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Mental Health

How to do Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise will help your child learn how to relax when he or she is feeling anxious or stressed. It can also help reduce physical problems such as stomachaches and headaches, as well as improve sleep. The technique involves tensing and then relaxing different muscles in the body. This can help your child learn the difference between being tense and feeling relaxed.

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Helpful Hints:

- Set aside 15 to 20 minutes to complete this exercise.
- Find a place where you and your child can complete this exercise without being disturbed.
- Teens may prefer to do this exercise on their own. Encourage them to find a quiet place to practice.
- When reading the instructions, speak slowly and use a calm and soothing voice. Pause after each instruction to allow your child time to carry it out.

- You can also record the instructions on a tape or CD. This can be helpful for teens who may want to do this on their own.
- For teens, change some of the wording. Use “stomach” instead of “tummy.”
- Make sure your child is not tensing too hard. He or she should feel tightness in the muscles, but not pain. Ask your child to tense each muscle for 5 seconds before relaxing the muscle.

Getting ready

Have your child find a comfortable place to sit or lie down, close his or her eyes, and let the body go loose.

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Instructions

Once your child is sitting comfortably with eyes closed, slowly read the following instructions:

"Take a deep breath in through your nose...hold your breath for a few seconds...and now breathe out...good...take another deep breath through your nose...imagine your tummy is a big balloon filling up with air...hold your breath...now breathe out and imagine that the air in the balloon is slowly escaping...Now I want you to pay attention to your body and how your it feels..."

Let's start with your legs...I want you to stretch out your legs in front of you and point your toes...squeeze the muscles in the top of your legs...now squeeze the muscles in the bottom of your legs...hold it...now relax...let your legs go limp...imagine that your legs are floppy cooked spaghetti noodles...relax all the muscles in your legs...notice how heavy your legs feel...now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out...

Now, make a fist with your left hand and squeeze...imagine that you are holding an orange and you are squeezing all the juice out of the orange...feel the tightness in your hand and arm...hold it tight...and now relax your hand...notice how your muscles feel when they are relaxed...now make a fist with your right hand and squeeze tight...imagine that you are holding a lemon and squeeze all the juice out...feel the tightness in your hand and arm...hold it...and now relax your hand...enjoy feeling relaxed...now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out...

Let's focus on your arms...stretch your arms out in front of you like you are reaching out to something...keep stretching...hold it...and now relax...let your arms drop to your sides...imagine your arms are cooked spaghetti noodles that are dangling at your sides...notice how relaxed your arms feel...relax your arms...now stretch your arms up above your head...try to reach for the clouds with your finger tips...hold...keep reaching above your head...now let your arms drop to your sides...relax your arms...let your arms go very floppy...notice how calm you feel...now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out...

Let's move to your shoulder...pull your shoulders up to your ears...hold...keep holding...now relax...notice how relaxed you feel...now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out...

Now, pull in your tummy muscles...imagine that an elephant has just stepped on your tummy...suck in all the muscles in your tummy...hold it...good...now relax...let your stomach out...relax all the muscles in your tummy...notice how your muscles feel when you relax them...now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out...

Finally, wrinkle up your faces as much as you can...wrinkle your nose...mouth...eyes...forehead...cheeks...and push your lips together...Notice how tight the muscles in your face feel...hold it...good...now relax...let all the muscles in your face go limp...notice how relaxed you feel...now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out...

Now relax your whole body...imagine you're a rag doll and try and relax all the muscles in your body. Notice how good you feel...so relaxed...so calm...now take a deep breath and hold it...and breathe out...you've done very well! When you are ready, you can slowly open your eyes."

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Quick Tense & Relax!

- After your child has had some time to practice the full version of the muscle relaxation exercise, introduce the *quick tense and relax* strategy.
- In this approach, your child learns how to tense all the muscle groups (for 5 seconds) and then to relax all the muscles in his or her body at **one time**.
- Your child can do this by taking a big breath, lifting up the shoulders, pushing out the chest and wrinkling up the

face. Then, silently saying the word “relax” and letting the whole body go limp like a rag doll. Over time, your child can start to practice this strategy in more stressful situations (for example, in the playground or while in the car).

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Quick Relax!

- Once your child has learned to tense and relax the whole body, the next step is to practice relaxing without tensing so that your child can easily use this strategy in a wide range of situations.
- Ask your child to take a deep breath, then slowly let out the breath while silently saying the word “relax” and letting the whole body go limp like a rag doll. If the child wishes, he or she can go through several breaths, each time letting the body become looser and more relaxed after each breath.
- The goal is to help your child develop a quick strategy to help him or her relax in any situation.

Helpful Hints:

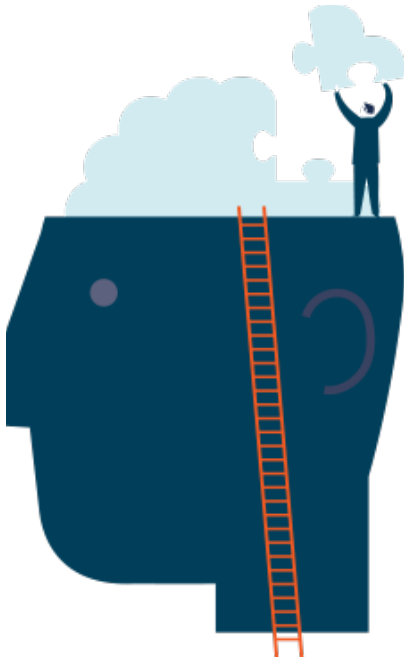
- **Practice!** When your child is first learning these strategies, encourage him or her practice
- **Do it together!** It can also be helpful to do the exercise along with your child or have the whole family participate. Make it a family project! However, some teens may prefer to do it on their own, so you might want to ask how much help they want.

- **Break it up!** If your child is very young, break up the exercises into two parts and take a break in between.
- **When to practice?** It can be helpful to practice the full version of the muscle relaxation exercise in the evening before your child goes to bed. Try the quick tense and relax or quick relax exercise at different times during the day.
- **Records!** Have your child record his or her practice sessions. For younger children, make up a poster and give your child a star every time he or she practices. For teens, encourage them to note practice times in their day planner or on a calendar, and to “check it off” once they do it.
- **Coping Card!** Encourage younger children to include muscle relaxation on their coping card.
- **Praise!** Give your child lots of praise for completing this exercise! It can be difficult to learn to relax. Let your child know that it takes time and practice, just like learning any new skill.

About the author



Anxiety Canada promotes awareness of anxiety disorders and increases access to proven resources. Visit www.anxietycanada.com.



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