

Progressive Relaxation

What Is Progressive Relaxation?

Progressive relaxation (PR) is a technique that focuses on one part of your body at a time, with the goal of relaxing that part. However, this is done *without* creating muscular tension as is used in progressive muscle relaxation. This technique can be especially beneficial to those who find the contraction of muscles difficult, unpleasant or not medically advised. Generally, PR moves through the body in a pattern, such as from the top of the head down to the feet or vice versa.

The Distractible Mind

It is important to remind ourselves that we have not failed in using relaxation techniques if our minds become distracted. Distractibility, sometimes referred to as “the monkey mind,” is part of the human condition. An attitude of non-judgment about this common problem and then a gentle refocusing back on the relaxation activity is generally most helpful. Trying “too hard” to relax can also be an impediment to relaxation, so an attitude of just “letting go” or “letting be” is beneficial.

Using Progressive Relaxation

Nearly anyone can learn and use this simple relaxation technique. Some individuals might prefer to go through the exercise on their own, while others prefer to be guided or to use recordings.

Uses

Progressive relaxation can be used similarly to any other relaxation technique. It can easily be used to assist with sleep, stress management, anxiety or general relaxation. It is frequently used to initiate imagery or hypnosis. For more information, refer to “[Guided Imagery](#)” and “[Clinical Hypnosis](#).”

Set up

Ideally, initial use of this and any other relaxation technique would be in a quiet setting, such as in bed before sleep. However, with practice and development of focused attention, this technique could be used in its brief or long form in any type of setting where relaxation would be of benefit.

Adaptations

Everyone is different and this technique specifically can be modified to match the needs or preferences of the individual using it. Some variations include adding guided imagery (such as imagining gentle waves of relaxation moving through the body) or body sensations (such as warmth or heaviness).

Recordings

There are recordings of relaxations available to buy or to download from the internet. Some individuals also like to make their own recordings, using their own voices. The script below could be used for this purpose.

Brief versions

This technique can be adapted for shorter periods of time by focusing solely on the highlighted text below. It can be adapted to whatever time frame is available. Briefer relaxations can be more effective after one has practiced with longer relaxations.

Progressive Relaxation Exercise

To complete this exercise and review all of the instructions, allow at least 10–12 minutes. It is advised to go at a slow pace from one body area to another, allowing several relaxing breaths in between. Highlighted text alone can be used for a briefer experience.

- **Find a comfortable position and a quiet place to relax.** It is beneficial if you can avoid interruptions during this time, such as phone calls or text messages.
- **Let your breath become slower and deeper.** Take your time to breathe in slow and allow for a nice long exhale.
- **When you are ready, you can close your eyes** or let your gaze be soft.
- **Starting with the very top of your head, think about, imagine, or feel your scalp beginning to relax.** Perhaps growing long and loose.
- Now, **move your awareness to your forehead**, and let that same sense, feeling, image, or thought flow into your forehead.
- **Focus on the entire area around the eyes.** Relax the area in your own way. Relax the eyelids, the temples, and even behind the eyes.
- Taking your time, **move to the large muscles of the jaw.** Let them relax, growing long and loose.
- **Progress to the mouth and inside the mouth.** Imagine, feel, or think about these areas relaxing. Include the tongue, lips, and the roof of the mouth.
- Flow your awareness to the **entire face and head** so that the whole area is relaxing.
- **The muscles of the neck** can begin to relax too, along with the head and face. Think about, imagine, or sense that all of these muscles are growing longer and looser.
- **Let the shoulders relax now**, just as if you are releasing all the burdens you have been carrying on your shoulders. Let them drop down further.
- **Bring your awareness now to the area of your chest** and your heart. Allow relaxation, in your own way, to flow through this part of your body.
- **Focus on the abdomen** and any contraction there. Let it relax, allowing deeper, more relaxed breathing.
- **Flow your focus to the large area of the back.** Starting with the very top of the spine near the base of the skull, image relaxing slowly down the spine, one vertebra at a time.
- **Continue to allow this relaxation to spread to:**
 - The hips
 - The buttocks



- The entire pelvis.
- Now let the relaxation spread down into the **upper legs**.
- **Move the relaxation to the knees.**
- **Flow into the lower part of the legs.** Include shins and calves.
- **The feet can relax, along with the rest of the body.**
- You can imagine, feel, or sense any remaining tension, gently draining out of your body. Once you've finished, stretch, look around and remain still for another minute or two to enjoy the relaxation.

Author(s)

“Progressive Relaxation” was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written by Shilagh A. Mirgain, PhD and by Janice Singles, PsyD (2016).