

Lesson 3

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Introduction

Progressive Muscle Relaxation, or PMR as it's also known, is a technique used to reduce anxiety. By alternately tensing and relaxing your muscle groups you effectively focus your mind and relax your body, helping you to gain control.

If you've ever experienced a tension headache, you'll know that your eyes, face, and head also bear the burden of tension when you're feeling anxious.

Practising PMR teaches you how to be more mindful of the difference between tense and relaxed muscles. You will learn how to consciously relax your body during times of anxiety, which not only makes you feel physically better but is a very practical way of alleviating your anxiety.

One note of caution before we start - if you have an injury or suffer from a medical condition that affects your muscles or physical health, you may want to check with a doctor before you start.

The goal is to gain control over the anxiety response in your body. It's also an effective means of helping yourself fall asleep once you've mastered the technique.

The science

When you experience anxiety, your muscles tend to tense without you realising it. If you stop and focus on your body, you will realise just how much tension you are holding. We frequently associate shoulder tension with stress and anxiety - and for a good reason! But it's not only your shoulders bearing the weight of the world. Your arms, legs, neck and even hands and feet feel the tension.

Taking a little time each day to focus on muscle tension and relaxation can reduce your anxiety and help you feel calm.

Value

As with all exercises, it can seem like too much effort. Reminding yourself of the benefits of PMR and fitting it into your daily routine can help bring a sense of calm to your life, so it's worth a go, yes?

Exercise

#Step 1 To begin, we'll find a quiet spot that's free from distractions, where we can either lie comfortably on the floor or recline in a chair. We'll remove any glasses or contact lenses and loosen any tight clothing. Let's rest our hands in our lap or wherever feels comfortable.

#Step 2 We'll take a few slow and even breaths right down into our bellies, just as we did in lesson one.

#Step 3 Now, let's focus our attention on each part of our body:

1. Starting with our foreheads. Squeezing the muscles as if frowning and holding for a few seconds. Feeling the muscles become tighter and tighter. Releasing them slowly, letting the tension we've created ebb away. Let's notice the difference in how our faces and muscles feel and the relaxing sensation of releasing all that tension. Continuing to release our forehead muscles until they feel completely relaxed while breathing slowly and evenly.
2. Next, focusing on the jaw. Tensing our jaw muscles and holding for a few seconds. Slowly releasing the tension. Paying attention to the sense of relaxation and continuing to take slow and even breaths.
3. Now, shifting our focus to the neck and shoulders. Raising our shoulders up towards our ears to increase the tension in our necks, and holding. Gradually releasing for 30 seconds, and paying attention to the sensation as the tension melts away.
4. Next, focusing on our arms and hands. Slowly making a fist with both hands and pulling our fists into our chest to increase the tension in our arms. Holding...then slowly releasing the tension, and noticing the difference as we relax.
5. Shifting our attention to our buttocks. Slowly increasing the tension by clenching, and holding. Slowly releasing the tension while continuing to take slow and even breaths.
6. Now let's consider our legs, slowly increasing the tension in them by tensing our thighs and calves. Squeezing our muscles as hard as we can before gently releasing that tension.
7. Finally, focusing on our feet. Slowly increasing the tension in them by clenching our toes. Tightening our muscles as much as we can, and then releasing slowly.

Let's take a moment to consider how we feel now and enjoy the relaxed sensation throughout our whole body, whilst continuing to take slow and even breaths.

What have we learnt?

Learning PMR is another vital piece of the puzzle when it comes to controlling your anxiety and becoming calmer.

It's easy to miss muscle tension until it really hurts, so becoming more aware of it by doing PMR regularly, helps.

As mind and body are very much linked, a relaxed and tension-free body positively affects your mind.

It's not just PMR that can help you move from a life of anxiety to one of calm. There are more tools at your disposal. Keep an eye on your inbox for the next lesson on our Anxious to Calm course and you'll be well on the way to finding your zen and a calmer, less anxious life.

What next?

If you're having problems 'switching off' at the end of a stressful day, the next lesson focuses on just that. We will introduce you to a technique that enables the mind to calm quickly and effectively using a very pleasant approach.