

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

ONE OF THE MOST simple and easily learned techniques for relaxation is Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), a widely-used procedure today that was originally developed by E. Jacobson in 1939.

The PMR procedure teaches you to relax your muscles through a two-step process. First you deliberately apply tension to certain muscle groups, and then you stop the tension and turn your attention to noticing how the muscles relax as the tension flows away.

Through repetitive practice you quickly learn to recognize—and distinguish—the associated feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. With this simple knowledge, you can then induce physical muscular relaxation at the first signs of the tension that accompanies anxiety. And with physical relaxation comes mental calmness—in any situation.

There are two steps in the self-administered Progressive Muscle Relaxation procedure: (a) deliberately tensing muscle groups, and (b) releasing the induced tension. This two-step process will be described after you are introduced to the muscle groups.

After learning the full PMR procedure as follows, you will spend about 10 minutes a day maintaining your proficiency by practicing a shortened form of the procedure (given in the next section below). As you practice the short procedure, you will be simultaneously learning cue-controlled relaxation. Ultimately, you will acquire something that will probably become an indispensable part of your daily life, and the initial drudgery of practice will be long-forgotten.

Before practicing PMR, consult with your physician if you have a history of serious injuries, muscle spasms, or back problems, because the deliberate muscle tensing of the PMR procedure could exacerbate any of these pre-existing conditions.

Suggestions for Practice

- Always practice full PMR in a quiet place, alone, with no electronic distractions, not even background music.
- Remove your shoes and wear loose clothing.
- Avoid eating, smoking, or drinking. It's best to practice before meals rather than after, for the sake of your digestive processes.
- Never practice after using any intoxicants.
- Sit in a comfortable chair if possible. You may practice lying down, but this increases the likelihood of falling asleep.
- If you fall asleep, give yourself credit for the work you did up to the point of sleep.
- If you practice in bed at night, plan on falling asleep before you complete your cycle. Therefore, consider a practice session at night, in bed, to be in addition to your basic practice.
- When you finish a session, relax with your eyes closed for a few seconds, and then get up slowly. (*Orthostatic hypotension*—a sudden drop in blood pressure due to standing up quickly—can cause you to faint.) Some people like to count backwards from 5 to 1, timed to slow, deep breathing, and then say, “Eyes open. Supremely calm. Fully alert.”

You will be working with most all the major muscle groups in your body, but for convenience you will make a systematic progression from your feet upwards. Here is the most popular recommended sequence:

- 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; Chest; Neck; Shoulders; Face

Tension–Relaxation Procedure

Step One: Tension. The process of applying tension to a muscle is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are using. First, focus your mind on the muscle group; for example, your right hand. Then inhale and simply squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 8 seconds; in the example, this would involve making a tight fist with your hand.

It can be very frustrating for a beginner to try to experience a fine degree of muscle separation.

Because neglect of the body is an almost universal cultural attitude, it is usually very difficult to begin learning how to take responsibility for body “mechanics.” So take heart and realize that learning fine muscle distinction is in itself a major part of the overall PMR learning process. PMR isn’t just about tension and relaxation—it is also about muscle discernment.

But also relax a bit and realize that no part of the body is an isolated unit; the muscles of the hand, for example, do have connections in the forearm, so when you tense your hand there will always be some small tension occurring in the forearm. When PMR asks that the hand be tensed without tensing the arm, it is really speaking to the “clumsy” beginner who, out of total body ignorance, will unthinkingly tense everything in the whole arm.

So if you accept the fact that you are simply in the beginner phase—rather than perceive yourself as somehow inept then you can have the patience to discern the fine muscles with practice.

Step Two: Releasing the Tension. This is the best part because it is actually pleasurable. After the 8 seconds, just quickly and suddenly let go. Let all the tightness and pain flow out of the muscles as you simultaneously exhale. In the example, this would be imagining tightness and pain flowing out of your hand through your fingertips as you exhale. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp, tension flowing away like water out of a faucet. Focus on and notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Note. The point here is to really focus on the change that occurs as the tension is let go. Do this very deliberately, because you are trying to learn to make some very subtle distinctions between muscular tension and muscular relaxation.

Stay relaxed for about 15 seconds, and then repeat the tension-relaxation cycle. You’ll probably notice more sensations the second time.

Source: <http://www.quidetopsychology.com/pmr.htm>