

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



by Barbara Frazier

Introduction

PMR involves the tensing and relaxing of muscles in specific areas of your body in succession from bottom to top. It's an effective method of releasing built-up stress held in the body, and also calms your mind as you proceed through the exercise.

Before You Start

- Select a quiet place where you can do the exercises without rushing. It takes about 15 to 20 minutes to go through the whole routine.
- It's best done either lying down or sitting comfortably in a chair where you have body support.
- Focus on each muscle group as you proceed through the exercise so that you're fully engaged mentally.
- Notice the feeling of tightness when you tense your muscles, and feel the tension leave when you relax. It's best to tense for 5 seconds or more if you can, without strain, and relax for 10 to 15 seconds after letting up. You want to release all the tension until you feel limp.

The Exercise

Start with several rounds of **square breathing**: Inhale to a count of four, hold for four, exhale to a count of four. That's one round. Do at least two rounds, and up to four, if you're feeling particularly stressed.

Beginning with your **feet**, push your toes down tensing your feet and **calf muscles** and hold. Don't strain, but tense fully. Now let go and relax completely.

Tense your **thigh muscles**. Hold and release.

Tense your **buttocks**. Hold and release.

Tense your **abdomen** by sucking in your stomach. Hold and release. Isolate those muscles as best you can. It's easy to tense other muscles at the same time, especially your buttocks, but with practice you can separate them.

Now tense your **lower back**. You can do this by arching it up. If you have lower back pain, you can skip this one if you notice it increases your pain.

Move to your **hands** and **arms**. Start by spreading your fingers out and bending them slightly. Tense your **fingers** and **hands**. Hold and release.

Next, tense your **forearms**. Hold and release.

Now your **biceps**, which you can do by pulling your arms up toward your shoulders as though you're lifting weights. Hold and release.

Tense your **triceps** by holding your arms straight out in front of you and locking your elbows. Hold and release.

Next, tense your **shoulders**. Hold them up and tighten them. Hold and release.

Push your shoulders back and tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades. Hold and release.

Tighten your **chest** by holding your shoulders down and slightly back while tensing your chest muscles. Hold and release.

Next is your **neck**. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head back as far as you can and tensing. Hold and release.

Now pull your head forward and down, pulling your chin in. Hold and release.

Last, tighten your **facial muscles**. You can do this all at once by leaning slightly forward, opening your mouth wide and sticking out your tongue, lifting your eyebrows, and tensing everything at once. Hold and release.

When finished, lie (or sit) still. Let your body sink into the ground. Feel every muscle relax. Stay in this position for five minutes if you have the time, and more if you like.

A Quick Exercise

Any time you need to de-stress quickly, you can do a progressive tightening of your muscles all at once, and then relax them. To do this, stand or lie down. Beginning with your feet, mildly tense your muscles progressively moving upwards and keep them tensed.

Increase the tension in all muscles and hold for 5 to 10 seconds, then progressively relax back down from head to toe. Repeat several times.

Doing this quick version not only relaxes you, but energizes you so you can proceed with whatever you need to do. It's helpful when you're feeling tired or overwhelmed.

Passive Muscle Relaxation

Passive muscle relaxation is an alternative to progressive muscle relaxation. The main difference between the two is that with passive you don't tense your muscles before you relax them.

You take the same progressive route starting with your feet and ending with your face and neck. You can reverse that order if you like.

It requires focusing on the body part, letting yourself completely relax that part while imagining the tension leaving.

It's important to keep your focus on the process throughout without allowing your mind to stray. Suspend any thoughts that are stressful or uncomfortable. Give yourself permission to focus only on the exercise.

This is an excellent exercise to do before drifting off to sleep, but can also be done at any time during the day.

How Often?

PMR can be practiced on a regular basis which is advisable if you experience chronic stress, or have issues with anxiety. In those cases, a daily practice is beneficial.

You can also use any of the practices described above as needed. The full-body quick exercise is great when you're feeling tired or stressed, and can give you an immediate lift. Passive muscle relaxation is easy to do sitting at your desk in the office, or on the couch at home. It's also helpful before retiring for the night.

Play around with it and find out what helps you the most!