

Using Progressive Muscle Relaxation to Ease Stress

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that can help you ease stress symptoms by relaxing one muscle group at a time. You can use this technique anywhere—at home, at work, or elsewhere. Here are some easy instructions.



Relaxing Your Muscles Step by Step

1. Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. If you like, take off your shoes and loosen any tight clothing so you can relax completely.
2. Start with a few deep breaths. Breathe in slowly and deeply, then exhale slowly.
3. Start at either the top of your head or the bottom of your feet. Focus on that area and slowly tense the muscles there. Keep them tight for 10-15 seconds and then slowly relax them.
4. Continue to tense and relax all of your muscle groups this way by slowly increasing the tension, holding the tension, and then slowly releasing: feet, legs, hips and buttocks, arms, abdomen, chest, shoulders, neck and face.
5. Finish by slowly tensing all your muscles at once, holding for a few counts and then slowly releasing.

Cautionary note: Listen to your body. If you have sore muscles or joints make sure you tense gently, so that you avoid feeling any pain. If necessary, skip those muscle groups altogether.

Helpful Tips

- When tensing one group of muscles, all the others should be relaxed. It may take practice to keep your arms relaxed while tensing your shoulders.
- Imagine yourself letting go of tension as you relax your muscles and let yourself rest a few seconds or minutes before tightening the next muscle group.
- If you have limited time, it may be beneficial to focus on just a few areas. For example, if you notice tension in your neck and shoulders, tighten those muscles instead of your whole body. Try tightening different muscle groups throughout your day instead of doing them all at once.
- To make it more relaxing, turn down the lights or close the blinds and listen to soothing music. Remember to keep your breathing slow and steady throughout.
- This exercise can be done anywhere—even standing in line or sitting in a car.

A full-body progressive muscle relaxation session can take 10-20 minutes. Practicing it at least 3 or 4 times a week can help you keep tension at bay, as well as help control anxiety, relieve insomnia and reduce blood pressure and some types of chronic pain. Once it becomes part of your stress management routine, you'll know how it feels when certain muscles are tense and relaxed. This will help you notice tension when it first starts and enable you to take steps to deal with it before it becomes a problem.

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