

Calming Your Body with Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Objective

To learn and practice progressive muscle relaxation, a technique that involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them.

You Should Know

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them. It is termed “progressive” because you relax all the major muscle groups — starting with your head and working your way down to your feet, tensing and then relaxing them one at a time. In only 10 to 15 minutes, you can achieve total body relaxation.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a particularly effective technique because it enables you to focus on your body tension. Although there are many other relaxation techniques that can help you reduce your anxiety, this technique may be most helpful for people who have body complaints that often accompany high levels of stress and anxiety, such as headaches, stomach problems, or muscle pain.

When you are ready to try this technique, find a place where you won't be disturbed or distracted for at least 15 minutes. Recline in a comfortable chair or on a mat, and take a few deep breaths to begin the exercise. Use the following audio to help you learn this technique:

https://www.betweenessions.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Progressive_Muscle_Relaxation.mp3

A transcript of the audio is provided on the next page.

After listening for a few times, you can practice this relaxation technique without the audio if you wish, but remember to relax for at least 10 minutes.

Relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, can be very effective in reducing anxiety but only when practiced regularly. Engaging in intentional relaxation practice for at least 10 minutes a day trains your brain and body to “calm down” on demand. As soon as you start to feel anxious, you can take a few deep breaths and think about how it feels to be calm, which automatically sends a message to your brain telling it to calm down, and to your body to release muscle tension.

When you regularly practice relaxation techniques, not only does this help you control your anxiety, but it may also have other health benefits on the mind and body. For example, some research suggests that relaxation techniques can aid the body in the healing process and help in controlling high blood pressure, coping with chronic pain, controlling asthma, and aiding with sleep problems. Many medical professionals also believe that daily relaxation exercises aid in preventing disease, reducing elevated levels of cortisol (the stress hormone), and bolstering the immune system. Use the chart on the next page to help you create a habit of engaging in progressive muscle relaxation every day.

What to Do

In this exercise, you will travel up your entire body, from your feet to your head, bringing awareness to each muscle group, first tensing, then relaxing – tensing and relaxing. As you tense your muscles, do not strain or exert yourself. Just notice the tension – gently squeezing, then harder, then hold, then release all the tension, letting go fully.

Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit or lie down, a place where you won't be interrupted and where you can relax completely. Turn off your phone. Lower the lights. You deserve this time — a time to calm your body and your mind. When you are ready, close your eyes.

Now allow yourself to come to a place of stillness, releasing any tension you are aware of. Let the floor or the seat support you fully.

Begin to notice the in-out rhythm of your breath. Notice your belly or chest rising and falling softly, as you gently inhale and exhale. In, out, in, out. No need to force or control the breathing. Just let it happen naturally.

When you are breathing in a steady rhythm, bring your attention to your feet and toes. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently scrunching your toes and contracting the soles of your feet. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds.

Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now bring your attention to your lower legs, your calf muscles. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your lower legs. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now bring your attention to your thighs. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your lower legs. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now focus on the muscles in your buttocks. Again, notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your buttocks. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Next, bring your attention to the muscles in your abdomen. Once again, notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your abdomen. Now squeeze hard, as if you're pushing your abdomen into to the back of your chair or onto the surface of

the floor. Squeeze as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now focus on the muscles in your back. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your back—now you might want to arch gently and tighten your back muscles as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now focus on the muscles in your shoulders and neck. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your shoulders and neck, perhaps lifting them up toward your ears. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Relax. Take a few more deep breaths and feel the weight of your body against the floor or chair. See if you can let go even a little more. Good.

Now focus on the muscles in your hands and wrists. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your hands and wrists, curling them into a loose fist. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation.

Now open your hands and extend your wrists in the opposite direction, without hyperextending them. Now tense them hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now focus on the muscles in your arms. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles in your arms. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now focus on the muscles in your face, starting with your eyes. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles around your eyes. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now bring your attention to the muscles in your lips and mouth. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles of your lips and mouth. Now squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Breathe

deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

Now bring your attention to the muscles in your jaw. So many of us carry a lot of tension in our jaw. Notice any tension. Now create more tension by gently contracting the muscles of your jaw, from the mouth and position of the teeth to the hinge near the ears. Squeeze hard, as hard as you can without discomfort. Hold for a few seconds. Now release. Now open your mouth and stretch out your jaw completely, creating tension. Hold for a few seconds and release. Breathe deeply, in and out. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Enjoy the relaxation. Tense again. Now release. Notice the relaxation. Let go. Breathe.

When you are ready, slowly come back to the present moment. Wake up your feet and hands, shaking them out if you wish. Wiggle your body and move around slowly at whatever pace is comfortable for you. Before you resume regular activity, take a few moments just to rest and breathe. You may use this recording at any time to help bring awareness to your muscles and to release tension in a safe, mindful way.

Use the following chart to record your daily progressive muscle relaxation practice. Make several copies of this chart, and keep a record of the time that you spend practicing this relaxation technique until it is truly a habit. You want it to become routine – something you do without thinking, like brushing your teeth. It is also useful to note your general mood, both before and after, your daily relaxation exercise.

Day	Time of Day	Mood Before Relaxation	Mood After Relaxation
Sunday			
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
