

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle relaxation (or PMR for short) was developed by Dr. Edmund Jacobson more than 50 years ago. It is a systematic approach to reducing muscle tension—and can be a very effective relaxation technique for people who have trouble with the more “meditative” approaches.

To practice PMR, sit comfortably in a quiet space. Loosen any tight or uncomfortable clothing. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. What you will be doing is taking a “tour” of your body—first tightening, and then releasing, a number of different muscle groups.

When you tense a muscle group, squeeze the muscles in that part of your body as tightly as you can and hold that tension for a count of five. Then let the tension go. Every time you release a tense muscle group, take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and—as you exhale—say “Re-e-e-la-a-x” silently to yourself. Notice that you are warm, relaxed, and comfortable. Then move on to the next muscle group.

First, tighten up all the muscles in your lower legs and feet. Curl your toes in towards your feet, and tighten the muscles in your calves. Really squeeze and feel all that tension—especially around your toes and in your calves. Hold it for a count of five. Then, let your feet and lower legs relax. Take a deep breath—hold it a few seconds—and as you exhale, say “Re-e-e-la-a-x” to yourself. Really draw that word out. Feel the relaxation in your toes, feet, and lower legs. Notice that you are warm, relaxed, and comfortable.

Then, move up to your buttocks, hips and thighs. Clench your thighs, tighten your buttocks and hips. Really feel the tension in this entire area of your body. Then release it. Take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and as you exhale, say “Re-e-e-la-a-x.” *

Work your way up to your head, tensing and releasing the muscles in your:

- feet and lower legs
- buttocks, hips and thighs
- abdomen
- lower back
- chest and upper back
- hands and arms
- shoulders
- face and scalp

Remember to take a deep breath in and out after each tensing-and-releasing cycle.

It will take a practice to fully master this relaxation technique—but once you have it down, you’ll be able to do quick body scans throughout the day, tensing and relaxing an individual group of muscles whenever you find a tight spot.

*Notice that you are warm, relaxed, and comfortable.