

Letters to the Editor

## Evidence on the Safety and Efficacy of Autogenic Training: Expanded Report of the Spanish Ministry of Health

Juan M. Guiote<sup>1,2</sup> , Miguel Ángel Vallejo Pareja<sup>2</sup>  & Blanca Mas<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Universidad de Granada, Spain

<sup>2</sup>UNED, Spain

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### ABSTRACT

This Letter to the Director of Psychologist Papers aims to review and supplement the Spanish Ministry of Health report regarding the efficacy and safety of autogenic training within the essential framework of the Health Protection Plan Against Pseudotherapies. It concludes that autogenic training is a safe and effective technique, supported by empirical and clinical evidence, and thus allows both professionals and citizens to have confidence in its application. Furthermore, it offers recommendations for future research, including the need for high-quality randomized controlled trials to determine more precisely the potential of autogenic training in mental and physical health.

### Ampliación del Informe de Sanidad: Evidencia Sobre la Seguridad y Eficacia del Entrenamiento Autógeno

### RESUMEN

La presente Carta al Director de Papeles de Psicólogo tiene como objetivo revisar y aportar evidencia complementaria al informe realizado por el Ministerio de Sanidad sobre la eficacia y seguridad del entrenamiento autógeno en el marco del necesario Plan de Protección de la Salud frente a las Pseudoterapias. Se concluye que el entrenamiento autógeno es una técnica segura y eficaz con aval empírico y clínico, por lo que, tanto profesionales como ciudadanía pueden confiar en su aplicación. Además, se ofrecen recomendaciones para futuras investigaciones, incluida la necesidad de ensayos controlados aleatorios de alta calidad para delinear con mayor exactitud el potencial del entrenamiento autógeno en los ámbitos de la salud mental y física.

#### Palabras clave

Entrenamiento autógeno

Seguridad

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Within the framework of the necessary Health Protection Plan against Pseudotherapies, promoted by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Science and Innovation, eight new reports have been published. One of them reviews the effectiveness and safety of relaxation techniques based on the induction of body sensations (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2024). In this category the methods of Vittoz, Wintrebert, Berges, Sapir, Ajuriaguerra, and autogenic training were grouped together. The review included randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews (SR) indexed in the Medline, Embase, Cinahl, PsycINFO, and Cochrane databases from 2006 to 2021. Of the 3,418 studies identified, 13 SRs and 18 RCTs met the inclusion criteria. No evidence was found of techniques other than autogenic training in the studies analyzed, so the review was limited to this method. The report concludes that:

Autogenic training may be beneficial in improving psychological and physical symptoms in different health conditions, but conclusions cannot be definitive due to the low number of studies for each health condition and the high or uncertain risk of bias. Further evaluation of the safety of these techniques is needed. (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2024, p. 14)

The relevance of this conclusion shows the scientific evidence for autogenic training and separates it from pseudotherapies. The aim of this letter is to detail specific aspects of autogenic training and to provide complementary evidence supporting its efficacy and safety. First, autogenic training is defined as a psychophysiological self-regulation therapy (Luthe, 1963) that exercises a less effortful attentional state (Guiote et al., 2022, 2023) and not as a relaxation based on the induction of bodily sensations (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2024). Secondly, autogenic training emerged in the scientific field (Schultz, 1932) and the clinical evidence of its efficacy is rigorously detailed in various manuals, among others, *Autogenic Therapy*, vol. 2 *Medical Application* (Luthe & Schultz, 1969). At present there is additional evidence to that compiled by the review promoted by the Spanish Ministry of Health. In the review by Álvarez-Pérez et al. (2024), of the 13 SRs included, only two-Kanji et al. (2006) and Seo et al. (2018)-are specific to autogenic training. However, for the period covered by the search (2006-2021) there is also the SR and meta-analysis by Seo and Kim (2019) that was not included, this may be due to the limited databases consulted. Furthermore, in the years prior to the period considered there were several critical reviews, SR, and meta-analyses (Ernst & Kanji, 2000; Linden, 1994; Pikoff, 1984; Stetter & Kupper, 2002) all with favorable evidence for autogenic training in different conditions showing a moderate effect size, for example,  $d = 0.68$  and  $d = 0.75$  for biological and psychological indices respectively in Stetter and Kupper (2002). Considering the period after the search range, it is relevant to note that there has been a boom in autogenic training research including four SRs and meta-analyses (Anggraeni et al., 2023; Breznoskova et al., 2023; Kohlert et al., 2022; Yumkhaibam et al., 2023) and several RCTs supporting its empirical basis. Regarding the safety of autogenic training, the Ministry of Health report (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2024) states that a single study reports a case of "a strange or blurred sensation in the subject's eyes that did not persist at the end of the intervention" (p. 32). It should be noted that this phenomenon does not constitute an adverse effect, but an autogenic discharge. Discharges, recognized in autogenic training for their therapeutic value, are self-regulatory processes that include various manifestations-motor, sensory, vestibular,

among others-and generally correspond to traumatic memories. Most of these phenomena are neutralized through standard training practice. For cases in which there is no neutralization, there are specific advanced methods of intervention (Schultz y Luthe, 1969). This makes it imperative that autogenic training be supervised by a professional in psychology or medicine, in both cases with specialized training in autogenic training. Furthermore, the absolute and relative non-indications and contraindications of autogenic training have been detailed (Luthe, 1979). Therefore, the safety of the technique in this framework is guaranteed. Because of its safety and efficacy, autogenic training is prescribed in other countries in health care settings. For example, in the United Kingdom, the National Health Service (NHS) endorses and recommends its practice through the NHS Foundation Trust of the University College London Hospitals network. <https://www.uclh.nhs.uk/our-services/find-service/integrated-medicine/autogenic-training>. On the other hand, it should be noted that, although Álvarez-Pérez et al. (2024) requested information and review from external associations, none of these were specialized in autogenic training. Likewise, the review report could have benefited from peer review as is recommended in scientific communication. Finally, in accordance with Álvarez-Pérez et al. (2024), it is recommended to continue the research by means of high quality RCTs that reinforce its empirical validity. Furthermore, the importance is emphasized of incorporating in the studies the complete standardized autogenic training that includes the six formulas, ensuring daily practice and supervision by a specialized professional. In conclusion, autogenic training, a psychophysiological self-regulation therapy with a hundred years of history, has shown its efficacy and safety in the field of mental and physical health. We will understand its full potential through new interdisciplinary studies.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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