

Wellspring: Student Wellness Program Self-Help Stress Management Strategies

Progressive Neuromuscular Relaxation: A stress reduction technique

Ideally, this exercise should take about 15 minutes if it is not rushed. You can shorten the exercise by eliminating specific muscle groups, thereby moving up the body more quickly.

When going through the exercise, you should hold muscle contractions for 4-6 seconds. If you can have someone read it to you, it will be helpful. You can also go through the exercise a few times and then run through the exercise by remembering the steps, or you could record yourself saying the exercise slowly and play it back when you need it.

Setting: Whenever possible lie down.

Initial instructions: You can do this virtually anywhere. You can do it in bed at night if you are having difficulty falling asleep. You can also use it if you are feeling sleepy and want to wake up in order to study. You can do the exercise sitting up in a chair, although it is much easier and more effective to perform while lying down.

You may want to take off your shoes and loosen any clothing or belts that are tight or that may constrict your breathing.

Close your eyes.

Put your hands on your abdomen about 2 inches beneath your navel. This is the area you should concentrate on when you are breathing. Most Westerners tend to breathe shallowly, sometimes almost panting. This kind of shallow breathing activates the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, the branch that controls the flight or fight response. By learning to breathe more deeply and pulling your breath down to your abdomen, you can consciously activate the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system, that branch that the body uses to relax and begin the process of entering sleep.

The exercise will have you contract a specific muscle group and to hold that contraction for about 5-6 seconds. Try to tighten that muscle group as much as you can, but if you begin to cramp, immediately relax that area. You will alternatively contract and relax muscles moving from the feet up the body all the way to the head. Throughout the exercise, think about your breathing. Breathe regularly, deeply, and in a relaxed fashion.

Specific Relaxation Instructions: Now that you have focused on the area of your abdomen that you should breathe from, lay your hands at your sides. Take three deep breaths and blow each one out very slowly.

Curl your toes as if you were digging them in the sand. Feel the whole underside of your foot tightening up. Curl them tighter, tighter... now relax. Think of the stress in your body as a fluid.

Allow that fluid to flow out of the tips of your toes. Wiggle your toes a little and feel the tension departing.

Point your toes away from your body and feel your calves contracting. Feel the tightness in your calves, your ankles, and your feet. Feel your whole body almost shaking with the tension. Now relax, let the tension flow down your calves, past your ankles, out through your toes.

Continue to breathe regularly and deeply.

Now point your toes toward your head. Feel your calves stretch and the tension in the muscles around your shins. Tighten, tighten... now relax and allow all of your leg beneath your knee to feel warm, supple, and relaxed.

Clench your thigh muscles and feel the tension around your knees increase. Feel your thighs shake with the tension. Continue to breathe deeply. And relax allowing the blood to flow freely through your muscles.

Tighten your buttocks muscles so that you feel yourself lifting up off the ground. These are muscles we sit on all day in class, but do little for in the way of rest and relaxation. Now relax your muscles slowly and allow your body to lower back down to the ground.

Contract the muscles of your pelvis. These are the muscles you would use to stop the flow if you were urinating. Feel the tension and discomfort around your pelvis and genitals. Now relax slowly allowing the blood to flow freely. Feel the tension leave your body.

Take a couple of deep, relaxing breaths.

Suck in your abdominal muscles as if you were trying to bring your navel to your spine. Even with your stomach muscles contracted, continue to breathe as regularly and comfortably as you can. Everyone is concerned with her or his looks all the time and people walk around trying to keep their bellies sucked in. Now relax and in your mind's eye imagine yourself with a nice, relaxed Buddha belly. Allow your abdomen to be positioned wherever is most normal, without trying to suck it in or contract it.

Feel the warmth coursing through your lower trunk and back, through your pelvis and gluts, down your thighs and legs and into your feet. Feel the blood flowing smoothly and regularly through your body as the tension slowly leaves.

Now take a very deep breath, but hold it in. Feel the pressure and tension in your chest as your breath fights to be released. Feel all the muscles between your ribs burning with stress. Slowly exhale. Get rid of the carbon dioxide buildup and take a couple of slow, deep breaths.

Make fists with your hands. Imagine yourself digging your nails into your palms. Feel the tension in your forearms and your entire arms shaking with effort. Relax and allow the tension to flow down your arms, into your palms, out through your fingers. Wiggle your fingers a little and allow the blood to flow and the warmth to spread.

Shrug your shoulders by raising them to your ears. Many Americans are so stressed out they carry their shoulders around their ears all day long without realizing it. Feel the tension around your shoulders, upper back, and neck and consider how unnatural it feels. Now slowly relax, allowing your shoulders to come back to their normal position. During the course of the day, think about how you carry your shoulders and remember that you can consciously relax them. You can control your stress rather than letting your stress control you.

Now press your head down against the floor and feel the tension building in the back of your neck and the base of your skull. Feel the pressure in this area of the head where many people develop chronic tension headaches. Relax your neck, let the tension flow down and out.

Take a couple of deep breaths.

With your eyes closed, raise your eyebrows and imagine furrows forming on your forehead. Allow yourself to experience the unusual sensation around your eyes. Slowly relax and imagine yourself smoothing out the muscles on your forehead so there are no furrows, no lines, just smooth skin.

Now close your eyes as tightly as you can. Feel as if your eyeballs are almost jiggling with effort. Feel the tension around your eyes, in your upper cheeks, even to the tip of your nose. Slowly relax and allow the tension to flow out from around your eyes and cheeks. Feel your face become warm and your skin smooth.

Press your lips together as tightly as you can, feeling the tension build in your cheeks and your jaw. Imagine your lips turning white as the pressure forces the blood out of them. Feel your cheeks vibrating with tension. Slowly relax, let the blood flow back in. Puff up your cheeks a little to get the feeling back.

Continue to breathe deeply and regularly.

With your eyes still closed and using your mind, do a brief assessment of your body, starting from your feet and moving upward. Get a sense of how you feel everywhere. Is any area of your body still tense? If so, in your mind, spend a little time on that area helping it to relax. Move up the body until you feel that every area of your body feels relaxed, warm, and comfortable.

Remember that you can use this exercise any time you want. It is easy and powerful and as relaxed as you feel now, you can feel whenever you want.

Take a couple more deep breaths. When you are ready open your eyes and slowly sit up.