

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

What is it and how does it work? You simply isolate one muscle group, creating tension for 8 - 10 seconds, then let the muscle relax and the tension go. For example, take your right hand, tighten it into a fist, and notice what happens. You can feel the muscle tension increase in your hand and up your forearm. The longer you hold it, the more tense it becomes. You become aware that it does not feel good. In fact, it begins to hurt. This is an example of exaggerated muscle tension. Continue to hold the tension and now, all at once, relax and let go. Allow your hand to flop down into your lap and notice the difference. The muscles now begin to relax, and the muscle tension just flows away, melts, dissolves, and disappears.

This process of relaxation is guaranteed to happen. Whenever you create tension in a muscle and then release the tension the muscle has to relax. The muscle does not have a choice. The interesting aspect of this process is that the muscle will not only quickly relax back to its pre-tensed state, but if allowed to rest, it will become even more relaxed than it was.

The key to triggering the relaxation response is to take charge of the voluntary muscles by tensing them and forcing them into a state of relaxation. Once the muscles relax then the other components of the relaxation response will naturally follow:

- Relaxed muscles require less oxygen so the breathing pattern slows and deepens.
- Heart rate and blood pressure decline.
- Normal blood flow returns to the belly and digestion resumes.
- Hands and feet warm up.
- Soon changes in mood follow, and you become more calm and refreshed.

You may also gain these overall health and lifestyle benefits from relaxation techniques:

- Fewer physical symptoms, such as headaches and back pain
- Fewer emotional responses, such as anger and frustration
- More energy
- Improved concentration
- Greater ability to handle problems
- More efficiency in daily activities

Using PMR

Ask a buddy to read it to you slowly with a low voice tone to encourage relaxation.

Get as comfortable as possible. This exercise will help you relax all of your muscles and teach you to be more aware of parts of your body that are especially tense. The object of this exercise is to tense and then release the pressure in different muscles. In this way, you will progressively achieve deeper relaxation.

Start by raising your eyebrows as high as possible, feeling the tension build. Hold that tension for a moment. Now relax, and feel the tension flow out. Now squeeze your eyes shut as tight as you can. Hold that tension. Let it build. Now relax your eyelids. Feel the relief from the tension.

Now clench your teeth together tightly. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now release your jaw, letting it go loose. Now squeeze your whole face up into a knot and hold it there. Hold it. Let the tension build as you squeeze your eyes, mouth and nose together hard. And now relax. Notice how loose and relaxed your whole face feels.

Now bring your chin slowly down toward your chest, feeling the tension building in your neck and shoulders. Hold it. And now relax. Feel the relief.

Now make your right hand into a tight fist and raise your right arm to shoulder height, stretching it way out. Feel the tension build as you clench your fist and keep your arm stretched. Now relax, letting your arm fall slowly to your side.

Now with you left hand make a hard fist. Raise your left arm to shoulder height, stretching it out as far as you can, straight ahead. Feel the tension build in your clenched fist and arm. Hold it. Now relax, letting your arm fall back to your side. Now, make fists with both hands and raise both arms to shoulder height, stretching straight ahead as far as you can. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now, let your arms fall back to your sides and relax. Feel the relief in these muscles.

Now, to your stomach. Pull these muscles in tight, as tight as you can. Hold it. Let the tension build. And now, relax.

Now, raise your right leg, tensing your thigh and calf muscles and pulling your toes back toward you. Hold it. Feel the tension build. Now, let your leg back down and relax. Now, raise you left leg and tighten your calf and thigh muscles as you pull your toes back. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now, let your leg back down and relax. Now raise both legs together and tighten your calf and thigh muscles as you extend your toes and point them straight forward as far as you can. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now let your legs back down and relax. Feel the sense of relief.

Now, take a few moments to think about how the muscles feel throughout your body. Check your neck, shoulders, arms, chest, stomach, legs and feet.

Now, spend a few moments experiencing the deeply relaxed restful feeling throughout your body. Sense the quiet and restfulness that comes from releasing the tension in your muscles. Now, take a full deep breath, hold it a moment, and then, as you let out the air allow any remaining anxieties and tensions to just flow away. You are now very deeply relaxed and at ease.

Now, open your eyes, stretch your arms and legs, moving them about. Get up when you feel ready.

After you've become an expert on your tension areas (after a few weeks), you can concern yourself only with those. These exercises will not eliminate tension, but when it arises, you will know it immediately, and you will be able to "tense-relax" it away or even simply wish it away.

Please note that an exercise program of any sort that stresses and stretches a full range of muscles can be used in this fashion if only you pay attention to the differences between tensions and relaxations of the muscles. Yoga is particularly good, but is very demanding at first. Tai chi is highly recommended.

Suggestions for Practice

- Always practice full PMR in a quiet place, alone, with no electronic distractions, not even background music.
- Remove your shoes and wear loose clothing.
- Avoid eating, smoking, or drinking. It's best to practice before meals rather than after, for the sake of your digestive processes.
- Never practice after using any intoxicants.
- Sit in a comfortable chair if possible. You may practice lying down, but this increases the likelihood of falling asleep.
- If you fall asleep, give yourself credit for the work you did up to the point of sleep.
- If you practice in bed at night, plan on falling asleep before you complete your cycle. Therefore, consider a practice session at night, in bed, to be in addition to your basic practice.
- When you finish a session, relax with your eyes closed for a few seconds, and then get up slowly. (*Orthostatic hypotension*—a sudden drop in blood pressure due to standing up quickly—can cause you to faint.) Some people like to count backwards from 5 to 1, timed to slow, deep breathing, and then say, "Eyes open. Supremely calm. Fully alert."

Types of Relaxation Techniques

It doesn't matter which technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly. There are other types of relaxation techniques, including:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** In this technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax and reduce muscle tension. You might say to yourself (in your mind) something like 'my right arm is

heavy' and keep repeating this slowly; gradually your arm will start to feel heavy and relaxed. You use the same approach to relax the rest of the body. You may imagine a peaceful place and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

- **Visualization.** In this technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. Imagine yourself relaxing in a beautiful, peaceful scene, say on an idyllic beach or a mountain top. Try to use as many senses as you can, including smells, sights, sounds and textures. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about the warmth of the sun, the sound of crashing waves, the feel of the grains of sand and the smell of salt water. The idea is to use all the senses: imagining not just the sights but the smells, feel and sounds of a place. Many tapes use an appropriate sound track such as waves breaking gently on the shore.

Other relaxation techniques include yoga, tai chi, music, exercise, meditation, and massage.

Relaxation Techniques take Practice

As you learn relaxation techniques, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment your muscles start to tense. This can prevent stress from spiralling out of control.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself. Stay motivated to reduce the negative impact of stress on your body and to experience a greater sense of calm in your life.

And bear in mind that some people, especially those with significant psychological problems and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional.

For any questions about this information, please contact us. We offer a range of wellness initiatives, along with therapy and assessment.