

Preparing for Relaxation

In order to create an optimal relaxation experience, the following tips are recommended:

- Use a distraction free room – ensure that the phone is turned off and that others in your environment are aware and respectful of your space to relax
- Ensure a comfortable room temperature or have a blanket available if the room is on the cool side
- Use a place that is quiet or has a constant background noise
- Ensure ample space
- Create dim lighting
- Wear loose comfortable clothing
- Remove shoes, glasses, contact lenses
- Urinate prior to the session
- Ensure that you take on a seated or lying position that is comfortable – uncrossed limbs, hands in lap or at one's side, head/neck supported

The Relaxation Response

While in a relaxed state, signs of relaxation can include the following:

- Jaw slightly open, not clenched
- Smooth forehead
- Soft facial and neck muscles
- Eyelids rested
- More frequent swallowing, increased salivation
- Slower heart rate, heart beats feel softer (not pounding)
- Slower pulse
- Abdominal/Diaphragmatic breathing
- Slower rhythm of breathing
- Pink palms – blood flow to hands and feet
- Legs slightly separate (if sitting)
- Outward pointing toes (if lying on back)
- Shoulders drop
- Sensation of warmth and heaviness in extremities
- Sensation of lightness, sensation of floating on a cloud or melting into surface
- Altered time perception, blank out / drift away not knowing where mind went for a few seconds
- Increased / decreased awareness of hunger or thirst
- Increased awareness of gas in intestines
- Increased awareness of bladder fullness

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (Active Form)

This technique is taken from a program designed by Dr. Edmond Jacobson and is named “progressive muscle relaxation”.

Many people can feel relaxed the first time they use this technique. Since relaxation is something that can be learned and improved upon, you may find that relaxation states will occur more easily as you repeat and practice this technique.

A PMR exercise can take about 15 to 20 minutes. You have several options as you move through this exercise. You can relax your body by focusing on one muscle group at a time. You can start at one end of your body and work to the other end. As you do it, you have the choice of either sitting in a chair, or lying down on a comfortable surface.

Tips for PMR

In relaxing the muscles, keep the following in mind:

- ✓ Inhale as you prepare to tense a muscle group.
- ✓ Tense the muscle (tightly but not to the extent that you are creating pain or spasms). Hold the tension (about 8-10 seconds) and notice the sensation of tension. Relax and let the tension go. Exhale as you release the tension. Notice the relaxation. Notice the difference between the sensations of tension and relaxation.
- ✓ Try to contract only the area that you are focusing upon.
- ✓ If you have any muscles that are vulnerable – if you have an injury, weakness, proneness to spasms, or any problem associated with any muscle group - you have the option of not practicing the PMR exercise targeted to that group, or you can be gentler in the creation of tension. Be careful not to strain too much. If you don't physically practice the tension of a muscle group, you can imagine tension in the area.
- ✓ During the exercise, remember to engage in diaphragmatic breathing – inhaling and exhaling fully and completely.

Target Muscle Groups

Tense & relax the different parts of the body. I have included some suggestions for creating tension in each of the muscle groups. Try moving through the muscle groups in the order listed. You have the choice of starting with your feet or with your head.

- *For Feet & Legs:*
Curl your toes.
Point toes away from your face.
Bend your feet backwards as if your toes are moving to point towards your head. Pretend that you have a string attached to your big toe and you are pulling the string towards you.
Press your feet/heels into the surface that they are resting upon.
- *Hips & Buttocks:*
Clench your buttocks tightly as if you are lifting yourself up in your chair.
- *Abdomen:*
Tighten up your stomach muscles to make it very hard. Pull your stomach in as though you are trying to touch it to your spine.
Push your stomach out as far as you can.
- *Chest:*
Take a deep breath that totally fills your lungs and hold it. Notice the tension and pressure in your chest.
- *Upper Back:*
Arch your back as if you are sticking out your chest and stomach.
- *Hands:*
Make fists; Spread fingers apart & bend your hands toward you at the wrist.
- *Arms:*
Contract biceps by creating fists, bending your elbows and move fists towards your shoulders.
Stretch your arms straight out at right angles to your body. Make fists with your hands.
If you are sitting in a chair with arms, press your elbows and hands into the arms.
- *Shoulders:*
Press your shoulder blades back into the chair as if you wish to touch them together.
Bring your shoulder blades up over the top of your chest as if you wish for your shoulders to touch over the top of your chest.
Raise your shoulders up as if to touch your ears.
- *Neck:*
Bend your head forward as if you are trying to touch your chin to your chest.
Feel the pull at the back of the neck and tension at the front of your neck.
- *Jaw and Lips:*
Gradually clench your teeth and simultaneously pull the corners of your mouth back into a grimace.
Press your lips together.
Open your mouth as wide as you can.
- *Eyes:*
Keeping your eyes closed, squint them as if you were in a dust storm.
- *Forehead:*
Keeping your eyes closed gradually raise your eyebrows up. Wrinkle up your forehead

When you have moved through all parts of your body, rest quietly in this comfortable state for 2-5 minutes. Then let the muscles in your eyelids lighten up, become ready to open your eyes, and aware of surroundings in the the room. Notice the ground beneath your feet, wiggle fingers and toes. Allow your eyes to open and move forward in your day.

Sometimes people experience difficulties keeping their minds from wandering the first few times they try this process. There is no need to feel discouraged. It is a natural process and criticizing yourself may increase your tension. Remember that relaxation is a skill and to improve any skill, ***practice is the key***. With practice and time, you will learn to identify signs and signals of stress/tension in your body.