

Progressive Relaxation

There are terrific benefits from learning to relax your body. By focusing on the PHYSICAL feelings of tension and release, we can trick our brain into de-stressing as well. You cannot feel both physically relaxed and anxious at the same time. And, we can train our body to habitually respond to anxiety-provoking situations with relaxation. In this way mastering progressive relaxation can serve as a kind of “anti-anxiety pill.” This technique has been used to effectively treat anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia, neck and back pain, and high blood pressure. It is also a helpful tool for anyone dealing with anger management issues.

The Technique

The basic principle of Progressive Relaxation is pretty straight-forward: You focus on the feeling of tension in one muscle group. Then, you consciously release the tension and focus on the feeling of relaxation in that muscle group. Then, you move on to the next muscle group, systematically working through the whole body.

Practice

Here is a brief version of progressive relaxation for you to start practicing. For a more complete description and detailed instructions I highly recommend [The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook](#) (2008).

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the ground. Take a few deep breaths and relax your body.
2. Curl both hands into tight fists; tighten your biceps and forearms as tight as you can. Focus on the feeling of tension. Now completely relax your arms and hands. Notice how they feel.
3. Pull your shoulders up toward your ears; scrunch up your face by drawing your eyebrows together and wrinkling your nose. Make it as tight as you can. With a strong exhale, release your shoulders and relax your face. Notice the feeling.
4. Now tighten your torso. Arch or hunch your back; take a deep breath and puff out your belly as far as you can. Hold it and focus on the feeling of tension. Release your breath and completely relax your torso.
5. Straighten your legs in front of you. Point your toes. Tighten your thighs, calves, and ankles. Notice the feeling of tension from your hips to your toes. Now allow your legs to relax and flop back to the floor. Notice the feeling of relaxation.

Practice a few times a day for the next two weeks. At first you should do this exercise when you are in a calm environment and can focus on the process. Once you are comfortable with it, start practicing when you find yourself in a stressful situation. Intentionally tighten your hands, arms and feet and then intentionally relax your body.