

Managing physical symptoms - Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

- **What is it?** PRM is a type of relaxation exercise that involves tensing and then relaxing all the major muscle groups of the body.
- **When should I use it?** PMR can be helpful when trying to decrease muscle tension or tightness (and related headaches) that is associated with increased stress or anxiety. It can also be helpful for relaxing the body before going to sleep.
- **Why does it work?** Tightening muscles before relaxing them works like a pendulum – the more tension you create by tightening muscles, the more relaxed you will feel when you release this tension. Also, by noticing what different parts of your body feel like when they are tensed and relaxed, you will get better at being able to recognize early signs of tension in your body so that you can do something about it before it builds up.
- **How do I do it?** The goals of PMR are to (1) learn how to isolate and tense/relax specific muscle groups, (2) decrease feelings of tension and tightness in the body, and (3) increase feelings of relaxation throughout the body.

First practice how to tense and relax each set of muscles in the body. Instructions for how to tense each set of muscles are as follows (taken from Barlow & Craske, 2007):

- Hands and forearms – make fists and pull fists in toward forearms
- Upper arms – pull arms back and in toward sides
- Lower legs – flex feet and pull toes up toward upper body
- Upper legs – push knees together and lift legs off the ground
- Stomach – pull stomach muscles in toward the spine
- Chest – take a deep breath into the chest and hold it
- Shoulders – pull shoulders up toward ears
- Neck – push neck back against chair or pull chin down toward chest
- Mouth/throat – clench teeth and pull corners of mouth back into a “smile”
- Eyes – squeeze eyes shut (do for 5 seconds instead of 10)
- Lower Forehead - pull eyebrows down toward the center of the face
- Upper forehead - raise eyebrows as high as possible toward the scalp

After you have practiced how to tense each set of muscles, start at the beginning of the list and tense the first muscle group (hands and forearms) for **10 seconds**. Then, slowly let the tension go and relax those muscles for **30 seconds**. Think the word **relax** as you do this. Then start this process over with the next set of muscles and continue until you finish the list.

PRM is most effective if you pay attention to the contrast between the feelings of tension and relaxation in each muscle group. Try to only tense one set of muscles at a time, making sure that all the other muscles in the body are relaxed with each step. Also, when tensing muscles, you should notice feelings of tightness, but this should not be painful. If you feel pain you may be tensing too much and you should try releasing some of the tension until you no longer feel pain. Regular practice will make it easier over time to relax more quickly using these skills.