

Stressed muscles are tense muscles, resulting in pain, fidgetiness, taut facial expressions, and headaches.⁶ Relaxation techniques as non-pharmacological interventions are growing in use within healthcare settings.⁴ PMR is adapted from 1905 research focusing on developing the ability to control the tension levels of the musculature, Edmond Jacobson sought to subconsciously monitor and release unwanted tension. PMR techniques blunt sympathetic arousal via repetitive release of muscle tension combined with slowing of respirations. The resulting tension–release cycle technique effectively mitigates symptoms in anxiety and depression⁵ and stabilizes the natural neurochemical stress response,¹ reducing heart rate, blood pressure, gastrointestinal nervous symptoms, and tension headaches. PMR has a strong record of clinical efficacy and a standard strategy for somatic states.⁷ Preparing to practice. Find a quiet space, alone, avoiding background music. When possible, wear loose clothing and remove shoes. Prepare to practice before eating or drinking excessively and avoid intoxicants or stimulants. Start either seating in a comfortable chair, or lying down if using for insomnia (plan on falling asleep if reclining).

Tension–Relaxation Training

Step One: Focus your mind on the intended muscle group (practice with the right or left hand). Inhale. Squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 8 seconds, making a tight fist with your hand. Focus on the hand only, and preventing the arm and shoulder from tightening with it. It takes practice to develop fine muscle discernment- this is part of the PMR learning process for beginners. Relax, realizing no body part is an isolated unit, in creating tension there will still be small tension occurring in the attached muscles.

Step Two: Tighten more. You will feel shaking. This is correct and may bring discomfort. Breathe. Proceed gradually and deliberately for eight seconds if you can. Stop for intense pain.

Step Three: Exhaling quickly, let go of the tension. Imagine the tightness and pain flowing out of the muscles and leaving with your breath. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp. Focus intensely on, and notice the subtle differences between, the feelings of tension and relaxation.

Step Four: Stay in relaxation mode for 15 seconds then repeat the tension-relaxation cycle.

Step Five: After completing a session, relax with eyes closed for several seconds. Count back from 5 to 1 with deep slow breathing. Say aloud, “Eyes open. Supremely calm. Fully alert.” Move to standing slowly to avoid orthostatic hypotension.

Full PMR

When you are comfortable with the process, follow the list of muscle groups in the chart completing the sequence in its entirety. If sleep overtakes you mid-session this is normal. Applaud the effort.

You will be working with most of the major muscle groups in a systematic progression from your feet upwards. Begin each with your dominant side.

Right foot
Right lower leg and foot
Entire right leg
Left foot
Left lower leg and foot
Entire left leg
Right hand
Right forearm and hand
Entire right arm
Left hand
Left forearm and hand
Entire left arm
Abdomen
Chest
Neck and shoulders
Face: jaw, eyes, forehead



Practice twice a day for a week. Spend extra time, if necessary, until you can achieve a deep sense of physical relaxation; then you can move on to the condensed PMR schedule.

Condensed PMR

This format targets summary groups of muscles rather than individual muscle groups, and begins cue-controlled relaxation.

Instead of working with just one specific part of your body at a time, focus on the complete group. In Group 1, for example, focus on both legs and feet together, all at once.

Cue-Controlled Relaxation

Using the tension-relaxation procedure target- summary groups of muscles. Focus on breathing during both tension and relaxation.

1. Inhale slowly as you apply and hold the tension.
2. When you let the tension go and exhale, say a cue word or phrase (Ex: "Relax, Let it go, Stay calm, All things are passing, Trust in God"). This associates the cue word with the state of relaxation. Eventually the cue word produces a relaxed state independently.

Practice Condensed PMR under the same conditions as full. Practicing twice daily for a week often prompts the mind in the ability to practice under other conditions or with distractions.

Condensed PMR Muscle Groups

Lower Limbs
Abdomen and Chest
Arms, Shoulders and
Neck
Face



The Science: PMR reduces cortisol and adrenalin,¹ re-establishing musculature circulation, decreasing heart rate, respiration and oxygen consumption, and relaxing skeletal muscle activity thus facilitating reduction of tension in involuntary muscles. Alpha brain waves and endogenous opioids (enkephalins) increase after practice² correlating with reports of decreased frequency of migraines, neck, and back pain.⁶ Immune Benefit: Data suggest PMR has an immunoenhancement effect⁷ inducing enkaphalins, sIgA concentration and secretion, and antibacterial peptides within the gut microbiome, reducing negative mood states. The resulting sense of improved well-being termed, 'remembered wellness' (Benson, 1996) exhibits effects similar to feelings of maternal attachment. Insight and behavior modification or physical interventions such as PMR, re-engages emotional control mechanisms.

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