



SELF-HELP EXERCISE: PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

INTRODUCTION

Your military exercises and deployment responsibilities required you to be tense, keyed up, and on guard most of the time. This can be a difficult habit to change. Your body may have become so used to feeling tense that now you are tense all the time, even when you don't need to be. Having tense muscles is often necessary when you are exercising or on duty, but if your muscles are tense all the time (including at times and places where tension serves no survival function), several problems arise.



What are the problems associated with muscle tension?

- ★ You keep preparing for some kind of demand or threat when there is no need to, placing stress on your mind and body.
- ★ You forget what your body feels like when it is at rest, so being tense starts to feel normal to you.
- ★ You are at risk for sleep problems (because it is difficult to sleep unless your body is relaxed), headaches, and a range of other physical health problems.
- ★ Chronic stress is toxic to your mind and body, so the more you can do to reduce it, the better.
- ★ People who have trouble relaxing on their own may try to relax by drinking or taking drugs. This might work for the short term, but it often leads to unhealthy and destructive habits. There are better and healthier ways to relax!

How can I counteract muscle tension?



- ★ You can learn to relax your muscles.
- ★ You can send your body the message that stressful or threatening situations are over and it is now okay to return to a calmer state.

Muscle relaxation may sound easy, but being able to relax when you need to is a skill. If you haven't already done so, we recommend learning deep breathing techniques so you can use them while you are doing muscle relaxation.

How will muscle relaxation help?

Progressive muscle relaxation is a way to reduce muscle tension. You can use it in a number of different ways:

- ★ To help you fall asleep
- ★ To calm your body and mind
- ★ To manage intense feelings and reactions to triggers
- ★ To identify tension early, before it builds up and becomes a problem



WHAT YOU CAN DO



Progressive muscle relaxation with deep breathing:

The goal of this exercise is to learn to notice the difference between muscle tension and muscle relaxation so you can relax your body. It's a simple, proven technique for reducing stress. You'll be instructed to connect words you use during this exercise (e.g., calm, relax, slow down) with a calm, relaxed state. With practice, simply saying these words to yourself when you tense up in real-life situations will provide a shortcut to reducing tension.

How to do the muscle relaxation exercise:

Read and follow the following muscle relaxation exercise.

- ★ Find a quiet place and time (a half-hour or so) where and when you won't be disturbed.
- ★ It's a good idea to try this activity when you aren't too tired — it's hard to practice relaxing if you're falling asleep!
- ★ Practice deep breathing for a minute or so.
- ★ Make sure you are sitting or lying in a comfortable position and that your legs, arms, and neck are supported.
- ★ When you have finished, take a moment to pay attention to how you feel.
- ★ Practice deep breathing for a minute or so.

Make yourself comfortable in a chair or on your bed, close your eyes, and sit quietly for the next few seconds.



Now build up the tension in your lower arms by making fists with your hands and pulling up on your wrists. If your nails are long, press your fingers against your palms to make fists. Feel the tension through your lower arms, wrists, fingers, knuckles, and hands. Focus on the tension. Notice the sensation of pulling, of discomfort, of tightness. Hold the tension for 10 seconds. Now release the tension and let your hands and arms relax onto the chair or bed with your palms facing down. Focus your attention on the sensation of warmth in your hands and arms. Feel the release from tension. Relax the muscles for 20 seconds.

Now build up the tension in your upper arms by pulling your arms back and in toward your sides. Feel the tension in the back of your arms, radiating up into your shoulders and back. Focus on the sensation of tension. Hold the tension for 10 seconds. Now release the tension in your arms and let them relax heavily down. Focus on your upper arms and feel the difference compared to the tension. Your arms feel heavy, warm, and relaxed. Relax for 20 seconds.

Now build up the tension in your lower legs by flexing your feet and pointing your toes toward your upper body. Feel the tension as it spreads to your feet, ankles, shins, and calves. Feel the tension spreading down the back of your leg, into the foot, under the foot, and around your toes. Focus on that part of your body for 10 seconds.



WHAT YOU CAN DO, CONT'D

Now release the tension and let your legs relax heavily onto the chair or the bed. Feel the difference in the muscles as they relax. Feel the release from tension, the sense of comfort, the warmth, and the heaviness of relaxation for the next 20 seconds.



Now build up the tension in your upper legs by pulling your knees together and lifting your legs off the bed or chair. Focus on the tightness through your upper legs. Feel the pulling sensations from your hip down and notice the tension in your legs. Focus on that part of your body for 10 seconds. Now release the tension and let your legs drop heavily down onto the chair or bed. Let the tension disappear. Focus on the feeling of relaxation. Feel the difference in your legs. Focus on the feeling of comfort for the next 20 seconds.

Now build up the tension in your stomach by pulling your stomach in toward your spine very tightly. Feel the tension. Feel the tightness and focus on that part of the body for the next 10 seconds. Now let the stomach go, let it go farther, and farther. Feel the sense of warmth circulating across your stomach. Feel the comfort and relaxation for the next 20 seconds.

Next build up the tension around your chest by taking in a deep breath and holding it. Your chest is expanded and your muscles are stretched around your chest. Feel the tension around your front and your back. Now hold your breath. Slowly let the air escape and breathe normally, letting the air flow in and out smoothly and easily. Feel the differences as your muscles relax in comparison to the tension. Moving up to your shoulders, imagine your shoulders are on strings, being pulled up toward your ears as you shrug them up high. Feel the tension around your shoulders radiating down into your back and up into your neck and the back of your head. Focus on that part of your body. Describe the sensations to yourself for the next 10 seconds. Now let the shoulders drop down, letting them droop farther and farther, feeling very relaxed. Feel the sense of relaxation around your neck and shoulders. Focus on this comfort and relaxation for the next 20 seconds.



Now build up the tension around your neck by pressing the back of your neck toward the chair or bed and pulling your chin down toward your chest. Feel the tightness around the back of your neck spreading up into your head. Focus on the tension. Now release, letting your head rest heavily against the bed or chair. Nothing is holding up your head except for the support behind. Focus on the relaxation and feel the difference from the tensions.

Build up the tension around your mouth, jaw, and throat by clenching your teeth and forcing the corners of your mouth back into a forced smile. Now hold the tension. Feel the tightness and describe the sensations to yourself. Now release the tension, letting your mouth drop open and the muscles around your throat and jaw relax. Now take some time and focus on the difference in the sensations in that part of your body.

Now build up the tension around your eyes by squeezing your eyes together tightly for the next few seconds. Let the tension disappear from around your eyes. Feel the difference as the muscles relax.



WHAT YOU CAN DO, CONT'D

Now build up the tension across your lower forehead by frowning, pulling your eyebrows down and toward the center. Feel the tension across your forehead and the top of your head. Focus on that tension for 10 seconds. Now release, smoothing out the wrinkles, and letting your forehead relax. Feel the difference.

Finally, build up the tension across your upper forehead by raising your eyebrows up as high as you can. Feel the wrinkling and the pulling sensations across your forehead and the top of your head. Hold the tension. And now relax, letting your eyebrows settle in their usual position and the tension leave. Focus on the sensations of relaxation and feel the difference compared to the tension.



Now your whole body is feeling relaxed and comfortable. As you count from one to five, feel yourself becoming even more relaxed. One — letting all the tension leave your body. Two — sinking further and further into relaxation. Three — feeling more relaxed. Four — feeling very relaxed. Five — deeply relaxed. As you spend the next few minutes in this relaxed state, think about your breathing. Feel the cool air as you breathe in and the warm air as you breathe out. Your breathing is slow and regular. Every time you breathe out, think to yourself the word “Relax. Relax. Relax.” You’re feeling comfortable and relaxed. Pay attention to your breathing in this manner for the next two minutes.

Now, as you count backward from five to one, gradually feel yourself becoming more alert and awake. Five — feeling more awake. Four — coming out of the relaxation. Three — feeling more alert. Two — open your eyes. One — sit up.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

You may have lived with tense muscles for a long time, so be patient and persistent as you train your body to relax. You should start to feel more relaxed after a few days of daily practice. Just like other skills, the more you practice, the easier it will get. Pretty soon you’ll be able to use your relaxation skills in demanding situations that stress and tension often make worse. Don’t get frustrated and give up if you don’t notice immediate results — these skills take practice! It is like any form of physical therapy: no train, no gain.

