

Frequent, Silent Mantram Repetition

A Jacuzzi for the Mind

Jill E. Bormann, PhD, RN

Managing stressful situations in the workplace is a challenge for all, especially healthcare workers in emergency settings. The ancient practice of silently repeating a mantram or mantra—a word or phrase with spiritual meaning—has been applied to our modern day living as an innovative form of stress management that is portable, immediate, inexpensive, invisible, and nontoxic. Preliminary studies on the efficacy of this technique in patients and healthcare workers have demonstrated its usefulness in decreasing stress, anxiety, and anger and increasing quality of life and spiritual well-being. **Key words:** *complementary/alternative therapy, nursing intervention, spirituality, stress management*

ARE you stressed, but do not have time for learning or implementing stress management techniques on the job? Frequent, silent repetition of a mantram may be a strategy for you.

This article explains how to choose and use a mantram for stress management and to deepen spiritual well-being. Developing the practical skills of one-pointed focus and slowing down are also described as allied disciplines to support mantram practice.

Mantram (mantra—as it is more commonly known in the West) in Sanskrit means “to cross the mind” or rise above ruminating, obsessive thoughts. A mantram, usually representative of a holy name such as Jesus,

the Buddha, Sri Krishna, or Divine Mother, is a word or phrase with spiritual meaning that has been handed down for generations within all major spiritual traditions. For a list of mantrams recommended by great spiritual teachers of the world, see Table 1.

There are many types of mantram techniques such as Transcendental Meditation,¹ a form of stress management that requires silently repeating a mantram while sitting quietly with eyes closed for 20 minutes twice a day. Other mantram practices require chanting out loud, alone, or with a group. All of these techniques are beneficial for stress reduction but most cannot be practiced during the stressful moments when you really need them. *Frequent, silent mantram repetition is unique because it can be practiced anytime, anywhere, even while on the job during stressful moments.*^{2,3} It helps focus attention, slows down the thinking process, and allows “pause time” for decision making. Unlike other stress management techniques, it has the added potential to deepen one’s spirituality when the user believes in its power to connect to the Divine. This type of mantram repetition has been described as a “formula for transformation,”³ rapid-focus tool,⁴ a collect call to God, or cognitive cue word. Mantram repetition has the purpose of producing

From the VA San Diego Healthcare System, and the School of Nursing, San Diego State University, San Diego, Calif.

The research reported here was supported by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Health Services Research & Development Service.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Corresponding author: Jill E. Bormann, PhD, RN, VA San Diego Healthcare System, 3500 La Jona Village Dr 118, San Diego, CA 92161 (e-mail: Jill.Bormann@med.va.gov).

Table 1. List of common mantras

Mantras	Meaning
Buddhist	
Om Mane Padme Hum (Ohm mah-nee pod-may-hume)	An invocation to the jewel (Self) in the lotus of the heart
Namo Butsaya (Nah-mo boot-sie-yah)	I bow to the Buddha
Christian	
My God and My All	St. Francis of Assisi's mantra
Maranatha (Mar-uh-naw-tha)	Lord of the Heart (Aramaic)
Kyrie Eleison (Kir-ee-ay Ee-lay-ee-son)	Lord have mercy or the Lord is risen
Christe Eleison (Kreest-ay Ee-lay-ee-son)	Christ have mercy, Christ has risen
Jesus, Jesus or Lord Jesus Christ	Jesus Christ
Hail Mary or Ave Maria	Mary mother of Jesus
Hindu/Indian	
Rama (Rah-mah)	Eternal joy within
Ram Ram Sri Ram (rahm rahm shree rahm)	Gandhi's mantra (variation on Rama)
Om Namah Shivaya (Ohm Nah-mah Shee-vy-yah)	An invocation to beauty and fearlessness
Om Prema (Ohm Pray-Mah)	A call for universal love
Om Shanti (Ohm Shawn-tee)	An invocation to eternal peace
So Hum (So hum)	I am that Self within
Jewish	
Barukh Atah Adonoi (Bah-ruke Ah-tah Ah-don-aye)	Blessed are Thou O Lord
Ribono Shel Olam (Ree-boh-noh Shel Oh-lahm)	Lord of the Universe
Shalom	Peace
Sheheena (Sha Hee-nah)	Feminine aspect of God
Muslim	
Allah	
Bismallah Ir-rahman Ir-rahim (Beese-mah-lah ir-rah-mun ir-rah-heem)	In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate
Native American	
O Wakan Tanka	Oh, Great Spirit

mental clarity, calmness, and transforming consciousness, which leads to an increased sense of personal Truth and inner peace. The advantage of frequent mantra repetition is that it is private, portable, immediate, non-toxic, and easy to use.⁴

HOW TO CHOOSE A MANTRAM

Much care should be taken in choosing a mantra. Take your time and choose it wisely. Avoid words that may evoke a negative association or bad memories. Choose one that appeals to you or offers strength and support. Choose a word or phrase that is compatible with your religious background and/or spiritual beliefs.

Some people have no difficulty choosing a mantra, as sometimes a word or phrase jumps out at them immediately. Others have to "try it on" and practice repeating it silently for a few days or weeks, to see how it feels—but when they decide to change it, they cannot! Their minds automatically revert to repeating the first one! It has already become a habit.

HOW TO USE A MANTRAM

The mantra should be practiced (ie, repeated quietly to oneself) as often as possible and over time to become effective. It has been described as a "rapid-focus tool" for the mind to interrupt automatic or negative

thought patterns at any time or place. It is important to practice mantram repetition before sleep and during “nonstressed” times, so as to strengthen the mind-body connection of the word/phrase with a physiological state of relaxation. Every repetition is like putting money in the bank . . . each instance of practice brings more calm and peace. Then to counter stressful situations, you “cash in” by drawing on your mantram reserves.

The meaning of the mantram, which usually represents a higher power or ideal state of being, lends itself to devotion. People who choose a mantram that represents their spiritual faith tend to use it more because of the “faith factor”⁵ and, therefore, they report greater benefits.

In times of distress or in dealing with anger or unpleasant emotional states, the mantram can be repeated intensely while walking briskly or during physical exercise as a way to transform the unwanted emotions into positive energy. This is called *mantram walk*.³ In addition to drawing attention away from unpleasant thoughts or emotions, the mantram serves as an immediate connection to one’s higher Power, or inner Self. It is a shortcut to becoming aware of the present moment and tapping into one’s inner resources.

The mantram can also be written, over and over, as a means of driving its meaning deeper into one’s consciousness. Writing is a strategy of bringing one’s entire attention to the word/phrase on a piece of paper. Writing the mantram can be particularly helpful when the mind is scattered or when struggling with an addiction. Using mantram writing in this way can serve as a “pause button” to allow one some space between thought and taking action. We recommend keeping a mantram journal or small notebook devoted solely to this purpose.

USING A MANTRAM FOR DEVELOPING ONE-POINTED ATTENTION OR MINDFULNESS

Mantram repetition makes the mind inherently one-pointed with focused attention and

can serve to raise one’s awareness of the thinking process. Many times, we are unaware of our thoughts and how they can lead to poor decisions and bad habits. The mantram is a very concrete, practical mechanism whereby you know when you are repeating it, and you know when you are *not*. Each time your mind wanders and you bring it back to focus on the mantram, you have an opportunity to increase mindfulness and the ability to control your attention. Attention explained in this way is a valuable resource that often goes wasted. Just as sunlight can be focused through a magnifying glass to create a laser-sharp point capable of burning a leaf, one’s attention can be focused on completing one task at a time with efficiency and accomplishment.

USING A MANTRAM FOR SLOWING DOWN

We live in a culture that values speed and doing many things at once. We expect instant results with the technology of computers, e-mails, cell phones, and fax machines. Although we derive benefit from these so-called time savers, they have also created an enormous demand on our attention and energy, often without our realizing it. People groan that there are “not enough hours in the day” to accomplish all they want. Such thinking promotes a sense of urgency and the need to hurry through life.

From this observation, it may seem contradictory to even consider slowing down. After all, everyone and everything around us appears to be accelerating or operating at high speed. It seems as if we must hurry to survive! Most of us are not even aware we are hurrying. We have become automatic robots, with no time to reflect, to become aware of or examine our lives with detachment.

The result of going faster and faster is that we become insensitive to the needs of others. Our actions tend to be contagious and influence those around us to hurry as well. Speed also fosters physical problems such as digestive, respiratory, and nervous system problems. Heart disease and other illnesses

can be linked to stress and “hurry sickness.” Easwaran^{2(p99)} claims, “If we want freedom of action, good relations with others, health and vitality, calmness of mind, and the ability to grow, we have to learn to slow down.” This is an enormous task when everything around us is speeding up and making demands that we do the same.

Slowing down involves discrimination.³ Yes, there are many things to attend to—daily maintenance of household and career, caring for relationships with family and friends. Discrimination is needed to determine what is most important, and then to do those things at a moderate pace so as to avoid carelessness and error. Contrary to what most of us believe, slowing down means efficiency! One makes fewer mistakes, has fewer accidents, and becomes more creative.

Discrimination really means setting priorities and learning to “let go” of the nonessentials. This alone takes time for reflection and evaluation and, for some people, it involves risk-taking. It may feel threatening to evaluate one’s pace and realize the need to change and slow down. Nevertheless, slowing down

involves making a conscious effort to choose wisely each day and each activity—in all aspects of life. The end result is living more fully, consciously, and intentionally.

Research on the benefits of frequent, silent mantram repetition has shown improvements in lowering perceived stress, anxiety, and anger in veterans and health-care providers.^{6,7} Mantram repetition has also been linked to improvements in existential spiritual well-being and increased spiritual faith.⁶⁻⁸

Because mantram repetition is simple, free, and portable, it is an ideal tool for nurses to utilize with patients in states of fear and pain. Teaching this technique in preoperative education settings, and treatment situations such as ongoing chemotherapy or radiation treatment, could be valuable. We have found that patients are more likely to try mantram repetition in crisis situations, such as trauma cases in the emergency department or situations of death and dying. But before sharing this technique with patients, we first recommend making it part of your life and testing its results on your own.

REFERENCES

1. Alexander CN, Swanson GC, Rainforth MV, Carlisle TW. Effects of the transcendental meditation program on stress reduction, health, and employee development: a prospective study in two occupational settings. *Anxiety Stress Coping Int J.* 1993;6(3):245-262.
2. Easwaran E. *Meditation*. Tomales, Calif: Nilgiri Press; 1997.
3. Easwaran E. *The Mantram Handbook*. 4th ed. Tomales, Calif: Nilgiri Press; 1998.
4. Flinders R, Gershwin M, Flinders T. *The RISE Response: Illness, Wellness, and Spirituality*. New York: Crossroads; 1994.
5. Benson H. *Timeless Healing*. New York: Scriber; 1996.
6. Bormann J, Kelly A, Gershwin M, Becker S. Critical incident research method to improve the Rapid Relaxation Response Program. Paper presented at: The 36th Annual Communicating Nursing Research Conference, 17th Annual Western Institute of Nursing Assembly; April 10-12, 2003; Scottsdale, Ariz.
7. Bormann JE, Becker S, Gershwin M, Kelly A. Mantram repetition for managing stress in veterans. Paper presented at: The 37th Annual Communicating Nursing Research Conference/18th Annual WIN Assembly; April 22-24, 2004; Portland, Ore.
8. Bormann JE, Shively M, Gifford AL, Redwine L, Smith TL. Efficacy of mantram intervention on stress in HIV [abstract]. *Ann Behav Med.* 29 (suppl):S039.