

Paired Muscle Relaxation, Step by Step

If you have decided to practice **paired muscle relaxation**, it can be very helpful to practice relaxing each of your muscles first.

When you are starting, practice in a quiet place to reduce distractions, and make sure that you have enough time. As you improve with practice, you will want to practice in many different kinds of places, so that you can relax effectively when you most need to.

Remember that effectiveness improves with practice. If judgments arise, observe them, let them go, and return to your practice. If you become anxious, try focusing on breathing *in* to the count of 5 and *out* to the count of 7 (or the counts you have already determined for paced breathing), breathing all the while into your belly until you can return to relaxation exercises.

Now that you are ready to begin . . .

1. Get your body into a comfortable position in which you can relax. Loosen tight clothing. Lie or sit down, with all body parts uncrossed and no body part supporting any others.
2. For each area of the body listed below, gather tension by tightening muscles. Focus on the sensation of tightness in and around that area. Hold the tension as you inhale for 5–6 seconds, then release and breathe out.
3. As you release, say in your mind very slowly the word “Relax.”
4. Observe the changes in sensations as you relax for 10–15 seconds then move on to the next muscle.

Start first with each of the 16 muscle groups.

Once you can do that, practice with medium groups of muscles and then large groups.

Once you are good at that, practice tensing your entire body at once.

When you tense your entire body, you are like a robot—stiff, nothing moving.

When you relax your entire body, you are like a rag doll—all muscles drooping down.

Once you can relax all your muscles, practice three or four times a day until you can routinely relax your entire body rapidly.

By practicing pairing exhaling and the word “Relax” with relaxing your muscles, you will eventually be able to relax just by letting go and saying the word “Relax.”

Large
Medium
Small

1. Hands and wrists: Make fists with both hands and pull fists up on the wrists.
2. Lower and upper arms: Make fists and bend both arms up to touch your shoulders.
3. Shoulders: Pull both shoulders up to your ears.
4. Forehead: Pull eyebrows close together, wrinkling forehead.
5. Eyes: Shut eyes tightly.
6. Nose and upper cheeks: Scrunch up nose; bring upper lips and cheeks up toward eyes.
7. Lips and lower face: Press lips together; bring edges of lips back toward ears.
8. Tongue and mouth: Teeth together; tongue pushing on upper mouth.
9. Neck: Push head back into chair, floor, or bed, or push chin down to chest.
10. Chest: Take deep breath and hold it.
11. Back: Arch back, bringing shoulder blades together.
12. Stomach: Hold stomach in tightly.
13. Buttocks: Squeeze buttocks together.
14. Upper legs and thighs: Legs out; tense thighs.
15. Calves: Legs out; point toes down.
16. Ankles: Legs out; point toes together, heels out, toes curled under.

Remember, paired relaxation is a skill. It takes time to develop. With practice, you will notice the benefits.

Note. Adapted from Smith, R. E. (1980). Development of an integrated coping response through cognitive–affective stress management training. In I. G. Sarason & C. D. Spielberger (Eds.), *Stress and anxiety* (Vol. 7, pp. 265–280). Washington, DC: Hemisphere. Copyright 1980 by Hemisphere Publishing Corporation. Adapted by permission.

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