

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

A research-supported technique for reducing physical and psychological tension

What It Is

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a mind-body technique developed in the 1920s by physician Edmund Jacobson and refined extensively since. The core premise is straightforward: physical tension and psychological anxiety are mutually reinforcing — and deliberately releasing muscle tension is one of the most reliable ways to interrupt that cycle.

The technique works by moving systematically through the body's major muscle groups, briefly tensing each one and then releasing it. The deliberate contrast between tension and release trains your nervous system to recognize what relaxation actually feels like — and to move toward it more readily over time.

PMR works by reducing activity in the sympathetic nervous system — the part responsible for the stress response. Regular practice has been shown in clinical research to lower anxiety, reduce muscle tension, improve sleep, and decrease physiological markers of stress including cortisol levels.

What It's Used For

PMR is one of the most well-researched relaxation techniques available. It has demonstrated effectiveness across a wide range of presentations:

- Generalized anxiety and chronic stress
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Tension headaches and stress-related physical symptoms
- Pre-performance or anticipatory anxiety
- Irritability and emotional dysregulation linked to physical tension
- Chronic pain conditions where muscle bracing contributes to discomfort
- Burnout recovery — particularly useful when the body carries stress that the mind has normalized

It is also commonly used as a foundational skill in cognitive-behavioral therapy, as it gives patients a reliable tool for down-regulating their nervous system before engaging in other therapeutic work.

How to Practice

Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Sitting in a supportive chair or lying down both work — lying down tends to produce deeper relaxation. Loosen any tight clothing. Plan for 15 to 20 minutes.

Each muscle group follows the same pattern: tense deliberately for 5 to 7 seconds, then release completely and rest for 20 to 30 seconds before moving on. Pay close attention to the contrast — the sensation of release is the point of the exercise, not the tension itself.

A few things to keep in mind: tense firmly but not to the point of strain or cramping. If you have an injury or pain in a particular area, skip it. You are not trying to exhaust your muscles — you are training your nervous system to recognize the difference between held tension and genuine relaxation.

The Script — Head to Toe

Read through this once before you begin so the sequence is familiar. After a few sessions, you won't need the script at all. Move through each step without rushing — allow yourself to fully arrive at each release before moving on.

1

Forehead

Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go — as if you're surprised by something. Feel the tension across your forehead and scalp. Hold for 5 to 7 seconds.

Release cue: Let your eyebrows fall. Feel the skin of your forehead smooth out and go still.

2

Eyes & Face

Squeeze your eyes shut tightly and scrunch your face toward the center — nose, cheeks, everything pulling inward. Hold.

Release cue: Release completely. Let your face go slack. Notice the softening around your eyes and cheeks.

3

Jaw & Mouth

Clench your teeth firmly together and press the tip of your tongue to the roof of your mouth. Feel the tension in your jaw and the muscles along the sides of your face. Hold.

Release cue: Let your jaw drop slightly and your tongue rest on the floor of your mouth. Notice how the sides of your face soften.

4

Neck

Gently press the back of your head into the surface behind you — or, if seated, pull your chin slightly toward your chest. Tense the muscles along the sides and back of your neck. Go carefully here; do not strain. Hold.

Release cue: Release slowly. Let your neck find a neutral, comfortable position. Feel the tension drain away from the base of your skull.

5

Shoulders

Draw both shoulders up toward your ears as far as they will go. Hold the shrug firmly and feel the tension across your upper back and trapezoids. Hold.

Release cue: Drop your shoulders completely. Let them fall as far as gravity takes them. Notice how different that feels from where they started.

6

Arms & Hands

Extend both arms, make tight fists, and squeeze from your hands all the way up through your forearms and biceps. Hold the full length of both arms tense. Hold.

Release cue: Release your fists and let your arms go limp. Let your hands rest, fingers loose and open. Feel the warmth and heaviness in your arms.

7

Chest

Take a deep breath and hold it, pressing your chest outward and pulling your shoulder blades together behind you. Feel the tightness across your chest and upper back. Hold.

Release cue: Exhale slowly and completely. Let your chest soften. Feel the release move down through your torso with each breath.

8

Abdomen

Pull your stomach in tightly — as if bracing for a punch. Hold the contraction, feeling the tightness across your core. Hold.

Release cue: Release. Let your belly go completely soft. Notice your breath returning to your abdomen naturally.

9

Hips & Thighs

Squeeze your glutes firmly together and press your thighs against each other or into the surface beneath you. Hold the tension through your hips and upper legs. Hold.

Release cue: Release. Feel your hips settle and your thighs soften. Let gravity take the full weight of your legs.

10

Calves

Flex both feet, pulling your toes toward your shins to engage your calves. Hold the contraction firmly — if you feel cramping, ease back slightly. Hold.

Release cue: Release. Let your feet fall to a neutral position. Feel the tension drain from your calves and shins.

11

Feet & Toes

Curl your toes downward as tightly as you can, as if gripping the ground with your feet. Feel the arch of each foot contract. Hold.

Release cue: Let your toes uncurl and your feet go completely limp. Take a moment here — feel the full weight of your body released into whatever surface is beneath you.

Full-Body Release

After completing the sequence, take a moment to scan your body from head to toe. Notice any areas where tension has returned or where the release felt incomplete. If you find any, tense that area briefly — 5 seconds — and release again.

Then rest. Stay still for 1 to 2 minutes. Breathe slowly and let your body continue settling. When you're ready to move, do so gradually — bring gentle movement back to your fingers and toes, stretch lightly, and return to alertness at your own pace.

The relaxation you feel at the end of this exercise is not a passive state — your nervous system has actively shifted. Take a moment to register what that feels like in your body before you return to activity.

Building a Practice

PMR becomes significantly more effective with regular use. Most people notice meaningful results after one or two sessions, but the real benefit comes from the cumulative effect of consistent practice — your nervous system learns to relax more quickly and completely each time.

Practical recommendations

- Practice once daily, ideally at the same time each day — before sleep is a particularly effective window.
- 10 to 20 minutes per session is sufficient. Longer is not always better.
- After several weeks of regular practice, many people can achieve a similar state of relaxation through breath and body awareness alone, without needing the full tension-release sequence.
- If you find your mind wandering during the exercise, return attention to the physical sensation in the current muscle group — that is the anchor.
- PMR can be combined with slow diaphragmatic breathing or brief guided imagery during the rest intervals for a deeper effect.

When not to practice

- Immediately after a large meal.
- If you are in acute physical pain — modify or skip affected areas, or postpone the session.
- If tensing a particular muscle group causes cramping or discomfort, ease back on the tension and focus more on the release phase.

PMR is a well-established, evidence-supported skill — not a substitute for clinical care when that is what is needed. If anxiety, tension, or stress are persistent rather than situational, that is worth exploring with a clinician who can work with you at that level. dyerpsy.com.