

25 progressive relaxation

for you to know

When you feel anxious, your muscles are likely to be tense. Consciously releasing your muscle tension will help you relieve anxiety. Progressive relaxation is an exercise that can help.

You can use progressive relaxation for anxiety prevention by practicing it on a regular basis. That will help keep your daily anxiety level lower. You can also use progressive relaxation as intervention on a day when your anxiety level is higher than usual.

Ideally, you will have a quiet place and fifteen or twenty minutes each time you practice progressive relaxation. If you have a busy schedule and find it hard to make that happen, you can do a brief variation of this exercise, just about any place at any time. When you are sitting in class, in the bleachers, in the passenger seat of the car, in a restaurant, or in the library, you can take a few minutes to focus on consciously relaxing your muscles. Any effort you make can help you release and relieve anxiety.

directions

Read this exercise all the way through carefully before you try it. If possible, find a quiet place without distractions to practice. You might want to have someone help you with this exercise the first few times you try it. Simply ask the person to slowly read the directions as you sit with your eyes closed, following them.

Progressive Relaxation

Sit in a comfortable position and loosen any tight clothing so that you don't feel cramped or constrained and can breathe easily. You may lie down if you wish, as long as you know you won't fall asleep. Before you start, rate your anxiety level on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 being completely peaceful and 10 being highly anxious). Write your number down, tell it to another person, or remember it so you can use it later.

Close your eyes and for a few minutes put your attention on your breath. You don't have to try to change your breathing at all—simply notice it. Instead of trying to direct your breath, just follow it. All you have to do is notice where it is at any moment and where it goes at the next moment. As you inhale and exhale, your breath may move in and out of your mouth or nostrils; it may move into your throat, neck, or lungs or even down into your diaphragm. Your breath may make your shoulders rise and fall or your chest move up and down. It may cause a tickle or a light sensation in your body at any point. There is no right or wrong way to experience your breath; just notice where it goes and continue to follow it.

When your breath becomes rhythmic and even, move your attention to the top of your head. Notice if you are holding any tension around your facial area or the muscles surrounding your skull. Imagine all of this tension leaving your head and being pulled out into the air around you. After it leaves your head, it simply floats away off into space. You notice that your forehead, your cheeks, your chin, and your jaw are all completely free of tension and relaxed. Your face and jaw are so relaxed that your mouth may drop open a little.

Now move your attention to your neck. Picture any tension that you may be holding in the back or front of your neck as leaving your body and floating off into space. Consciously release the muscles in your neck and let go of any tension in this area.

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Next, pay attention to your shoulders and upper back. Notice if you are holding any tension here. Many people hold anxiety in these areas. Consciously release any tension you are holding here. Feel the release and relief as you let the tension go. Feel your shoulders drop a little as the tension leaves your body.

Move your attention now to your chest and lungs. Know that you are releasing any and all tension from this area of your body. Your lungs are contracting and expanding freely. Your chest is rising and falling peacefully and rhythmically as you breathe. Any tension that was in your chest or lungs has now left. Your muscles here are completely relaxed.

Next, focus on your upper arms. Picture the muscles in your arms relaxing. These muscles work hard each day, helping you lift and carry. Right now they don't have to do anything, so let them relax. Release any tension that you might be holding in your upper arms and then in your lower arms and your hands and fingers. Concentrate on releasing any tightness you may be carrying anywhere along your arms. Picture the tension simply flowing down your arms and out the ends of your fingertips. Your arms are now completely relaxed.

Move your focus to your stomach. It is common for people to feel tightness or "knots" in their stomach when they are anxious. Pay attention to your stomach muscles and consciously relax them. Each time you exhale, let them become more and more limp, until you feel your stomach "sinking" comfortably into your body. Know that any tension in your stomach is now gone, and your stomach is completely relaxed.

Now place your attention on your lower back and hips. Release any tension you may be feeling in these areas. Let your hips feel warm and heavy, and feel them sinking comfortably into the chair beneath you. Let the muscles in your lower back and hips relax completely and notice how good this feels.

Next, move your attention to your upper legs. There are large muscles in your thighs that carry you from place to place every day. They don't need to do any work right now, so you can let them relax completely. Let your upper legs feel warm and heavy. Let them sink into the chair beneath you as you release all the tension from this area of your body. Notice how relaxed your thighs are now.

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Move down your legs to your knees and calves, your feet and toes. These body parts also work hard to hold you up every day. They can be completely relaxed now. Consciously let any tension go from these muscle groups and joints. Picture the tension flowing easily out of your legs and your feet and out the tips of your toes. Let all of this tension disappear into the air around you.

Now sit quietly for a few minutes and enjoy the relaxation you have allowed in your body. Notice what it's like to be this relaxed. Rate your anxiety level once again, as you did before you started this exercise. Notice if your number has gone up, down, or stayed the same. When you are ready, bring your attention back to the room you are in, and open your eyes.

more to do

The goal of this activity is to reduce anxiety. Sometimes it will initially raise people's anxiety because they aren't used to sitting quietly or with their eyes closed. With practice, it will get more comfortable.

Describe what it was like for you to do this activity.

Tell what your anxiety ratings were before and after the exercise. Tell why you think your anxiety level went up, down, or stayed the same.

List any places in your body that you noticed tension. Circle those where you have noticed tension at previous times when you have been anxious. Know that you can pay attention to those places and make an effort to consciously relax them when they become tense.

Tell what it was like to have your body completely relaxed.
