

Progressive muscle relaxation

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.

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've finished, stay seated. Slow your breathing as described in *Calming breathing techniques* on www.healthinfo.org.nz for a few minutes before you become fully alert.

Neck and shoulder muscles

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".

Repeat that movement.

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. Feel the different sensation in those muscles as they stop working.

Repeat that movement.





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. Repeat that movement.

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.

Repeat that movement.

Jaw and tongue

Gently but firmly, clench your teeth together. Hold your teeth clenched while you feel the tightness in the muscles in your cheeks and the tension of your tongue. When your teeth are clenched, your tongue will be firm in your mouth. Let your teeth come apart and allow your tongue to be floppy and to gently rest on the roof of 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.

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 October 2020.