

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

In this chapter you will learn to:

- ❖ Distinguish between tense and relaxed muscles
- ❖ Progressively relax all the muscles of your body
- ❖ Relax quickly in stressful situations

BACKGROUND

You cannot have the feeling of well being in your body and at the same time experience psychological stress. Progressive Relaxation of your muscles reduce pulse rate, blood pressure, and the startle reflex, as well as reducing perspiration and respiration rates. Deep muscle relaxation when successfully mastered can be used as an anti-anxiety pill.

Edmund Jacobson a Chicago physician published the book Progressive Relaxation in 1929. In it he described his deep muscle relaxation technique which he asserted required no imagination, will power, or suggestion. His technique is based on the premise that the body responds to anxiety provoking thoughts and events with muscle tension. This physiological tension in turn increases the subjective experience of anxiety. Deep muscle relaxation reduces physiological tension and is incompatible with anxiety. The habit of responding with one blocks the habit of responding with the other.

Jacobson's original progressive relaxation procedures might take many months or even years to learn, but Joseph Wolpe (1958) developed a short form for these procedures that included verbal suggestions to relax. This abbreviated form can be mastered in a matter of days or weeks. Wolpe made this streamlined version a part of his systematic desensitization protocol for the treatment of phobias. He found that once they relaxed, clients were more capable of tolerating and responding adaptively to situations they were afraid of.

SYMPTOM RELIEF EFFECTIVENESS

Excellent results have been found with progressive relaxation techniques for the treatment of muscular tension, anxiety, depression fatigue, insomnia, neck and back pain, high blood pressure, mild phobias, and stuttering.

TIME TO MASTER

One to two weeks, employing two different fifteen minute sessions per day.

INSTRUCTIONS

Many people do not know which of their muscles are chronically tense. When you practice progressive relaxation, you focus on the sensations of tension in one muscle group at a time. Then, when you release the tension, you focus on the sensations of relaxation in that same muscle group. You move progressively through your whole body from one muscle group to the next repeating this procedure. Using progressive relaxation techniques you learn to identify particular muscle groups and to distinguish between the sensations of tension and deep relaxation.

Progressive relaxation can be practiced lying down or seated in a chair. Each muscle group is tense from five to seven seconds and then released and relaxed for twenty to thirty seconds. These lengths of time are simply rules of thumb and don't have to be slavishly adhered to. This procedure is repeated at least once. If a particular muscle group is difficult to relax you can practice tensing and releasing it up to five times.

Once the procedure is familiar enough to be remembered keep your eyes closed and focus your attention on just one muscle group at a time. Another option is to purchase a professional recording such as the one listed in the recording section of this chapter.

The instructions for progressive relaxation are divided into two sections. The first part deals with the basic procedure, which you may wish to record and replay while practicing. This will familiarize you with the muscles in your body that are most commonly tense. If you do record these sessions be sure to pause long enough for tensing and relaxing. The second section shortens the procedure by simultaneously tensing and relaxing many muscles at one time, so that deep muscle relaxation can be achieved in a very brief period.

The Three Basic Levels of Tensing

There are three basic levels of tensing that you can use when you practice progressive relaxation. With experience, you can decide which level of tensing is most pleasant and effective for your needs.

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THE THREE BASIC LEVELS OF TENSING

There are three levels of tensing that you can use when you practice progressive relaxation. With experience you can decide which level of tensing is most pleasant and effective for your needs.

1. Active tensing involves tensing a particular muscle group as tightly as you can without hurting yourself, studying the sensations of tension then releasing the tension and studying the sensations of relaxation in that same area. While you are tensing one part of your body, the rest of your body is relatively relaxed. Remember to breathe diaphragmatically (it's easy to forget to breathe this way, especially during the tensing phrase). Active tensing is the level of progressive relaxation described in italics below. By really exaggerating the tension, you are likely to feel where you carry chronic tension, the tense place may actually be sore. For people who have no injuries and who are not extremely tense, active tensing is recommended as the method of choice, at least for the first time you practice progressive relaxation. Some people prefer using this level every time they practice progressive relaxation, because tensing the muscles fatigue muscle fibers and releasing the tension feels very relaxing and good. It's a little like setting down heavy bags you've been holding while standing a long time.
2. Threshold tensing is the same as active tensing except it involves tensing a particular muscle group slightly (just enough so that you notice the tension, it's barely noticeable to the human eye). Threshold tensing should be used for areas of your body that are injured or very tense to avoid pain or injury. Many people prefer to use threshold tensing once they've become familiar with the basic muscle groups through active tensing because threshold tensing takes less effort and feels less invasive. Some people use threshold tensing from the beginning because of health issues or extreme tension.
3. Passive tensing is the same active tensing except that during the tensing phase you simply notice the tension that is present in a particular muscle group. You can use the same basic procedure described below in italics and substitute the words "Notice the tension in your _____" whenever the instructions call for tensing a muscle. If you feel no tension in a

particular muscle, do threshold tensing or simply notice the sensations that are there. You may prefer to use passive tensing on a regular basis once you are familiar with active and threshold tensing. You will find that a round of progressive relaxation using passive tension, following a round of either active or threshold tensing, can deepen your state of relaxation.

VERBAL SUGGESTIONS

As you are releasing tension, you may also find it helpful to say to yourself one or more of the following expressions

Let go of the tension

Calm and rested

Relax and smooth out the muscles

Let the tension dissolve away

Let go more and more

Deeper and deeper

Basic Procedure

Get into a comfortable position in a quiet room where you won't be disturbed. You may want to loosen your clothing and remove your shoes. Begin to relax as you take a few slow deep breathes... now as you let the rest of your body relax, clench your fists and bend them at the wrist...tighter and tighter...feel the tension in your fists and forearms ... Now relax.... feel the looseness in your hands and forearms.... notice the contrast with the tension... (if you have time, repeat this, and all the succeeding procedures at least one more time). Now bend your elbows and tense your biceps...Tense them as hard as you can and observe the feeling of tautness....let our hands drop down and relax...Feel the difference... turn your attention to your forehead and wrinkle your forehead as tight as you can... Feel the tension in your forehead and scalp. Now relax and smooth it out. Imagine your entire forehead and scalp becoming smooth and at rest... Now frown and notice the strain spreading throughout your forehead...Let go. Allow your brow to become smooth again... Squeeze your eyes closed... tighter.... Relax your eyes let them remain closed gently and comfortably... now open your mouth wide and feel the tension in your jaw.... Relax your jaw... When your jaw is relaxed, your lips will be slightly parted. Notice the contrast between tension and relaxation.... Now press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Experience the strain in the back of your mouth....Relax...

Press your lips purse them into an "O" ...Relax your lips.... Feel the relaxation in your forehead, scalp, eyes, jaw, tongue and lips... Let go more and more....

Now roll your head slowly around your neck, feeling the point of tension shifting as your head moves... and then slowly roll your head the other way. Relax, allowing your head to return to a comfortable upright position... Now shrug your shoulders, bring your shoulders up towards your ears...hold it...drop your shoulders back down and feel the relaxation spreading through your neck, throat, and shoulders, pure relaxation, deeper and deeper....

Now breathe in and fill your lungs completely. Hold your breath. Experience the tension... now exhale and let your chest become loose....Continue relaxing letting your breath come freely and gently....Notice the tension draining out of your muscles with each exhalation...Next tighten your stomach and hold. Feel the tension...Relax...Now place your hand on your stomach. Breathe deeply into your stomach pushing your hand up. Hold...and relax. Feel the sensation of relaxation as the air rushes out...Now arch your back without straining. Keep the rest of your body as relaxed as possible. Focus on the tension in your lower back....Now relax let the tension dissolve away.

Tighten your buttocks and thighs...Relax and feel the difference...now straighten and tense your legs and curl your toes downward. Experience the tension....Relax....Straighten and tense your legs and bend your toes towards your face. Relax

Feel the comfort and the warmth and heaviness of deep relaxation throughout your entire body as you continue to breathe slowly and deeply..... you can relax even more as you move through your body, letting go of the last bit of tension in your body. Relax your feet...relax your ankles...relax your calves relax your shins, relax your knees....relax your thighs....relax your buttocks....Let the relaxation spread to your stomach ...you're your lower back... to your chest.....let go more and more. Feel the relaxation deepening in your shoulders in your arms, and in your hands, deeper and deeper. Notice the feeling of looseness and relaxation in your neck....your jaw....your face....and your scalp....Continue to breath slowly and deeply. Your entire body is comfortably loose and relaxed, calm and rested.

Shorthand Procedure

Once you have mastered the basic procedure use the following procedure to relax your muscles quickly. In this procedure, whole muscle groups are simultaneously tensed and then relaxed. As before, repeat each procedure at least once, tensing each muscle group from five to seven seconds and then relaxing from fifteen to thirty seconds. Remember to notice the contrast between the sensations of tension and relaxation.

1. Curl both fists, tightening biceps and forearms (Charles Atlas pose). Relax
2. Roll your head around your neck clockwise in a complete circle, then reverse. Relax.
3. Wrinkle up the muscles of your face like a walnut; forehead wrinkled, eyes squinted, mouth opened, and shoulders hunched. Relax
4. Arch your shoulders back as you take a deep breathe into your chest. Hold . Relax. Take a deep breath, pushing out your stomach. Hold. Relax.
5. Straighten your legs and point your toes back tow3ards your face, tightening your shins. Hold. Relax Straighten your legs and curl your toes, simultaneously tightening your claves, thighs buttocks. Relax

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. If you make a recording of the basic procedure to facilitate your relaxation program, remember to space each procedure so that enough time is allocated to experience the tension and relaxation before going on to the next muscle or muscle group.
2. As with all relaxation techniques, regular practice of progressive relaxation will enhance the speed and the depth of your relaxation.
3. Be cautious when tensing your neck and back, because excessive tightening can result in muscle or spinal damage. Also, over tightening your toes or feet can result in muscle cramping.
4. People new to this technique sometimes make the error of relaxing tension gradually. This slow motion release of tension may look relaxed but it actually requires sustained tension. When you release the tension in a particular muscle, let it go instantly let your muscle suddenly become limp.

5. Although initially you will learn progressive relaxation in a quiet place, eventually you will be able to use at least a shortened version of it anytime during the day when you notice you are tense.

FURTHER READING

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