

Stress Management: Doing Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Introduction

Have you ever had an aching back or pain in your neck when you were anxious or stressed? When you have anxiety or stress in your life, one of the ways your body responds is with muscle tension.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a method that helps relieve that tension.

- In progressive muscle relaxation, you tense a group of muscles as you breathe in, and you relax them as you breathe out. You work on your muscle groups in a certain order.
- When your body is physically relaxed, you cannot feel anxious. Practicing progressive muscle relaxation for a few weeks will help you get better at this skill, and in time you will be able to use this method to relieve stress.
- When you first start, it may help to use an audio recording until you learn all the muscle groups in order. Check your local library or a bookstore for progressive muscle relaxation audio recordings.
- If you have trouble falling asleep, this method may also help with your sleep problems.

How do you do progressive muscle relaxation?

The procedure

You can use an audio recording to help you focus on each muscle group, or you can learn the order of muscle groups and do the exercises from memory. Choose a place where you won't be interrupted and where you can lie down on your back and stretch out comfortably, such as a carpeted floor.

1. Breathe in, and tense the first muscle group (hard but not to the point of pain or cramping) for 4 to 10 seconds.
2. Breathe out, and suddenly and completely relax the muscle group (do not relax it gradually).
3. Relax for 10 to 20 seconds before you work on the next muscle group. Notice the difference between how the muscles feel when they are tense and how they feel when they are relaxed.
4. When you are finished with all of the muscle groups, count backward from 5 to 1 to bring your focus back to the present.

After you have learned how to tense and relax each muscle group, here's something else to try.

When you have a very tense muscle, you can practice tensing and relaxing that muscle area without going through the whole routine.

The muscle groups

The following is a list of the muscle groups in order and how to tense them. Remember to lie down when you do this.

Muscle group	What to do

Hands	Clench them.
Wrists and forearms	Extend them, and bend your hands back at the wrist.
Biceps and upper arms	Clench your hands into fists, bend your arms at the elbows, and flex your biceps.
Shoulders	Shrug them (raise toward your ears).
Forehead	Wrinkle it into a deep frown.
Around the eyes and bridge of the nose	Close your eyes as tightly as you can. (Remove contact lenses before you start the exercise.)
Cheeks and jaws	Smile as widely as you can.
Around the mouth	Press your lips together tightly. (Check your face for tension. You just want to use your lips.)
Back of the neck	Press the back of your head against the floor or chair.
Front of the neck	Touch your chin to your chest. (Try not to create tension in your neck and head.)
Chest	Take a deep breath, and hold it for 4 to 10 seconds.
Back	Arch your back up and away from the floor or chair.
Stomach	Suck it into a tight knot. (Check your chest and stomach for tension.)
Hips and buttocks	Press your buttocks together tightly.
Thighs	Clench them hard.

Lower legs	Point your toes toward your face. Then point your toes away, and curl them downward at the same time. (Check the area from your waist down for tension.)
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