

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a systematic technique for achieving a deep state of relaxation. It was developed by Dr. Edmund Jacobson more than 50 years ago. Dr. Jacobson discovered that a muscle could be relaxed by first tensing it for a few seconds and then releasing it. Tensing and releasing various muscle groups throughout the body produces a deep state of relaxation, which Dr. Jacobson found capable of relieving a variety of conditions, from high blood pressure to ulcerative colitis.

In his original book, *Progressive Relaxation*, Dr. Jacobson developed a series of 200 different muscle relaxation exercises and a training program that took months to complete. More recently the system has been abbreviated to 15 to 20 basic exercises, which has been found to be just as effective, if practiced regularly, as the original more elaborate system.

Progressive muscle relaxation is especially helpful for people whose anxiety is strongly associated with muscle tension. This is what often leads you to say that you are "uptight" or "tense." You may experience chronic tightness in your shoulders and neck, which can be effectively relieved by practicing progressive muscle relaxation. Other symptoms that respond well to progressive muscle relaxation include tension headaches, backaches, tightness in the jaw, tightness around the eyes, muscle spasms, high blood pressure, and insomnia. If you are troubled by racing thoughts, you may find that systematically relaxing your muscles tends to help slow down your mind. Dr. Jacobson himself once said, "An anxious mind cannot exist in a relaxed body."

The immediate effects of progressive muscle relaxation include all the benefits of the relaxation response described at the beginning of this chapter. 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 ability to face phobic situations through graded exposure
- Improved concentration
- 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.

There are no contraindications for progressive muscle relaxation unless the muscle groups to be tensed and relaxed have been injured. If you take tranquilizers, you may find that regular practice of progressive muscle relaxation will enable you to lower your dosage.

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 self-hypnosis, guided visualization, and meditation.

1. Practice at least 20 minutes per day. Two 20-minute periods are preferable. Once a day is mandatory for obtaining generalization effects. (You may want to begin your practice with 30-minute periods. As you gain skill in relaxation technique, you will find that the amount of time you need to experience the relaxation response will decrease.)
2. Find a quiet location to practice where you won't be distracted. Don't permit the phone to ring while you're practicing. Use a fan or air conditioner to blot out background noise, if necessary.

3. Practice at regular times. On awakening, before retiring, or before a meal is generally the best time. A consistent daily relaxation routine will increase the likelihood of generalization effects.
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 and sitting in a reclining chair are two ways of supporting your body most completely. (When lying down, you may want to place a pillow beneath your knees for further support.) 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 garments and take off shoes, watch, glasses, contact lenses, jewelry, 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. (Success with relaxation depends on giving peace of mind high priority in your overall scheme of values.)
8. Assume a passive, detached attitude. This is probably the most important element. You want to 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.
 - 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 abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7 to 10 seconds and then release for 15 to 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 the area of your eyes.
7. Tighten your jaw 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 way 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 ten 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 can 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 and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation sequence should take you 20 to 30 minutes the first time. With practice, you may decrease the time needed to 15 to 20 minutes. You might want to record the above exercises on an audiocassette to expedite your early practice sessions. Or you may wish to obtain a professionally made tape of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. (See appendix 3.) Some

people always prefer to use a tape, while others have the exercises so well learned after a few weeks of practice that they prefer doing them from memory.

Remember—regular practice of progressive muscle relaxation once a day will produce a significant reduction in your overall level of anxiety. It will also reduce the frequency and intensity of panic. Finally, regular practice will reduce anticipatory anxiety that may arise in the course of systematically exposing yourself to phobic situations (see chapter 7).