

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Relaxation is more than unwinding in front of the TV or in the bathtub. When dealing with anxiety or stress it is the regular, daily practice of deep relaxation that makes a difference.

Deep relaxation refers to a distinct physiological state that is the opposite of how your body reacts under stress. This is referred to as *the relaxation response*. Your body is physically unable to have a stress response and a relaxation response at the same time.

Regular practice of deep relaxation can produce, over time, a generalization of relaxation to the rest of your life. That is, after several weeks of practicing deep relaxation daily, you will tend to feel more relaxed all the time.

One way to achieve deep relaxation is through progressive muscle relaxation (PMR). PMR is a technique where each muscle group is systematically relaxed by tensing and then releasing it.

Benefits

There are many benefits associated with deep relaxation:

- Reduction of general anxiety
- Preventing stress from becoming cumulative. Unabated stress tends to build over time. Entering into the quiet of relaxation once a day gives your body the opportunity to recover from the effects of stress.
- Increased energy and productivity
- Improved concentration and memory. Regular practice tends to increase your ability to focus and keeps your mind from “racing”
- Reduction of insomnia and fatigue. Learning to relax leads to sleep that is deeper and sounder
- Prevention and/or reduction of some physical complaints: migraines, headaches, ulcers
- Increased availability of feelings. Muscle tension is one of the chief impediments to an awareness of your feelings.

** Sometimes relaxing can cause trauma survivors anxiety. As trauma survivors may feel the need to be vigilant at all times, relaxing can feel like letting one’s guard down. If you feel yourself become more anxious instead of relaxed then take care of yourself. Do what you need to do. Maybe it would work better for you to do a grounding exercise or just listen to music. Relaxing is not meant to cause you anxiety.

Guidelines

To make the most of progressive muscle relaxation the following guidelines are helpful:

- Assume a comfortable position that supports your whole body
- Practice at least 20 minutes a day
- Find a quiet location without distractions
- Practice at regular times
- Practice on an empty stomach
- Loosen any tight garments
- Make a decision to not worry about anything
- Maintain your focus on your muscles. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you are working on
- Be compassionate with yourself. You don't have to remember everything exactly right. You don't have to have perfect concentration.
- Adopt a "let it happen" attitude and be free of any worry about how well you are performing the technique. Let go. Do not *Try* to relax.