

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Our muscles tend to tense up by reacting to fear and anxiety. This can result in feeling “tense”, which may lead to muscle aches and pains, and leave you feeling exhausted. Do you have the same sort of experience? Muscle relaxation can be useful when your anxiety is associated to the muscle tension. Follow this guide to learn how to relax those tensed muscles.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, fear and anxiety as part of a way to prepare our bodies for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not be actually dangerous, the hormones cause our bodies to react in the same way. Sometimes, we might not realise how our muscles become tense, which could be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, then consistently practice this technique.

Preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive relaxation exercises, do keep in mind the following pointers:

- Physical injuries: If you have injured yourself or has a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- Pick a good environment: Minimise any forms of distraction, such as turning off the TV and using soft lighting.
- Make yourself comfortable: Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including a head rest. Wear loose clothing and remove your shoes.
- Avoid heavy meals: Do not practice after having a heavy meal, or after consumption of alcohol.

General procedure

1. Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and allow yourself to relax.
2. Once you are ready to start, tense the muscle group described. Ensure that you can feel the tension, but not too much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
3. Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for about 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say “Relax...” as you relax the muscle.
4. After finishing the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments to allow yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

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 - Repeat as for right hand and forearm.
4. Left upper arm - Repeat as for right upper arm.
5. Forehead - Raise your eyebrows as high as possible, as though you were surprised by something.
6. Eyes and cheeks - Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. Mouth and jaw - Open your mouth as big as you can, just like when you are yawning.
8. Neck - Be cautious when you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though looking upwards.
9. Shoulders - Bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. Shoulder blades/Back - Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, such 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 - Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. 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.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and what you can do to relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any form of training – practising consistently is the key.