

# Relaxation and Stress Reduction Techniques (Progressive Muscle Relaxation) Counselling Service Tip Sheet



There are many physical, biological and psychological benefits to be gained from using relaxation techniques. These benefits have been widely documented, with immediate effects including (to name just a mere few) lowered heart rate, blood pressure and cortisol levels. In the longer term, relaxation practice can assist you to sleep better and to strengthen your immune system, making you less susceptible to sickness and disease. Pain can also be better controlled with regular specialised relaxation practise. On the psychological side, relaxation can increase your sense of general well-being and improve your capacity to think clearly,

focus and sustain your attention, manage stress, regulate emotions and increase awareness – particularly good news for students!

The instructions below will guide you through the [Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#) technique. It can be particularly helpful to record these instructions onto an audio device (e.g. MP3 player/voice recorder) so that you can work through the activity without reading.

We are going to tense and relax a total of 16 muscle groups in the body in succession. The idea is not to tense the muscle groups too hard that you cause strain. On each

group you will tense the muscles for about 7 seconds, concentrating on what is happening there. It might be helpful to imagine a picture of that muscle group being tense as you do this. When you release the tension do so abruptly if you can, since this will create a more sudden feeling of limpness and relaxation.

After each muscle group is released of its tension sit with the limp feeling for a further 15 seconds before moving on. If you have any medical complaint with a muscle group, such as a history of back injury or pain, just skip that task or lie quietly for a few seconds before moving on.

1. Lie comfortably on the floor, somewhere that is quiet, safe and free from distraction.
2. Clench your fists. Hold this for a slow count to 7 and release it suddenly. Feel the tension flow slowly away as you do this. Sit for a few seconds with this release.
3. Next, tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up towards your shoulders like you are “making a muscle” with both arms. Hold it there for 7 seconds... and release.
4. Next, tighten your triceps, which are the muscles on the opposite side of your biceps, by extending your arms straight out. Hold for 7 seconds... and release.
5. Next, tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows up as far as you can. Hold for 7 seconds... and release.
6. Next, tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold for 7 seconds... and release, feeling a softening spreading through your eyes.
7. Next, tighten your jaw by opening your mouth as wide as you can so you stretch the muscles around the hinge of your jaw. Hold... and release. Just allow your jaw to hang gently.
8. Now tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pushing the back of your head towards the floor. Try not to be too rough with this because these muscle groups are sensitive. Hold... then release. Make sure that you are tensing the neck muscles and not any other muscles inadvertently. Now take a slow, deep breath in and tune into the weight of your head against the floor.
9. Now tighten your shoulders by raising them up to your ears. Hold... and release. This is where we usually hold a lot of daily tension.
10. Next, tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades together so they try to touch each other. Hold... and release.
11. Now tighten the muscles of your chest by taking another slow, deep breath in... holding... and slowly releasing.
12. Next, tighten the muscles of your stomach by clenching it as hard as you can... hold this... then release, feeling a warm sensation spreading through this area.
13. Now tighten your lower back. If you have had back trouble in the past, just lie quietly through this one. For others, make a “C” shape arch with your back, only as far as is comfortable ... hold... and release.
14. Now tighten the muscles of your backside by pulling in tightly... hold... and release. Feel your hips loosen as you release this one.
15. Next, squeeze the muscles of your thighs together and feel the squeeze all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to squeeze your hips to do this. Hold... and release.
16. Now tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes towards you, flexing carefully to avoid cramps. Hold... then release.
17. Next, tighten your feet by pushing your toes downward in the opposite direction to before. Hold... then release.
18. Now lie quietly, breathing evenly and gently. Mentally scan your body from top to toe for any residual tension and then just take another minute to tense and release any areas that remain especially tight.
19. Lastly, once you've finished your scan, imagine a wave of warm relaxation slowly spreading through your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation process should take you between 20-30 minutes the first time. With practice it can take about 15 minutes. You might wish to record the above script onto a tape to follow along in your early practice sessions. Practicing the above relaxation process once a day will produce a significant reduction in your overall level of anxiety. It will also reduce the frequency and severity of panic attacks.

## References

More information is available from:

- Counselling Tip Sheet: The Benefits of Relaxation

## Acknowledgements

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Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.

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