

Relaxation training: progressive muscle relaxation

Find out about progressive muscle relaxation and why it is an important way of reducing stress and anxiety. Learn the steps involved in progressive muscle relaxation and get tips on what to do if you're not getting the hang of it.

Why progressive muscle relaxation is useful

When people are stressed out, anxious or have an anxiety disorder, they often have really tense or tight muscles. This means that you can actually reduce the stress and anxiety you feel, if you learn to relax your muscles properly. Progressive muscle relaxation can help you with this – it's one of the most common types of relaxation training, and it's used by a lot of people. It involves tensing and relaxing different groups of muscles through your body.

How to do it

Progressive muscle relaxation works best if it's something that you practice daily for at least eight weeks, as it does take time for your body to get used to it (just like if you were trying a new sport or exercising).

Preparation

Make sure before trying out progressive muscle relaxation training, that you do these things:

- › Find a comfortable quiet space. Make sure you're in a place free of distractions. Switch off your phone, go into a quiet room, and avoid being around other people if you think they're likely to be a distraction.
- › Make sure you're comfortable. Wear comfy clothes, take off your shoes, and if you've eaten recently, give your food some time to digest.
- › Sit on a chair in a comfortable position. You can also lie down if you prefer, but you're more likely to fall asleep.

The relaxation

- › When you're prepared and ready, focus your mind on your right foot (you can start with your left side if you're a leftie and it feels more normal).
- › Breathe in, and tense your foot muscles as hard as you can.
- › Count to ten, with your muscles still tense.
- › Suddenly and quickly release your foot muscles so that they're completely relaxed.
- › Count to twenty.

Now, repeat the process from the start and do it again, using the same foot. You should notice more sensations the second time. When you've tensed and relaxed the same muscle twice, it's time to move on to another group of muscles.

This can help if...

- › You're feeling stressed
- › You're feeling anxious
- › You want to learn how to relax

Take action...

- › Grab a notebook and start tracking your muscle relaxation
- › Discover how others have benefited from muscle relaxation
- › Learn more advanced relaxation techniques



Do exactly the same thing – tense muscles for ten seconds, relax for twenty, repeat. The idea is to relax and tense all the muscles in your body, starting with your feet and working your way up.

Recommended order of muscle tensing

- > *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*
- > *Abdomen (tummy)*
- > *Chest*
- > *Neck and shoulders*
- > *Face*

Don't forget, if you're a leftie, you can start with your left side if it feels more comfortable.

When you've completed this process, your muscles should be much more relaxed. The more you practice it, the more relaxed your muscles will be able to become over time:

Finishing a session

When you've finished your last tensing pattern,

- > *Relax with your eyes closed*
- > *Count slowly backwards from 5 to 1.*
- > *Get up slowly. If you get up too quickly the drop in blood pressure could cause you to fall down again or feel dizzy.*

If you're having trouble

Progressive muscle relaxation training can be really hard, particularly at first. People have trouble staying focused. The main thing to remember is that the more you practice, the easier it will become. It can be really frustrating to get over the initial hurdle, but don't be discouraged.

You may also find it easier if you have someone to call out the steps to you, so that you don't have to remember in your head which muscle group to move to next. Try and find a video or audio track which uses progressive muscle relaxation techniques if you think it might help.