

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Progressive muscle relaxation is a systematic technique for achieving a deep state of relaxation. It was developed by Dr Edmund Jacobson more than fifty years ago.

Progressive muscle relaxation is especially helpful for people whose anxiety is strongly associated with muscle tension, maybe feeling "*uptight*" or "*tense*." Sleep difficulties or insomnia respond well to PMR. If you are troubled by racing thoughts, you may find that systematically relaxing your muscles tends to help slow them down.

Long-term effects of *regular* practice of progressive muscle relaxation include:

- A decrease in generalized anxiety
- A decrease in anticipatory anxiety related to phobias
- Reduction in the frequency and duration of panic attacks
- Improved concentration
- Improved sleep
- An increased sense of control over moods
- Increased self-esteem
- Increased spontaneity and creativity

These long-term benefits are sometimes called *generalization effects*: the relaxation experienced during daily sessions tends, after a month or two, to *generalize* to the rest of the day. The *regular* practice of progressive muscle relaxation can go a long way toward helping you to better manage your anxiety, face your fears, overcome panic, and feel better all around.

Guidelines for Practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation (or Any Form of Deep Relaxation)

The following guidelines will help you make the most use of progressive muscle relaxation. They are also applicable to *any* form of deep relaxation you undertake to practice regularly, including guided imagery and meditation.

1. Practice at least *20 minutes per day*. Two 20-minute periods are preferable. Once a day is required for obtaining generalization effects.
2. Find a *quiet location* to practice where you won't be distracted.
3. Practice at *regular times*. On waking, before going to bed, or before meals are generally the best times.
4. Practice on an *empty stomach*. Food digestion after meals will tend to disrupt deep relaxation.
5. Assume a *comfortable position*. Your entire body, including your head, should be supported. Lying down on a sofa or bed or sitting in a reclining chair are two ways of supporting your body most completely. Sitting up is preferable to lying down if you are feeling tired and sleepy. It's advantageous to experience the full depth of the relaxation response consciously without going to sleep.

6. Loosen any tight clothing and take off shoes, watch, glasses, contact lenses, jewellery and so on.
7. Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. Allow taking care of yourself and having peace of mind to take precedence over any of your worries.
8. Adopt a "let it happen" attitude and be free of any worry about how well you are performing the technique. Do not try to relax. Do not try to control your body. Do not judge your performance. The point is to let go.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing, in succession, sixteen different muscle groups of the body. The idea is to tense each muscle group hard for about 10 seconds, and then to let go of it suddenly. You then give yourself 15-20 seconds to relax, noticing how the muscle group feels when relaxed in contrast to how it felt when tensed, before going on to the next group of muscles. You might also say to yourself "I am relaxing," "Letting go," "Let the tension flow away," or any other relaxing phrase during each relaxation period between successive muscle groups. Throughout the exercise, maintain your focus on your muscles. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you're working on. The guidelines below describe progressive muscle relaxation in detail:

- Concentrate on what is happening. Feel the build-up of tension in each particular muscle group. It is often helpful to visualize the particular muscle group being tensed.
- When you release the muscles, do so abruptly, and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15-20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.
- Allow all the *other* muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.
- Tense and relax each muscle group once. But if a particular area feels especially tight, you can tense and relax it two or three times, waiting about 20 seconds between each cycle.

Once you are comfortably supported in a quiet place, follow the detailed instructions below:

1. To begin, take three deep breaths into your tummy, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7-10 seconds and then release for 15-20 seconds. *Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and "making a muscle" with both arms. Hold... and then relax.
4. Tighten your *triceps*--the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms--by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold ... and then relax.

5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold... and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around them.
7. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold ... and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold ... and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold for up to 10 seconds ... and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (You should omit this exercise if you have lower back pain.) Hold ... and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold ... and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes toward you (flex carefully to avoid cramps). Hold ... and then relax.
18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head all the way down to your toes.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation sequence should take you 20-30 minutes the first time. With practice you may decrease the time needed to 15-20 minutes.