Focused Breathing Exercise
Achieving the Relaxation Response

Adapted from Herbert Benson, MD
by Valerie J. Keffala, PhD

Step 1. Pick two focus words, a short phrase (i.e. prayer), or peaceful image.

Step 2. Sit or recline quietly in a comfortable position.

Step 3. Close your eyes.

Step 4. Take four slow and steady cleansing breaths- breathing in through your nose on a count of 4, then exhaling through your mouth on a count of 6. As you exhale relax your tongue, allowing it to rest on the bottom of your mouth, and allow your jaw to easily fall open.

Step 5. As you breathe slowly in Step 4, relax your muscles, taking time to be aware of tension in your neck, shoulders, back, hands, feet, legs, stomach, and buttocks.

Step 6. After the 4 cleansing breaths, in Step 4, breathe slowly and naturally. As you inhale allow yourself to focus on one of your focus words, or begin to focus on the short phrase, or image. As you exhale allow yourself to focus on the second focus word, or complete the short phrase, or image.

Examples:
  on the inhale (choose one): focus word- calm
  focus phrase- The Lord is my shepherd…
  focus image- wave washing onto the beach

  on the exhale (choose one): focus word- relax
  focus phrase- …there is nothing that I lack
  focus image- wave washing back out to the sea

Step 7. Assume a passive attitude. Do not worry about how well you are doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, “Oh well,” and gently return to the repetition.

Step 8. Continue for 20 minutes.

Step 9. After completing the exercise, do not stand immediately. Continue in your exercise position for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute or so. Then gently begin stretching your hands, feet, arms, legs, and back.

Step 10. Practice once or twice daily and when attempting to sleep.