
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) and Body Scan

What Is Progressive Muscle Relaxation?

We all carry tension in different parts of our bodies. This tension may become so habitual that we don't even realize our muscles are tense. Progressive muscle relaxation not only helps release tension from muscles, but it also helps you become more aware of your muscles. This exercise involves sequentially tightening and relaxing various muscle groups.

General Procedure:

- Sit in a chair with eyes closed and your hands loosely in your lap. Take a few slow, deep breaths.
- Extend your right arm in front of you and tense your fist to the point of pressure but not of strain. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds, and then let your hand relax back into your lap. Let your hand and arm relax for 10-20 seconds.
- Repeat the previous step, tensing and relaxing your right fist for a second time.
- Continue alternating tension with relaxation for each of the remaining muscle groups. Remember to keep breathing as you tense your muscles. After you have tensed and relaxed one muscle group, move on to the next. Below you will find a sample sequence of muscles to tense and relax, but progressive muscle relaxation can be done with a fewer number or greater number of muscle groups as well. For example, you may choose to tense just one fist at a time, both fists at the same time, or perhaps even tense your entire arm along with the fist in the first step. You may also choose to spend more time with an especially tense muscle before moving on to the next muscle. It is not important that you tense your muscles in a certain way. Do this in whatever manner is comfortable for you. You should never tense to the point of pain. Also try to keep any muscles not currently being tensed in a relaxed state. Practice once per day, if possible. It is an acquired skill and you will get better at it with practice.

Possible PMR muscle sequence:

- Hands – clench each fist
- Upper arms – bend elbows and tense your upper arms (i.e. 'make a muscle')

Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Body Scan (continued)

- Shoulders – lift your shoulders towards your ears
- Neck – let neck drop to your chest
- Forehead and scalp – raise eyebrows
- Face – scrunch up face
- Tongue – press tongue against roof of mouth
- Chest – tighten chest muscles
- Upper back – pull shoulders forward
- Lower back – roll head and upper back down and forward, stretching the lower back (e.g. like touching your toes while sitting in a chair)
- Buttocks – squeeze buttocks
- Abdomen – tighten stomach muscle
- Thighs – while sitting with knees bent at 90 degree angle, tense thigh muscles / or press upper legs together from knees to hips to create tension
- Calves – lift toes off ground towards your shins
- Feet - gently curl toes down so they are pressing into the floor

When you have finished tensing and relaxing each muscle group, sit quietly for another a minute or two. Use your imagination to further relax your muscles. Focus on one muscle group at a time. Going from one to the next, visualize the muscles spreading out; getting long, loose, and more deeply relaxed. Sit quietly for a few more minutes and feel the relaxation.

-To finish this exercise, gently stretch and slowly open your eyes.

Body Scan

Related to progressive muscle relaxation is the body scan. During a body scan you mentally “scan” your muscles looking for areas of tension. Close your eyes. Start with your head and move down your body. Ask yourself, “Where am I tense?” Scan your muscles looking for signs of tension. Ask yourself, “Is my forehead relaxed? Is my jaw relaxed?” and so forth. Scan your face, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, back, stomach, buttocks, legs, and feet. Whenever you discover an area of tension, gently move the muscle to loosen it, and then relax it. In a body scan, you do not necessarily need to tense the muscle before you relax it.