

Stress Management: Progressive Muscle Relaxation



You cannot have the feeling of warm well-being in your body and at the same time experience psychological stress. Deep muscle relaxation, when successfully mastered, can be used as an anti-anxiety pill.

This method, developed by a physician, Edmund Jacobson, is based on the premise that the body responds to anxiety-provoking thoughts and events with muscle tension. This physiological tension, in turn, increased the subjective experience of anxiety.

Deep muscle relaxation reduces physiological tension and is incompatible with anxiety. It is the cornerstone of nearly every relaxation program.

It teaches you first to tighten and then relax specific muscle groups throughout your body. In the process, you learn what deep relaxation feels like and how to recognize and quickly release tension anywhere it builds.

Be sure to notice what relaxation feels like in each part of your body. Does it feel heavy? Warm? Tingly? Being able to recognize the difference between relaxation and muscle tension – often so chronic it goes unnoticed – is a key skill.

The following “short form” of Progressive Muscle Relaxation shows you how to tighten and relax large muscle groups sequentially. It can be practiced lying down or in a chair with your head supported. Remember to tighten each muscle group for 7 seconds and then release.

REPEAT EACH PROCEDURE ONCE.

1. Take a few deep breaths, way down into your abdomen. As you exhale, let your whole body begin to relax.

2. Curl both fists, tightening forearms, biceps, and pectoral muscles (Charles Atlas pose). Hold for 7 seconds and relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your arms and chest.

3. Wrinkle up your forehead. Hold for 7 seconds and relax. At the same time, roll your head clockwise in a complete circle. Then reverse. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your forehead.

4. Now make your face like a walnut: simultaneously frown, squint your eyes, pinch your lips, tighten your jaw and hunch your shoulders. Hold it for seven seconds and relax. Notice how it feels when your face and shoulders deeply relax.

5. Gently arch your back and take a deep breath into your chest. Hold the position, as well as your breath, and relax.

6. Take another deep breath, this time pressing your stomach out. Really let it bulge. Hold for 7 seconds and relax. Again notice how it feels to relax your back and stomach.

7. Now, flex your feet and toes. Tighten your buttocks, thigh, and calf muscles. Hold and relax.

8. Lastly, point your toes out (ballerina style) while again tightening buttocks, thighs and calves. Relax after 7 seconds. Notice what your legs feel like when they really relax. Briefly scan your body and allow yourself to feel the relaxation spread from head to toe.