

Procedures for Relaxation
(taken from *A Time to Learn*, pp. 227-34)

Introduction

A valuable skill for anyone to master and use is how to be physically relaxed. Being able to obtain a relaxed state allows you to concentrate upon the requirements of the task at hand, to achieve a balance between being unmotivated and being overanxious, and thus helps you to do your best.

One of the early advocates of progressive relaxation was Dr. Edmund Jacobson (1938, 1958). Over the years there has been much written about relaxation, particularly by experts in the field of physical education. Psychologists have taught relaxation methods to students who are tense about examinations as well as to people who want to learn to approach a threatening situation more readily or to be relaxed in order to do some task well. Relaxation techniques have also been used by people who suffer from insomnia, as an aid to getting to sleep.

Relaxation is a skill. It can be learned. There have been a number of writers who have detailed step by step procedures for becoming relaxed. Progressive relaxation is by definition gradual. You learn to relax parts of the body separately until you have become totally relaxed. Once you have learned and adopted a method of relaxation, you will probably be able to relax in a relatively short time. You can take advantage of short breaks during the day to relax. Below are steps for learning progressive relaxation adapted from the work of Wolpe & Lazarus (1967, pp.177-80), Jacobson (1958), and Wessal (1979).

Steps in Progressive relaxation

Progressive relaxation is accomplished by systematically and separately tensing each gross-muscle system, holding that tension for several seconds, and then relaxing the muscles you have tensed. If muscles are tensed, they relax more deeply when they are released. The feeling of relaxation is increased by experiencing the contrast between extreme muscle tension and sudden release of that tension.

First, read and understand the steps outlined below. Then, find a comfortable setting and begin to learn to relax. If you have access to a recording device, you may wish to read these instructions into it and then play them back to use as a guide in relaxing. Use a slow, steady voice tone and pause long enough so that you as listener can perform each step in an unhurried, relaxed manner. You should create enough tension when tensing the various muscle groups to make a noticeable difference between tension and relaxation, but not so much that you shake or strain any muscles.

Step 1: The Hands

- Clench your **right** fist. Hold it tight for 5-7 seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and forearm.
- Relax your hand. Appreciate the contrast between the tensed and relaxed state.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

- Clench your **left** fist. Hold it tight for 5-7 seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and forearm.

- Relax your hand. Appreciate the contrast between the tensed and relaxed state.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Clench **both** fists. Hold it tight for 5-7 seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and forearm.
- Relax your hand. Appreciate the contrast between the tensed and relaxed state.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

Step 2: The Arms

- Bend both elbows. Tense the **biceps**. Hold it tight for 5-7 seconds. Study the tension.
- Straighten arms and relax. Appreciate the contrast between the tensed and relaxed state.
- Be sure when you are relaxing the arms that they are in a comfortable position for you, possibly hanging loosely from your sides.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Stretch your arms as far out in front of your body as possible.
- Tense the **triceps muscles** in the back of the arms. Hold it tight for 5-7 seconds. Study the tension.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast. Let your arms feel comfortably heavy.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

Step 3: The Head

- Notice how the arms and hands are relaxed. Enjoy this relaxation. Experience it fully.
- Wrinkle your **forehead**. Note the tension. Wrinkle it tighter. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast. Notice that the scalp feels smooth and relaxed.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Frown and crease your **brows**. Note the tension. Tighten the frown. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast. Notice that the scalp feels smooth and relaxed.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Close your **eyes** tightly. Exert more pressure. Tighter and tighter. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Press your **tongue** hard against the roof of your mouth. Notice the tension. Hold it for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Press your **lips** tightly together. Study the tension. Press your lips tighter. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
- Notice that your face, scalp, and head all feel much more relaxed. Your arms and hands are becoming looser and looser. You are more and more deeply relaxed all over.

Step 4: The Neck

- Now concentrate on your neck muscles.
- Hold you **head** as far back as you can. Feel the tension spread through your neck. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- While relaxed, roll your head down to the left. Notice it feels comfortably heavy.
- Now roll your head to the right. It now feels heavier and even more relaxed.
- Repeat the exercise and study the contrast.

- Press your **chin** to your neck. Study the tension. Press tighter. Hold the tension for 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

- Return your head to a comfortable position. Notice that your head and face are relaxed. Your jaw is loose. Your arms and hands are loose and heavy. Allow yourself to relax more and more.

Step 5: The Shoulders

- Shrug (raise) your **shoulders** firmly. Observe the tension. Hold the tension 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Note how the relaxation is spreading to your back, and how relaxed your neck and throat is.
- Repeat and study the contrast.
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- Relax the entire body. Breathe easily in and out. Notice how the relaxation is increased as you exhale.
- Take a deep breath. Hold your breath for 5-7 seconds. Exhale and relax. Notice how the relaxation is spreading throughout your entire body.

Step 6: The Abdominal Muscles

- Contract your **abdominal muscles**. Observe the tension. Tighten more. Hold the tension 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Notice the general feeling of relaxation. Breathe normally and easily 10 to 15 seconds.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

Step 7: The Lower Back

- Arch your **lower back**. Make it quite hollow. Study the tension. Arch your back further. Hold the tension 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Let go of all contractions in your body. Notice that your shoulders, arms, and head are all comfortably heavy and relaxed.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

Step 8: Buttocks and Thighs

- Press your **heels** down as hard as you can. Study the tension in your thighs. Press harder.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

- Tighten your **buttocks**. Observe the tension. Hold the tension 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Notice the contrast.
- Notice the relaxation has spread to your hips and thighs. Your back and shoulders are comfortably limp.
- Repeat and study the contrast.

Step 9: The Lower Legs and Feet

- Press your **toes** down and away from your face. Study the tension in your calf muscles. Press harder. Hold the tension 5-7 seconds.
- Relax. Appreciate the contrast.
- Notice your feet and ankles are relaxed. So are your calves, shins, knees, thighs, buttocks, and hips. Your entire body feels relaxed. Each area is becoming more and more relaxed.

Step 10: Increasing the Relaxation

- Your legs and feet are comfortably loose and limp. Your stomach, waist, and lower back are becoming more and more relaxed.
- Your upper back, chest, shoulders, arms, and even your finger tips, feel more and more relaxed.
- Your head is comfortably heavy and relaxed.
- Your neck, throat, and jaw are loose, your face is smooth and relaxed
- Inhale deeply. Slowly, very slowly, exhale. Take 2 or 3 long, deep, relaxing breaths. Notice that you become more relaxed and comfortably heavy with each one. Each time you exhale you feel more and more relaxed. Notice the relaxation in each part of your body. Think about raising your arm or speaking.
- Concentrate on the effort it would take to do either of those things. Enjoy the relief of knowing you do not have to raise your arm, or speak, or otherwise disturb your comfortable feeling of relaxation.
- You should now feel quite generally relaxed.
- Some of you will find that it is relatively easy for you to learn to relax. Others of you may find it rather difficult since we vary in our ability to master different skills. If you are having troubles, some variation of the procedures may be helpful. For example, each time as you relax the muscles you have tensed, you may wish to relax them very gradually rather than suddenly. This will allow you to experience the difference between the tense and relaxed

states more fully. Or, you may find that for you tension becomes localized in one or two areas such as the neck and shoulders or the forehead.

Further reading

If you are interested in learning more about relaxation, there are several references listed below. We call particular attention to Chapter 14 in the book by Dr. Janet Wessal (1979). This chapter contains some alternative procedures for relaxation, as well as abbreviated steps for getting the most out of brief periods of relaxation during the day. Exercises are presented to help you check your progress in learning to relax.

References

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