

# Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One of the most simple and easily learned techniques for relaxation is Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). The PMR procedure teaches you to relax your muscles through a two-step process. First you deliberately apply tension to certain muscle groups, and then you stop the tension and notice the feeling as the tension flows away and the muscles relax.

Through repetitive practice you quickly learn to recognize the associated feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. With this simple knowledge, you can then induce physical muscular relaxation at the first signs of the tension that accompanies anxiety. And with physical relaxation comes mental calmness—in any situation.

**Before practicing PMR, you should consult with your physician if you have a history of serious injuries, muscle spasms, or back problems.**

If you continue with this procedure, you do so at your own risk.

## Self-administered Progressive Muscle Relaxation

There are two steps in the self-administered Progressive Muscle Relaxation procedure: (a) deliberately tensing muscle groups, and (b) releasing the induced tension. This two-step process will be described, and then you will be introduced to the muscle groups and the sequence of training.

After learning the full PMR procedure, you will spend about 10 minutes a day maintaining your proficiency by practicing a shortened form of the procedure. As you practice the short procedure, you will be simultaneously learning cue-controlled relaxation. Ultimately, you will acquire something that will probably become an indispensable part of your daily life, and the initial drudgery of practice will be long-forgotten.

### Tension–Relaxation Procedure

**Step One: Tension.** The process of applying tension to a muscle is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are using. First, focus your mind on the muscle group; for example, your right hand. Then inhale and simply squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 8 seconds; in the example, this would involve making a tight fist with your hand.

**Note. Beginners usually make the mistake of allowing muscles other than the intended group to tense as well; in the example, this would be tensing muscles in your right arm and shoulder, not just in your right hand. With practice you will learn to make very fine discriminations among muscles; for the moment just do the best you can.**

It's important to really feel the tension. Done properly, the tension procedure will cause the muscles to start to shake, and you will feel some pain.

**Note. Be careful not to hurt yourself, as compared to feeling mild pain. Contracting the muscles in your feet and your back, especially, can cause serious problems if not done carefully; i.e., gently but deliberately.**

**Step Two: Releasing the Tension.** This is the best part because it is actually pleasurable. After the 8 seconds, just quickly and suddenly let go. Let all the tightness and pain flow out of the muscles as you simultaneously exhale. In the example, this would be imagining tightness and pain flowing out of your hand through your fingertips as you exhale. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp, tension flowing away like water out of a faucet. Focus on and notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

**Note. The point here is to really focus on the change that occurs as the tension is let go. Do this very deliberately, because you are trying to learn to make some very subtle distinctions between muscular tension and muscular relaxation.**

Stay relaxed for about 15 seconds, and then repeat the tension-relaxation cycle. You'll probably notice more sensations the second time.

### Muscle Groups

You will be working with most all the major muscle groups in your body, but for convenience you will make a systematic progression from your feet upwards. Here is the most popular recommended sequence:

- Right foot
- Right lower leg and foot
- Entire right leg
- Left foot
- Left lower leg and foot
- Entire left leg
- Right hand
- Right forearm and hand
- Entire right arm
- Left hand
- Left forearm and hand
- Entire left arm
- Face
- Neck and shoulders
- Abdomen
- Chest

**Note.** If you are left-handed, you might want to begin with your left foot, and so on.

### The Full PMR Schedule

It is recommended that you practice full PMR twice a day for about a week before moving on to the shortened form (below). Of course, the time needed to master the full PMR procedure varies from person to person.

Here are some suggestions for practice:

Always practice full PMR in a quiet place, alone, with no electronic distractions, not even background music.

Remove your shoes and wear loose clothing.

Avoid eating, smoking, or drinking. It's best to practice before meals rather than after, for the sake of your digestive processes. **Never practice after using any intoxicants.**

Sit in a comfortable chair if possible. You may practice lying down, but this increases the likelihood of falling asleep.

If you fall asleep, give yourself credit for the work you did up to the point of sleep.

If you practice in bed at night, plan on falling asleep before you complete your cycle. Therefore, consider a practice session at night, in bed, to be in addition to your basic practice.

When you finish a session, relax with your eyes closed for a few seconds, and then get up slowly. (*Orthostatic hypotension*—a sudden drop in blood pressure due to standing up quickly—can cause you to faint.) Some people like to count backwards from 5 to 1, timed to slow, deep breathing, and then say, “Eyes open. Supremely calm. Fully alert.”

### The Shortened PMR Schedule

In the shortened form of PMR, you will (a) work with summary groups of muscles rather than individual muscle groups, and (b) begin to use cue-controlled relaxation.

***The summary muscle groups.*** The four summary muscle groups are as follows:

- Group 1: Lower limbs
- Group 2: Arms, Shoulders, and Neck
- Group 3: Face
- Group 4: Abdomen and Chest

Instead of working with just one specific part of your body at a time, focus on the complete group. In Group 1, for example, focus on both legs and feet all at once.

***Cue-controlled relaxation.*** Use the same tension-relaxation procedure as full PMR. In addition, focus on your breathing during both tension and relaxation. Inhale slowly as you apply and hold the tension. Then, when you let the tension go and exhale, say a cue word to yourself (below). This will help you to associate the cue word with a state of relaxation, so that eventually the cue word alone will produce a relaxed state.

Many people find that cue-controlled relaxation does not have to depend on only one word; it may actually be more helpful in some situations to use a particular phrase. Some suggestions for cue words/phrases are:

- “Relax”
- “Let it go”
- “It’s OK”
- “Stay calm”
- “All things are passing”
- “Trust in God”

### Summary

Initially, you should practice the shortened form of PMR under the same conditions as you practiced full PMR. After about a week of twice-daily practice you will then have enough proficiency to practice it under other conditions and with distractions. In fact, you will then be using it to turn off tension and tune out distractions whenever you feel any [anxiety](#) or [stress](#).