

How an Innovative Therapy Technique Made Me Feel like a Superhero When I Was at My Worst



"Take another deep breath, hold it, and let yourself feel like you're drifting and floating."

The voice overtook me as I felt my body slip into that weightless feeling between consciousness and [sleep](#). It was as if someone wrapped my body in [memory](#) foam and filled every corner of my mind with white [noise](#).

"My jaw is slack."

"My shoulders are relaxed."

"My neck is loose."

These were some of the phrases that I was told to repeat to myself in a recording made by my therapist and given to me during our first session together. Each one focused on a different body part, meant to make me feel warm, heavy, and unconstrained. This was the beginning of my [biofeedback](#) training.

Just Relax

I chose my therapist because he's an expert in biofeedback, a psychology technique where a patient learns to control their body's functions, like heart rate or palm sweating. Biofeedback was first introduced in 1969 as the crossroads of traditional whitecoat psychologists and those interested in a higher consciousness.

Before I could reach a higher consciousness though, I had to master just being relaxed.

A few weeks prior to my first appointment with him, I was trapped in a horror movie in my own mind. I couldn't shake this one single thought that replayed itself incessantly for a week straight: that of the top knuckle on my right ring finger snapping backwards and breaking.

It's a disturbing thought on its own to anyone who prefers their fingers intact, but imagine it popping into your mind over and over — and over and over — until you want to check yourself into a psych ward. I was consumed. I could barely talk or sleep or work without wanting to slam my head against a wall. I was desperate for any advice, so when my dad recommended biofeedback, I made an appointment immediately.

The technique he employed in the recording is called autogenic relaxation. Through the self-induced relaxation akin to hypnosis, my doctor coaches his patients to cure themselves of ailments like [depression](#), migraines, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure and [anxiety](#) — my personal woe. Learning to relax your body was just the first part, though.

Anxiety by the Numbers

[At my next appointment with my therapist](#), he hooked me up to a slew of sensors as I reclined in his plush leather chair. Three cold metal circles stuck to my forehead measured my muscle tension in millivolts, a small wire taped to my pointer finger took my skin temperature, and two more sensors on other fingers measured my sweat production. Once I was connected, the doctor quizzed me.

"Alright, count backwards from 1,000 by 3s. If you mess up, you have to start over. If you don't get to 940 in 30 seconds, you have to start over. Ready, go."

I'm sure my measurements immediately spiked. I'm terrible at math and to add a time pressure to them was beyond stressful. But I got through it. He did it again, but with higher stakes.

"Okay, now you're going to count backwards from 1,000 by 6s and you have to get to 860 in 30 seconds. Ready, go."

To prepare for my biofeedback training, my therapist was simulating an anxiety-inducing situation to see what my normal and stressful levels were.

During the following appointment, he again hooked me up to the muscle tension sensors, but this time instead of stressing me out, he walked me through the autogenic relaxation phrases from the recording. But this time, the machine I was hooked up to was now emitting a pulsing sound that correlated with my muscle tension level. The more tense I was, the faster the pulses.

As his voice coached me through the phrases, and then in the next appointments as I walked myself through them, I learned to listen to the pulsing and to my body to see what slowed the tempo. My muscle tension level started at around 4.0 millivolts and he told me some of his patients

start out at as high as 10 millivolts. Each appointment, he set the threshold lower and lower on the scale and once I reached it, the pulsing turned off. Each appointment, I was learning to bring myself to a more relaxed state than the time before.

By focusing on the pulsing, I experimented with what autogenic relaxation phrases worked best for me, what my ideal relaxed breath is like, and even how to position my head and arms for optimal relaxation.

Put to the Test

I've struggled with anxiety for as long as I can remember.

As I walked into the doctor's office during my fourth session, I laid eyes on someone from my past who brings me a great amount of anxiety. My heart rate spiked and my chest tightened. Suddenly, breathing became a difficult task. I immediately turned on my heels and hid in my car until the person left, but the anxiety followed me into my appointment. My newfound relaxation technique was about to be tested.

As I cleared my mind during the biofeedback training, I was able to turn the pulsing off, meaning I brought my muscle tension down to the threshold set by the doctor, but the second the stressful person popped back into my mind, the pulsing turned back on. Over and over I emptied my mind and filled it with the autogenic relaxation phrases and turned the pulsing off, but, again, it'd spike back up once I thought of the person.

Running into my past turned out to be a blessing in disguise; I was learning to control the stressful thoughts and ensuing physiological response with just my mind. It was hard work, but I knew it would be a skill I could turn to my whole life. If I could control my heart racing, maybe it'd be easier to quiet my disturbing thoughts.

In the sessions that followed, I learned to relax myself instantaneously and

in any situation without the autogenic phrases, getting my muscle tension level from the original 4.0 down to just 1.7. I'm now able to take a deep breath, let it out, hold it, and find that perfect state of relaxation — like magic.

Biofeedback empowered me during a time when I felt shaken down to my core. I walked away from each appointment feeling like I have a superpower and for the first time in years, I feel like I can finally control the anxiety that seems to rule my life.