

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

an Antidote for Stress

Stress can occur suddenly or build up over time. However it happens, muscles of the body become tensed in a way that adds to the overall feeling of distress. Individuals who store stress in their bodies often talk about feeling tense and also of having aches and pains. Managing stress through a progressive muscle relaxation technique, the tensing and relaxing of various muscle groups, is a proven and practicable way to release unwanted body tension associated with stress.

Prepare

- You can practice this technique while sitting in your chair or lying down.
- Begin by conducting a check of your body and note how tense or relaxed you feel in the following group of muscles: ankles, feet, calves, thighs, pelvic region, back, hands, lower and upper arms, shoulders, neck, and head.
- It is helpful to note how tense you feel before practicing the progressive relaxation and to compare this tension level to how you feel after practicing the technique. You can rate your level of tension on a scale from 1 to 10. The lower the score, the more relaxed you feel, the higher the score, the more tense you feel.

The Technique

- Step 1** Close your eyes and focus on your toes. Curl your toes in toward your feet and squeeze them tight. Keep squeezing until you feel the tension in your muscles.
- Step 2** Continue to tense, then hold, and release.
- Step 3** Relax your muscles; feel the restful sensation in your toes.
- Step 4** Repeat this procedure, but this time flex your toes up toward the sky.
- Step 5** Once again, flex your toe muscles until they are tight and hold them in that position. Then relax, pause, and feel the restful sensation in your toes.
- Step 6** Repeat this procedure for your feet. First, flex them in toward your body, hold, and release. Then point them out, away from your body, hold, and release.
- Step 7** Follow the same tensing, then holding, then releasing process for your calves, then your thighs, then your buttocks.
- Step 8** Make a fist with your hands and squeeze, then tense your arms, and hold. Notice the feelings of heaviness or warmth. Release and notice the sense of well-being you attain when you release the tension.
- Step 9** Tense your back, neck, and face muscles, one at a time. Hold each position as long as it is comfortable to do so.
- Step 10** Tense all the muscles in your body at once, remembering to tense, hold, and then release. This time you should feel a growing sense of relaxation spreading through your body and notice that you are allowing yourself to completely relax.

Consult a physician when beginning any new stretching and exercise program — particularly if you have any health concerns.

