

Progressive Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an exercise routine where you relax your body and your mind by progressively tensing up and then relaxing your muscles from head to toe. The technique was first described by Edmund Jacobson in the 1930s and is based on a premise that mental calmness is a natural result of physical relaxation. Throughout the years, Jacobson's techniques have been modified in many different ways. Even the [Department of Veteran Affairs](#) recommends it. An example of a modified progressive relaxation exercise follows.

About Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

(Read or paraphrase the following to the group before you begin.)

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing, in succession, different muscle groups of the body. The idea is to tense each muscle group hard (but not so hard that you strain) and hold it for 5–10 seconds, and then to let go of it suddenly.

You then give yourself 15–20 seconds to relax. Notice how the muscle group feels when relaxed in contrast to how it felt when tensed. Then proceed to the next group of muscles.



These are some general guidelines we will follow:

- When you tense a particular muscle group, do it vigorously, but without straining, and hold it for about 5 seconds. (You might count out the seconds.)
- Concentrate on what is happening. Feel the buildup of tension in each particular muscle group. It is often helpful to visualize the particular muscle group being tensed.
- Throughout the exercise, maintain your focus on your muscles. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you're working on.
- Remember to breathe, even as you are holding the position. "Hold" does not mean holding your breath.

- When you release the muscles, do so quickly and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15–20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.
- You might also say to yourself, “I am relaxing, letting go, letting the tension flow away,” or any other relaxing phrase during each relaxation period between successive muscle groups.
- Allow all the other muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.

Please note: Throughout this exercise, tell participants that they should not continue any movement if it causes them pain and to be cautious about stretching or tensing parts of their body that have caused past problems (for example, a bad back, neck, leg, or arm). If participants are not sure if it’s safe to do any part of this exercise because of injuries, it’s best not to try. Consult a doctor first.

The exercises:

Tighten your muscles without straining. Hold each movement for about 5 seconds. Then relax for 15 seconds.

1. Sit in a comfortable position in a quiet place. (Armless chairs are best.)
2. Now take three long, slow, deep breaths—in through your nose, all the way down into your stomach. Hold the breath for just a moment, and then exhale slowly through your mouth. Allow your breath to carry away all stress and tension as the air floods out of your lungs.
3. Now let your breathing rhythm return to normal. Breathe naturally as you relax for 15 seconds.
4. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold for a count of 5 seconds and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
5. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids shut. Hold and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around them.
6. Tighten your jaw by smiling widely so 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.

7. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your chin back as far as you can. Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold and then relax. Take a few deep breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into your shoulders.
8. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold and then relax.
9. 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. (**Note:** Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.)
10. Clench your fists. Hold and then relax.
11. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and “make a muscle” with both arms. Hold and then relax.
12. Tighten your triceps (the muscles along the back of your upper arms) by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold and then relax.
13. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.
14. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
15. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (**Note:** Omit for people with lower back pain.) Hold and then relax.
16. Tighten your buttocks. Hold and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
17. Tighten your thighs by pressing your knees together as if you were holding a penny between them. Hold and release. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
18. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes toward you. Hold and then relax.
19. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold and then relax.
20. 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.

21. 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.
22. Conclude by sitting quietly with eyes closed for about one minute.

Imagine that!

At the end of the exercise, ask everyone to use their imagination and let it take you away from the pressures of the day. Begin by suggesting some favorite places, such as a favorite room, favorite vacation spot, favorite restaurant, etc. Ask the group to close their eyes and picture themselves being there. Ask them to use as many of their senses as possible. (Example: Pretend you are having a picnic beside a lake on a beautiful spring day. Can you hear the ducks flapping on the water, smell the lilacs in the air, taste the peanut butter sandwich, etc.?) At the end of the program, ask everyone to share what they imagined.



Additional Resources:

[WebMD – Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Stress and Insomnia](#)

[Berkeley – Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script](#)

[Progressive Muscle Relaxation \(WITH Music\)](#)