some years before discovering AT and, at nearly 73 years of age, now enjoy almost perfect health. However, it was AT that helped me to focus the power of my subconscious mind on the deadly problem of my nose and to regain restful, fully breathing sleep, without the aid of chemicals which were driving that part of my body to the point of no return. AT works for me. It can work for you.

REFERENCES


Murphy, J.  _The power of your subconscious mind_. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1981.