

Progressive muscle relaxation

Āta whakatānga ā-uaua

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a method of learning to recognise muscle tension, then to reduce it. It involves tensing muscles, recognising the sensation of muscles working, then allowing the muscles to stop working.

Set aside a time and place for relaxation. Give yourself permission to focus on the sensation of muscle tension and muscle relaxation.



Start by sitting or lying comfortably. Tighten the muscle groups in the sequence described below. Focus on the sensation of tension. Then feel the different sensation as you let those muscles stop working.

Breathe in as you tighten your muscles and breathe out as the muscles stop working.

Take some moments to feel the sensation of "flop" in the muscles that have stopped working. When you have finished, stay seated. Slow your breathing as described in Calming breathing techniques for a few minutes before you become fully alert.

Face and head

Close your eyes and push (purse) your lips together as tightly as possible. Then release the tension in the muscles of your face. Raise your eyebrows towards your hairline, then relax these muscles. Feel the different sensation in those muscles as they relax.

Jaw and tongue

Press your tongue to the roof of your mouth firmly. Then release the tension in your tongue. Open your mouth as widely as possible. Then relax your mouth.

Say the letter "Nnnnn" to yourself. When you say or think "Nnnnn", your tongue automatically releases tension and "docks" on the roof of your mouth.



Neck and shoulder muscles

Tilt your head gently to the left, roll your head round so it is leaning forward, then roll it round to the right. Bring your head back to the middle and raise your shoulders towards your ears. Hold your shoulders up and feel the tension in the muscles up through the back of your neck and across your shoulders. Then let those muscles stop working. As your shoulders drop down, feel the different sensation in those muscles as they "flop".

Hands and forearms

Bend your fingers into fists. As you bend your fingers towards fists, feel that the muscles in your forearms work to make the movement. Hold your fingers in tight fists and feel the muscles working. Then let those muscles stop working and let your hands loosen their grip. Bend your elbows to bring your hands towards your shoulders then relax your arms back to your sides. Feel the different sensation in those muscles as they stop working.

Buttock muscles

Become aware of your buttocks. Squeeze the cheeks of your buttocks together. Notice the sensation of tension in those big muscles as they tighten. Then let those muscles stop working.

Abdominal and thigh muscles

As you tighten your buttock muscles, your abdominal and thigh muscles also tighten. Repeat the tensing of your buttock muscles but focus on the sensation of tension in your abdominal and thigh muscles. Feel the tension, then let those muscles stop working. Feel the different sensation in those muscles as they stop working.

Legs and feet

Point your feet downwards (or push your feet into the floor) then point your feet up as far as possible. Feel the tension in the front and back of your lower legs. Then let those muscles stop working. With your legs relaxed, curl your toes down and then bend the toes up as far as possible. Feel the tension, then let those muscles stop working. Feel the different sensation in those muscles as they stop working.

Next steps

Through practice you can become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension and how you can relax them.

Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training. Practising consistently is the key. Then, when you start to feel anxious, you can progressively tense and relax your muscles to help calm yourself.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed November 2023.