

Guidelines for Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Many studies have shown that relaxing one's muscles markedly reduces anxiety. Over time, people *learn* to be anxious and tense; in the same way, people can teach themselves how to relax. One way of learning how to relax is through Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR).

1. In order to learn to relax, it's important to practice at least 20 minutes a day, every day. Find a regular time (after waking, before bed, before meals) when you're sure not to be distracted. You may want to start with a longer (30 minute) relaxation period. As you get better and better at PMR, it will take less and less time to achieve the relaxation effects.
2. Before beginning relaxation, make sure you are in a quiet place, preferably with dim lighting. You may recline in a chair or lay on a couch or a bed during the relaxation, as long as you are comfortable (and won't fall asleep!). Turn on the fan or the air conditioner, close your eyes, and give yourself permission to shut out all the distractions of the day.
3. Practice relaxation on an empty stomach. Food digestion after meals will tend to disrupt deep relaxation. Wear comfortable clothes and take off shoes, glasses, jewelry, etc.
4. 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 other worries. (Success with relaxation depends on giving peace of mind high priority in your overall scheme of values.)
5. Assume a detached attitude. Do not *try* to relax. Do not *try* to control your body or your thoughts. If you find your mind wandering, guide yourself gently back to the sensation in your muscles. The point is to allow yourself to let go, not to worry about your performance.
6. Be aware that PMR involves both tensing and relaxing your muscles. During this process, you may experience unusual sensations, such as tingling, warmth, or heaviness in your muscles as they relax. This is a normal process, and is generally a sign of increasing relaxation. However, if you are injured in any part of your body, you may want to avoid tensing that body part, and instead just focus on loosening and relaxing the muscles.
7. When you tense a particular muscle group, do so vigorously for 7-10 seconds. Envision the muscle group tensing, and focus on feeling the buildup of tightness and strain.
8. 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.
9. Allow all the other muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.

This is a skill that takes a while to learn! The first few times you go through PMR, you might not feel very different. However, over time you will find it easier and easier to let go of your tension, and will begin to feel more and more relaxed.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Step By Step

Once you are comfortably supported in a quiet place, follow the instructions for each muscle group below (or just listen along to your recording):

- 1) To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
- 2) Clench your **left fist**. Hold for 7-10 seconds, and then release for 15-20 seconds. Repeat with the **right fist**. (Use the same time intervals for all muscle groups.)
- 3) Tighten your **forearms** by straightening your fingers and pointing them at the ceiling, then back towards your body. Hold...and then relax.
- 4) Tighten your **biceps** by drawing your forearms up towards your shoulders and “making a muscle.” Hold...and then relax.
- 5) Shrug your **shoulders** up towards your ears, tightening the muscles. Hold...and then relax.
- 6) Wrinkle up your **forehead** and brow, focusing on the tension in the muscles...and then relax.
- 7) Squeeze your **eyes** shut as tightly as you can, feeling the tension in the muscles around the eyes. Hold...and then relax.
- 8) Clench your **jaw**, hard, flexing the muscles in your jaw and cheek. Hold...and then relax.
- 9) Press your **lips** together tightly, pursing them so the muscles around your mouth tighten...and then allow them to relax.
- 10) Press your head back against the chair or bed, hard, feeling the tension in the **back of your neck**. Hold...and then relax.
- 11) Allow your head to fall forward, as though trying to bury your chin in your chest, and feel the tension in the **front of your neck**. Hold...and then allow your head to fall back, very naturally.
- 12) Arch your back, sticking out your chest, and feel the tension in your **upper back**...and relax.
- 13) Take a deep breath and hold it, feeling the tightness in the muscles around your **chest**. Hold it...and then relax, breathing deeply from the abdomen.
- 14) Tighten the muscles of your **stomach**, making the stomach very hard. Hold...and relax.
- 15) Stretch both of your legs, straight out in front of you, until you can feel the tension in the backs of your **thighs**. Hold...and then relax.
- 16) Tense both **calf** muscles by stretching your feet and pointing your toes up toward your head. Hold...and then relax.



From: Goldfried & Davison, *Clinical Behavior Therapy*