

# tools of the trade

**Relaxation Response** *The Relaxation Response. Herbert Benson. New York: Avon Books, 1976. 222 pp. \$2.25 (paper).*

This book synthesizes recent scientific data with age-old Eastern and Western writing that establish the existence of an innate human capability: the relaxation response. These methods (prayer, meditation, etc.) have been practiced for centuries. The relaxation response need not be a part of a religious experience, but can be used simply as a technique for counteracting the harmful effects of stress on the body.

Much of the scientific data, as well as the synthesis of historical writings concerning the relaxation response, originated at Harvard's Thorndike Memorial Laboratory and Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. The book is written in popular style with chapters providing: (1) an overview of the "hidden epidemic," (2) a discussion (with simplified diagrams) of various vital functions and internal signs of stress, (3) spirit versus meditation, (4) the basic elements of meditation, and (5) suggestions for eliciting the relaxation response. The latter includes:

- A quiet environment.
- A mental device (to shift the mind from logical, externally oriented thought, there should be a constant stimulus—a sound, word, or phrase repeated silently or aloud, for example).
- A passive attitude (when distracting thoughts occur, they're to be disregarded and attention redirected to the repetition of the word).
- A comfortable position.

Benson suggests that learning a new skill takes practice; learning to achieve the relaxation response is no exception. His book includes simple, specific procedures.