

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a calming exercise that helps your body release stress. Many people tense their muscles without realizing it. PMR teaches you to notice tension and gently let it go by tensing and relaxing muscle groups one at a time.

Benefits of PMR

- Calms your mind
- Relaxes tight or tired muscles
- Reduces stress
- Improves sleep

PMR basics

1. **Get comfortable:** Find a quiet place to sit or lie down for 10–15 minutes.
2. **Work one muscle group at a time:** Start with your feet and work your way up to your head and face.
3. **Notice the difference:** Pay close attention to how your muscles feel when they are tense vs. relaxed. This is the most important part.

Practicing PMR

Tighten and hold each muscle group for five seconds, then relax for 10–15 seconds. Move through the areas of your body one at a time. For example, complete the exercises on your left leg and then move over to your right leg. Repeat the cycle with your arms, then move to your torso and up through your shoulders and face until you've tensed and relaxed your whole body.

Tighten and relax different muscle groups:

- **Feet:** Curl your toes downward and hold.
- **Calves:** Pull your toes up toward your face, feeling the stretch in your calves.
- **Thighs:** Squeeze and hold your leg muscles.
- **Hands:** Make a tight fist and hold.
- **Upper arms:** Bend your arm at the elbow and tighten your elbow and bicep.
- **Buttocks:** Squeeze your glutes.
- **Stomach:** Tighten your abdominal muscles.
- **Chest:** Take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds.
- **Shoulders:** Raise your shoulders toward your ears.
- **Mouth/jaw:** Open your mouth as wide as is comfortable and stretch your jaw like a yawn.
- **Eyes:** Squeeze your eyes shut and hold.
- **Forehead:** Raise your eyebrows as high as you can and hold.

Helpful tips

- You should feel a gentle, firm squeeze, not pain.
- Your muscles may shake, which is okay.
- Keep breathing slowly throughout the exercise.
- If a movement causes pain, skip that muscle group.

Guided PMR options

There are many free recordings of guided PMR exercises available online. Try searching: “Progressive Muscle Relaxation” on YouTube, in a podcast app, or in your phone’s app store.

For more mental health educational resources, visit depressioncenter.org/toolkit.

This document provides general educational information developed by the Eisenberg Family Depression Center. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Please consult your health care provider if you have questions about your health or treatment options.