

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and PTSD symptoms as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. One method of reducing muscle tension is by practicing a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In PMR, muscles are intentionally tensed and then relaxed.

When you practice PMR, tense each area for approximately 10 seconds, and then relax the area for approximately 20 seconds. When you squeeze each area, aim to tense your muscles at approximately 50% of the hardest you could squeeze. Do not squeeze each muscle group as hard as you can. Also, if a particular area is painful, squeeze only at 10%, or not at all.

To practice PMR, follow these steps:

1. Close your eyes and assume a comfortable position, either lying down or sitting up.
2. Gently shift your focus to the breath, just noticing what it feels like to breathe in and out, noticing the quality of the breath.
3. Now extend your awareness to your entire body. As you attend to any sensations arising in your body, make note of any tension you may be experiencing in your body. However, do not try to change this tension right now, just be aware of it, without judgment.
4. Begin PMR, following the relaxation sequence presented below. For each area, tense for 10 seconds, and then relax for 10 seconds. When tense, notice what it feels like to tense that area. When you relax that area, relax completely, noticing what it feels like to relax after having been tense. If there is remaining tension, attend to it without judgment.

Relaxation sequence example

1. Right hand and forearm. Make a fist with your right hand.
2. Right upper arm. Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to “make a muscle”.
3. Left hand and forearm.
4. Left upper arm.
5. Forehead. Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you are surprised.
6. Eyes and cheeks. Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. Mouth and jaw. Open your mouth as wide as you can, as if you are yawning.
8. Neck. Face forward and pull your head back, as though you are looking at the ceiling.
9. Shoulders. Tense the muscles in your shoulders by bringing them up towards your ears.
10. Shoulder blades/Back. Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. Chest and stomach. Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. Hips and buttocks. Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. Right upper leg. Tighten your right thigh.
14. Right lower leg. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. Right foot. Curl your toes downwards.
16. Left upper leg. Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. Left lower leg. Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. Left foot. Repeat as for right foot.

A few PMR tips:

- If possible, complete this exercise sitting in a chair or lying down.
- If you feel comfortable with closing your eyes during this practice, this is recommended. If not, find a place on the floor to gently focus your eyes on.
- It is recommended that this technique be practiced for 15-30 minutes.
- If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- Be aware that trauma can be stored in the body. It may happen that when you focus on specific areas of the body, there may be accompanying emotions. If this happens, simply notice the link between physical sensations and emotions, honoring these experiences.
- Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practice is the key.
- If you want to intensify your practice, consider doing two iterations of PMR in one setting.