

# Progressive Muscle Relaxation

## Creating the 'Relaxation Response'

A guide to helping you manage stress related issues, including anxiety, phobias and social & performance anxiety.



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## Progressive Muscle Relaxation - creating the 'Relaxation Response'

The technique introduced below by CBT online is based on a combination of theories and techniques by two major proponents of physical and mental relaxation. Firstly, Edmund Jacobson, founder of the Progressive Muscle Relaxation technique more than 100 years ago, and secondly, Herbert Benson who pioneered mind-body research, focusing on stress and the 'Relaxation Response' with regards to physical and mental health wellbeing.



Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) involves relaxing the muscles in a progressive or step-by-step manner. This form of relaxation is extremely useful in learning how to relax and let go of tension at times when you become

anxious, worried or need to find a level of calm so that you can focus your mind. It works well in conjunction with CBT and other techniques that may be taught alongside it, or at a later date. It is a great precursor to 'mindfulness' and the focus on various parts of the body brings awareness to the present moment.

The process is based on what is called the 'relaxation response' which is a proven theory that works on the premise that you can't be very tense & anxious and relaxed & calm at the same time. As such it can help as part of the treatment of anxiety and stress related issues including, phobias, and social & performance related anxiety. The relaxation response is the polar opposite of the fight / flight (or freeze) response, a term established by Walter Bradford Cannon.



This process of relaxation is almost certain to happen because it is based on a principle of muscle physiology. Whenever you create tension in a muscle and then release the tension, the muscle has to relax. The muscle does not have a choice. It must happen.

The interesting aspect of this process is that the muscle will not only quickly relax back to its pre-tensed state, but if it is allowed to rest, it will become even more relaxed that it was.

As this procedure of creating tension and then releasing it, is applied to every major muscle group of the body, all of these muscles will become more relaxed than when you started. The key to triggering the relaxation response in this manner is to take charge of the voluntary muscles by tensing them and forcing them into a state of relaxation. Once the muscles relax then the other components of the relaxation response will naturally follow.

Relaxed muscles require less oxygen, so the breathing pattern slows and deepens. The heart does not need to be beating as fast to carry oxygen out to relaxed muscles. Heart rate and blood pressure decline. The normal blood flow returns to the stomach and digestion resumes. Hands and feet warm up.

Such a series of bodily adaptations all start and fall naturally into place because the voluntary muscles are being directed into a state of relaxation. Soon changes in mood follow, and you become more calm and relaxed. One initial point that needs to be noted is that during this process, as you tense, there may be an initial slight increase in your pulse rate, but this should not be of any concern. All exercise will raise your pulse rate, and this should be minimal. There is no need to worry about this.

As with all new techniques, it takes a bit of practise to learn (typically 2-3 weeks), so that it can then be used automatically, as and when it is needed. As such it is important to practise this initially every day for the first week (it takes ten minutes) and then three or four times a week for a one or two of weeks after that.

If you follow the steps below you will be well on your way to learning how to relax. This exercise should take about 10-15 minutes. However, if you only have 5 minutes to spare, 5 minutes is certainly better than nothing.



The two main tasks of progressive relaxation are to:

1. Purposely tense the muscles so as to recognise the feeling of tension
2. Relax the muscles letting the tension flow out of the body

During the relaxation exercises you are required to alternately tense and relax each of the muscle groups in the body, step-by-step and after a while you will become more adept at recognising tension and then letting go of that tension.

Detailed instructions on all the muscle groups are below but in summary: The exercises begin with the hands, moving up the arms to the shoulders, neck, and head, then down through the chest, back and stomach to the buttocks, thighs, calves, and feet. The muscles are tensed for 7-10 seconds, then relaxed for about 10 seconds. You may need to refer to this document to begin with so as to relax the muscles in the right order, however, with practice the exercise will become routine.

While each muscle group is being tensed, breathe in and hold the breath for 1-2 seconds. As the muscles are relaxed, breathe slowly out. If you wish at this point you can think or say the word 'relax' at the same time. At the end of the exercise rest quietly for a few minutes, enjoying the sensation of total body relaxation. Normal activities are then resumed bringing a greater feeling of calm and relaxation into the daily routine.



Achieving deep levels of relaxation requires patience and practice. The more often the individual practises, the deeper and longer lasting the relaxation will be and the more quickly anxiety and stress can be reduced.

Once progressive muscle relaxation is sufficiently mastered, the individual will be able to use this relaxation technique in any place, at any time, as the need arises. Whenever an increase in muscle tension is

noticed, the relevant muscle groups can be targeted for a quick, on-the-spot relaxation exercise. By keeping muscle tension levels in check throughout the day, the individual is able to maintain more continuous feelings of relaxation.

# The Process

1. Find a quiet and relaxing place. Choose a chair that's comfortable for you, note although these exercises may be adapted to use with a yoga mat or lying on a floor, but some of the exercises are best learned sitting in a chair. Put mobiles on silent if possible, to avoid being disturbed.
2. Allow your mind to settle and if any concerns or other thoughts drift back into your mind while you are relaxing, do not worry, just let them float gently through and out of your mind without emotionally reacting to them. Let your mind be as clear and as calm as possible.



3. Practise slow breathing method for one minute. Breathe in for 3 seconds and breathe out for 5 seconds, perhaps thinking or saying the word relax every time you breathe out. Let your breathing flow smoothly. Imagine the tension flowing out of your body each time you breathe out. In through the nose and out through the mouth is best but in and out of nose is okay if it feels better. Breathe into the lower part of the lungs and let your breath rise up through the lungs.

4. Relax your muscles. For each of the muscle groups in your body, tense the muscles for 7-10 seconds, then relax for about 10 seconds. Only tense your muscles moderately (not to the point of inducing discomfort). Tense and relax your muscles in the following order:

- **Hands** - curl hands into fists, tense, then relax.
- **Lower arms** - bend your hand down at the wrist, as though you were trying to touch the underside of your arm, then relax.
- **Upper arms** - tighten your biceps by bending your arm at the elbow, then relax.
- **Shoulders** - lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then relax.
- **Neck** - stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then relax.
- **Forehead and scalp** - raise your eyebrows, then relax.
- **Eyes** - close your eyes moderately tightly, then relax.
- **Jaw** - lightly clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles not with real tension), then relax.
- **Tongue** - press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then relax.
- **Chest** - breathe in deeply to inflate your lungs, then breathe out and relax.
- **Stomach** - push your tummy out to tighten the muscle, then relax.
- **Upper back** - pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then relax.
- **Lower back** - while sitting, lean your head and upper back forward, rolling your back into a smooth arc thus tensing the lower back, then relax.
- **Buttocks** - tighten your buttocks, and then relax.
- **Thighs** - while sitting, push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax.
- **Calves** - lift your toes off the ground towards your shins, then relax.
- **Feet** - gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then relax.

5. That's it! Now enjoy the feeling of relaxation and sit still for a few minutes to reorientate. You can stretch out a bit if you like.

Important: In all of what follows, learning this technique is NOT to be seen as a challenge, e.g., how well you can or can't do it, or how quickly you can or can't learn it, how effective it is, is it working for me etc. Just relax and trust in yourself and your own natural resources and go through the process. This is a very effective technique for many people – if however you don't feel it's working for you, then at least you tried it!

This type of relaxation can be used as a base for learning to relax through breathing and then further into meditation and mindfulness. If these are techniques you are interested in learning more about, then please contact Brian Dorans:

[www.cbt-online.co.uk/contact](http://www.cbt-online.co.uk/contact)

CBT online is run by Brian Dorans, and all therapy and coaching is personally delivered by him. Based in Buckinghamshire, just outside London, working online enables CBT to be offered to clients across the UK and internationally. Brian has been working as both a therapist and a coach for over 15 years.

Brian has been using Skype over the last 10 years to work with clients in the UK, US, and many Central and Eastern European countries.

Brian works holistically with each client, and uses his broad experience treating a wide variety of issues to bring about lasting change in the quickest possible time. He has experience in teaching and integrating a range of relaxation and mindfulness techniques alongside CBT which can work very effectively for certain conditions that clients encounter.

He is also fully qualified to practice hypnotherapy and has been a practitioner of meditation for over 30 years.



**Brian Dorans – CBT online**

- MA Glasgow University
- Member of National College of Hypnosis, Psychotherapy and Mindfulness
- Member of the British Psychological Society
- Member of The Association for Coaching
- Fully licenced and insured to practice

Caution / disclaimer: The type of exercise above is deemed moderate, however if it's been a while since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, talk to your doctor before starting this routine. We advise that anyone who wishes to follow the above routine does so at their own risk.



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