

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Introduction

Our bodies and brains communicate with each other through chemical and electric signals. This means that when we feel stressed our muscles can tense up. The tension in our muscles then sends signals back to our brains that they are tense, which can increase our level of mental stress. We can break this cycle in the mind using mindfulness, visualization or grounding exercises, or we can break it in the body with exercises like breathing, stretches or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR).

It can be difficult to tell your muscles to relax, sometimes even difficult to tell where your body is tense. Progressive muscle relaxation is an exercise where we tense each muscle group in our body in turn and then release it. This relaxes the muscle group and also helps you to recognize the difference in how it feels for those muscles to be tense or relaxed. For this exercise we want to tense each muscle group gently and then release it. At no point should your muscles feel strained. If you have an injury or intense pain in an area of your body, you may want to skip that place until it is healed or the pain feels less intense.

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Steps

PMR can be practiced standing, sitting, or lying down on your back on a firm mattress or other comfortable but supportive surface. It can be a particularly good practice to do right before bed to help you sleep. It can help start by grounding briefly or taking three deep breaths.

As you practice, it is important to breathe normally throughout this exercise; do not hold your breath. It can be helpful to match the tensing of your muscles with an in-breath and the relaxing of your muscles with an out-breath. Pay particular attention to the feeling of the muscles releasing. You can even visualize the tension leaving your body as you exhale.

	<p>Start in your feet. As you inhale, curl your toes and push them forward and down, feeling the tension in your arches and even in your ankle. Hold your feet like this for 5 seconds while you count slowly. Now release your toes and let your foot relax as you breathe out.</p>
	<p>Next, inhale and pull your toes up and back towards you and tense your calf muscle. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your foot and let your calf relax as you exhale.</p>

	<p>Next, inhale and tense your thighs. You can do this by pushing the back of your knees towards the ground. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your thighs and feel them relax as you breathe out.</p>
	<p>Next, inhale and tense your buttocks. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your buttocks muscles and allow the area to relax as you exhale.</p>
	<p>Next, inhale and tense your stomach and abdominal muscles by pulling your stomach inwards and backwards. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your abdominal muscles and allow them to relax as you exhale.</p>
	<p>Next, tense the muscles in your back and shoulders by pulling your shoulder blades together and arching backwards slightly as you inhale. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your shoulders and allow your back muscles to relax as you exhale.</p>
	<p>Next, tighten your hands into fists and tense up all the muscles in your arms as you inhale. Hold them tight like this for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your hands and relax your arms back down to your sides, letting them hang loosely as you exhale.</p>
	<p>Next, tense your shoulders and neck muscles by bringing your shoulders up to your ears as you inhale and holding them there for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now release your shoulders, letting them relax back down away from your ears as you exhale.</p>
	<p>Next, tense the muscles in your face, clenching your jaw, pressing your lips against each other, and squeezing your eyes shut tightly, as you inhale. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now let the muscles in your face release and relax, allowing your jaw to loosen so that your mouth is slightly open as you exhale.</p>
	<p>Finally, tense your entire body by pulling your arms and legs in together and tightening into a ball as you inhale. Hold this tension throughout your entire body for 5 seconds.</p> <p>Now exhale and release your body and let your limbs relax out. Allow your whole body to relax and feel as though it is melting into the floor or chair or mattress. Feel the tension slowly leaving your body. Pay attention to the feeling of relaxation. Notice how your body feels different now that it is allowed to relax. Stay with this feeling for at least 10 seconds.</p>



If you are not going to sleep, begin to move your body slowly, taking a moment to feel your muscles waking up. When you feel ready, stretch your arms and legs and if your eyes have been closed, open them now.



References & Further Reading

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