

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

What

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) helps you release tension in your body through a two-step process: 1) First, you systematically contract (i.e. tense) muscles and muscle groups. 2) Second, you release these muscles and muscle groups and notice how you feel as you relax your body. Practicing PMR helps reduce tension and stress, and will help you relax when you feel anxious.

PMR can also help with the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety, such as headaches, stomach aches, and poor sleep.

Often, people who suffer from anxiety forget what it feels like to be physically relaxed. PMR is an exercise that not only relaxes, but helps increase awareness of how one's body feels when it is tense and when it is relaxed. Practicing will allow you to notice when a muscle is tense and when it is relaxed—soon, noticing muscle tension can serve as a cue for you that you may be feeling anxious.

How

Set Up

Find a comfortable place to sit or lay down where you will not be disturbed. The goal is to feel relaxed while awake—many people begin to feel sleepy and, if you begin to fall asleep, the practice may be more effective if you sit up (if you are lying down) or if you get up to move periodically (and get enough sleep each night!). Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothing, and take off your shoes. Close your eyes and let your body go loose. Take five slow, deep breaths.

Tension

The first step is to tense the muscles in a specific region of your body. The process is the same for each region, and each region is tensed/relaxed in sequence (described below). Focus on the target muscle group, take a slow deep breath, and tense the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds (you might feel some shaking, even slight discomfort—but stop if you feel pain). FEEL the tension.

Relaxation

Second, quickly relax the target muscle group. After 5 seconds of contracting the muscles, release all the tension. Exhale as you release the tension. Feel the muscles relax and become loose. IMPORTANT: pay attention to the difference between relaxed and tense. Gaining awareness may be the most important part of the exercise. Remain in this relaxed state for 10-15 seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group. After finishing each group, take a few minutes (or longer) to enjoy being in a relaxed state.

(Muscle Groups on back side)

Muscle Groups

Foot:	Curl your toes and pull your heel toward your toes.
Lower Leg:	Tighten your calf muscles by pointing your toes.
Upper Leg:	Tighten the front (e.g. quadriceps) and rear (e.g. hamstrings) to keep upper leg tense.
Hand and Forearm:	Make a tight fist.
Upper Arm:	Tighten your biceps and triceps to make a tense, but steady upper arm.
Buttocks:	Squeeze buttocks together.
Stomach:	Tighten your core/stomach muscles.
Chest:	Pull your shoulders to the front and towards each other, flexing pectoral muscles.
Neck and Shoulders:	Raise shoulders towards your ears.
Mouth:	Open mouth wide like a big yawn and hold open as wide as possible.
Eyes:	Clench eyes shut.
Forehead:	Raise or lower eyebrows as far as possible (each tenses slightly different muscles).

(Either alternate sides for legs/arms, or do both at same time)

Tips

Give yourself 15 minutes for this exercise...hurrying will hinder you from really relaxing.

Find a location where you will not be disturbed (or that you don't think you will).

Awareness takes time and may be uncomfortable at first...with time, you will become comfortable paying attention to your body.

Be careful...if you have any injuries, work with a professional to modify the exercise to prevent further injury. You might feel discomfort, but you should not feel pain during this exercise.

It may be helpful to listen to a guided PMR...search the internet and you will find examples of pre-recorded progressive muscle relaxation exercises.

Practice once or twice a day for the first couple of weeks...even if you do not feel anxious at the time. In fact, initially it will likely be more effective to practice when you are not anxious.