



On-demand relaxation

Here's a technique to rejuvenate your mind and body—all it takes is just five minutes a day

■ By Nicole Paulie

IF YOU HAVE BEEN looking for a way to relax your body and mind and have no time to go for a massage... you are in the right place. Progressive muscle relaxation [also called PMR] is a great intervention for bringing peace and relief to your body, any time you want. And the best part is, you can do it all by yourself, by slowly relaxing various parts of your body, until your entire body is relaxed.

While relaxation is a good reason to turn towards PMR, it also has various other health benefits.

- » It lowers the heart rate, blood pressure, and promotes healthy sleep. All of these things together lower momentary stress levels and long-term stress levels when practised regularly.
- » It is often used as a treatment for people who suffer from general and social anxiety, panic attacks, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. People who suffer from anxiety disorders are often unaware of how tense

they are during the day because, for them, feeling stressed begins to feel normal. They clench their jaw, tighten their shoulders and back, tense their stomach muscles, and keep a tight fist for most of the day.

- » When someone holds their muscles in tense positions for long periods of time, it results in back pain, headaches and/or migraines, bruxism [grinding of teeth], and stomach aches. This continued tenseness keeps the body's anxiety levels high and makes it more difficult for the body to return to a state of relaxation. The good news is that you can use relaxation techniques such as PMR to put a stop to this vicious cycle of anxiety.
- » Practising PMR daily helps the muscles to learn to relax, and eventually lowers the body's baseline stress level.
- » After practising PMR daily for about a month, you should find that your muscles are more likely to turn to relaxation instead of tightness as their neutral position.
- » You should also see a visible difference in your daily stress levels.

How to do PMR

Start by finding a place that is quiet and relaxing—a

place where you can sit in silence for at least five minutes. Be sure to sit or lie down in a position that is comfortable. If you are worried about falling asleep, you may want to try this sitting up at first.

Begin by taking deep, long breaths; make it a point to breathe more from your abdomen and not your chest. Notice how your body feels first as it fills up with air, and then as the air leaves the body. Imagine all of the tension being released from your body as you breathe out, and the relaxation flowing in, as you inhale.

Turn your attention to your forehead. Tense the muscles in your forehead as hard as you can for five seconds, and as you breathe out let the muscles relax. Continue this with all of the muscles in your face: your eye lids, your jaw, and your ears.

As your head begins feeling relaxed, move your attention downwards, turning next to your neck, shoulders and arms. Shrug your shoulders and then relax. Squeeze the muscles in your chest, your arms, your hands... and then relax.

Now that your upper body is fully relaxed, take a few moments to breathe deeply, and scan through your upper body. Notice what it feels like when those muscles are relaxed, and what it feels like to be in this moment. Make a note of this so you can remember it later.

Next, allow the relaxation to continue flowing through your body by tensing the muscles in your abdomen. Again, holding tight for five seconds, and then letting go. Follow this by tightening your butt muscles, and then your thighs. Let this relaxation continue to flow down into the feet as you pull your feet backwards tensing your calves, and curl your toes to tighten your feet.

At this point, scan one last time through your body to see if any parts have again become tense,

Music to accompany PMR

Nada Himalaya by Deuter

Shakuhachi Meditation Music by Stan Richardson

Destress Relax by Times Music

Indigo Dreams by Lori Lite

The Most Relaxing Classical Music Ever by Hal Leonard Corp

It's a good idea always to do something relaxing prior to making an important decision in your life.

— Paulo Coelho

paying special attention to common problem areas such as the shoulders, jaw, and stomach. If they have become tense, just tighten and release the muscles to relax them.

Lastly, take a few moments to notice what it is like when your entire body feels relaxed. Continue to deeply breathe in and out, and allow the feeling of relaxation to wash over you entirely.

Tips for practising at home

Be sure to practise this exercise at least once a day. Remember, it may be difficult to relax at first, but like most things, the more you practise, the easier it gets. Avoid practising it directly before or after a meal. The hunger or feelings of fullness distract you from focussing on your muscles.

If you find that you have a hard time staying focussed on PMR on your own, see if someone can read aloud a relaxation script to you, or even record yourself saying one slowly to play back later. Additionally, there are many free smart phone applications and guided PMR audios available online. Simply search "progressive muscle relaxation audio" or "progressive muscle relaxation script" the next time you're online.

After you feel you have gained a good grip on the exercise, try using it just before or after situations you would normally find stressful. For example, the next time you have a presentation, exam, job interview, or uncomfortable social situation, try using this exercise beforehand.

It only takes five minutes a day to start working towards that level of 'Zen' you may be looking for.



Nicole Paulie is a Counselling Psychologist, author and blogger based in the United States and Ireland. She specialises in using mindfulness and holistic lifestyle changes for mental well-being. She has extensive experience working with adult individuals in both an in-patient and out-patient psychiatric setting.

