

# Progressive Relaxation Technique

## Introduction

Progressive Relaxation is a step-by-step procedure to help the body relax when you are feeling tense. Progressive Relaxation been around for many years because it works. It takes a bit of practice to learn but then you will have a skill you can use again and again to reduce your stress in a variety of anxiety-producing situations.

It's important to practice Progressive Relaxation on a regular basis until you feel it comes naturally. Practice it whether or not you feel stressed. If you wait to do it until you are stressed and you have not practiced, it can still work, but less effectively. This is because people often rush through it when they have not practiced. Racing through it prevents you from relaxing. Slowing down and focusing on your breathing and on how your muscles feel makes a difference.

It can be helpful to practice Progressive Relaxation when you get into bed at night, since it can help you fall asleep. Its goal is to relax both your body and brain, so save practice for when those rested states will be useful and you don't have to jolt back into reality. Once you learn the technique, you can use it at any time or modify it to meet your schedule and needs.

## Preparation

- Practice in a quiet place where you are comfortable and do not have a tight timeframe. If it helps, you can put on white noise or calming music at a low volume.
- Close your eyes and focus only on your breathing. Push away any outside thoughts as they occur and refocus on your breathing. You may need to do this several times.
- Keep your eyes closed. Take some slow deep breaths, feeling your body gently expand and then deflate with air. If you can, try to extend your inhalations to 2 or 3 counts and your exhalations to 3 or 4 counts. It may take some concentration to switch off your brain and breathe this way. Focus your attention on the physical part of breathing – how your breathe feels or sounds, or noticing (in your mind's eye) how your chest rises and falls.
- Continue *slowly* inhaling and exhaling this way. Really slow things down. If you're short on time, do 4 unhurried cycles of breathing in and out. The slower they are and the more you do, the more relaxed your brain and body will become.
- Every time you do Progressive Relaxation, start with the breathing. It makes the process more effective and also adds stress relief on its own.

## Basic Principle

It is impossible for the body to be relaxed and tense at the same time. So if you can learn to relax physically, you will naturally feel less tense. To do so, you will learn here to focus on how relaxed and tightened muscles feel different.

## Procedure

- 1) Close your eyes.
- 2) Tense up each muscle group and hold it for 8-10 seconds. Squeeze that area very tightly, but not to the point of discomfort. Notice how the tension feels as you hold it that way.
- 3) Now completely release the flexed muscles in that area and let your body sink into a loose, limp state. Notice how that previously-contracted area feels now and how different it is from before. Stay relaxed for 10-15 seconds. Focus your attention only on noticing the difference in sensations between tense and relaxed.
- 4) Slowly repeat this process for each muscle group, starting at your head and ending at your feet. After you tense up and relax one group of muscles, move on to the next. Fully tense up and fully relax each time. Remember to do it slowly.

Tip: Before you start, look at a clock and count outloud for 8-10 seconds and then for 10-15 seconds. It's often longer than you think, so slow down your counting accordingly during Progressive Relaxation. It doesn't have to be the exact number of seconds, and you will learn to feel when enough time has passed to move on to the next muscle group (and if you are too relaxed to do so, that's good too!).

### *Muscle Groupings to tense up and relax one by one:*

- Facial muscles (include jaw, tongue, eyes, and forehead. No one is watching!)
- Neck and shoulders
- Arms
- Hands and fingers
- Back
- Abdominal area
- Upper legs
- Calves and feet

You are welcome to break down this list into smaller muscle groups too, especially in areas where you tend to feel more stress. For example, you may want to do the right shoulder separately from the left, or your jaw area separately from your eye area.

## Afterward

After you complete the sequence, going from head to toes, keep your eyes closed and mentally check over your body to observe if there are still areas of tension anywhere. If there are, return to that area, tense it up as much as you can, hold that tension for 10 full counts, and then relax the muscles again. (Note that if you need to return to an area, it's likely a place where you typically hold stress. You can use that information throughout the day to gauge your stress level and make sure you keep it relaxed.)

Continue breathing, noticing and enjoying the sensation of relaxed muscles and a more rested body. If you were not planning to sleep, take a few long breaths and, when you are ready, open your eyes and orient yourself to your surroundings. Get up slowly and quietly. You may want to stretch (gently) and ease yourself into the next activity rather than immediately reaching for a screen or your to-do list.

Tip: Once learned, Progressive Relaxation can be modified. You can focus just on the particular muscle group where you tend to carry stress (for many, it's shoulders, neck, and jaw). A shortened Progressive Relaxation is "portable" and you can use it, for example, ten minutes before a job interview, or an important meeting, or a presentation. You can also try it when you are feeling overwhelmed about something. The slow breathing part is especially helpful when feeling worked up about something. Try to find a quiet space if you can. And if need be, you can absolutely do Progressive Relaxation (with any muscle group) while seated.

Remember it takes a little time and practice to learn Progressive Relaxation, but soon you will have a new tool in your toolbox to help you manage stress and anxiety at any time in the future.

Be well!

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