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Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This is a little better zine.

It doesn't have the solutions to your big problems, but the skills inside can make coping a little easier when life is difficult.

Learn more at littlebetterzine.com

Learning how to relax my body when I feel stressed is important to me because:
(add your answer here)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a **two-step** technique for stress management.

Stress affects both the mind and the body – it includes both emotional distress and physical tension.

Changing unpleasant emotions is hard, but you can learn how to change the physical symptoms of stress.

If you learn how to relax your muscles, you will find that distressing emotions will feel less intense.

Progressive muscle relaxation can help with anxiety, insomnia, headaches, high blood pressure, and other stress-related health problems.

Anyone can learn progressive muscle relaxation with practice.

Step One: Inhale and Tighten

Find a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down.

Breathe in and make fists, clench the muscles in your hands.

Notice how the tension feels as you slowly inhale.

Your hands should feel tense, but not painful.

Step Two: Exhale and Release

As you **breathe out**, release the tension in your hands.

Take a few more slow, calming breaths – in and out – as the tension drains away from your hands.

What sensations do you notice in your hands as they relax? Maybe they feel warm, tingly, heavy, or some other sensation.

When you think you've relaxed your hands as much as possible, try relaxing them even more.

Take your time.

Relaxing Your Whole Body

After you learn **Step 1** and **Step 2**, you can repeat the process of tensing and releasing other muscle groups in your body.

You should tense each group of muscles enough to feel tight, but this technique should never be painful.

Take your time and breathe at a calm, comfortable pace.

Here are 14 muscle groups you can tighten (inhale) and release (exhale), one muscle group at a time:

1. **hands** – clench your fists
2. **arms in** – bend your elbows and tighten your biceps
3. **arms out** – straighten arms and tighten your triceps
4. **shoulders** – shrug your shoulders up to your ears
5. **forehead** – wrinkle your forehead
6. **eyes** – shut your eyes tightly
7. **mouth** – lips together, tongue on the roof of your mouth
8. **neck down** – push chin down to chest
9. **neck up** – turn your head up to look above you
10. **back** – arch back and bring shoulder blades together
11. **abdomen** – tighten your abdominal muscles
12. **buttocks** – clench your buttocks
13. **thighs** – tighten your thighs
14. **calves** – point your toes down

You can tighten and release a muscle group multiple times if you want, or you can focus on fewer muscle groups if you need to release tension from a specific area in your body.

Warning signs that I'm feeling stressed: (add your answer here)

Practice Makes Different

With regular practice, you will become more familiar with the physical sensations of tension and relaxation.

You may also learn to notice the early physical signs when stress is building up inside your body.

Progressive muscle relaxation is not a cure for the problems which cause stress, but it can make coping with stress a little easier.

Try it Without Tensing Any Muscles

You can also try progressive muscle relaxation **without** tensing any of your muscles – this modified technique is simply called **progressive relaxation**, and it may work better for you if clenching your muscles feels difficult or unpleasant.

To practice progressive relaxation, relax the 14 muscle groups one-by-one **without** tensing them. Just skip **Step 1** and practice **Step 2** only, relaxing each muscle group one at a time as you slowly exhale.

Record each time you practiced progressive muscle relaxation: (record your progress here)

Loving-Kindness Meditation

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It doesn't have the solutions to your big problems, but the skills inside can make coping a little easier when life is difficult.

Learn more at littlebetterzine.com

Feeling compassion for myself and for others is important to me because: (add your answer here)

About Loving-Kindness Meditation

Loving-kindness is the heartfelt wish for the well-being of oneself and others.

The purpose of loving-kindness meditation is to cultivate feelings of compassion and peace.

Loving-kindness meditation is a type of Buddhist meditation, but anyone can try it, even if you are not Buddhist.

Preparation

Find a comfortable position and take a few slow deep breaths.

Notice how breathing feels in your body.

Try to set aside any thoughts that may be distracting you.

Loving-kindness meditation practice begins by sharing loving-kindness with yourself.

Some people feel selfish when they share loving-kindness with themselves, but receiving unconditional love is never selfish.

Set a timer for 5-10 minutes and repeat these four statements silently to yourself at a gentle pace:

- **May I be safe.**
- **May I be healthy.**
- **May I be happy.**
- **May I be at peace.**

Take your time and focus on the meaning of the words.

Notice any feelings, sensations, urges, and images that arise when you share loving-kindness with yourself.

If you notice a difficult feeling like anger, grief, or sadness, try to accept this as a sign that your heart is softening.

What blocks me from feeling compassion: (add your answer here)

Turning Outward

After you have shared loving-kindness with yourself, you can also reflect on loving-kindness for another person you choose.

Here are some people for whom you might feel loving-kindness, in order from easiest to most challenging:

- a loved one
- a neutral acquaintance
- a stranger
- a difficult person
- all beings everywhere

Loving-Kindness for Another Person

After you have selected another person to share your loving-kindness with, set a timer for 5-10 minutes and repeat these four statements silently to yourself at a gentle pace while thinking about the recipient of your loving-kindness:

- **May you be safe.**
- **May you be healthy.**
- **May you be happy.**
- **May you be at peace.**

Take your time and focus on the meaning of the words.

Notice any feelings, sensations, urges, and images that arise when you share loving-kindness with another person.

If you notice a difficult feeling like anger, grief, or sadness, try to accept this as a sign that your heart is softening.

Keep Cultivating Peace

The more you practice loving-kindness, the easier it will be to cultivate feelings of compassion and peace in your life.

You can practice loving-kindness meditation whenever you like.

Poem Excerpt by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,

only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Make Better To-Do Lists

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Using to-do lists effectively is important to me because: (add your answer here)

Why Use a To-Do List?

People who struggle with forgetfulness, inattention, and low motivation can benefit from using to-do lists.

To-do lists help by moving information from your memory onto a piece of paper – this is called **externalizing information**.

If you write tasks down in a place where you will see them, then you don't need to worry about forgetting them.

To-Do List Basics

You should use **no more than two to-do lists**:

- 1 list for school + work tasks
- 1 list for personal tasks

(Or if you prefer, you can use one list for both work and personal tasks – but not more than two.)

Include **all** of your tasks on these two lists – no sticky notes.

Write your to-do lists on a single piece of **paper** – no apps.

Keep all your tasks on **one page**, so you don't have to flip back and forth to see your entire list. When you run out of space on your paper to-do list, copy all the unfinished tasks to a new piece of paper. (Spiral-bound notepads are great for to-do lists)

Keep your to-do list in an easily visible place where you will see it throughout the day.

Visually mark the important tasks on your list – you can circle, underline, or star ★ the tasks which are most urgent.

If you want to save a record of your work, you can record the date you complete a task when you cross it off your to-do list.

Break Up Big Tasks into Small Ones

Will any task on your to-do list take more than **30 minutes**?

Are there tasks on your to-do list that you are avoiding, or tasks that have been on your to-do list for a while?

Break these tasks up into smaller steps.

Write only the **next step** on your to-do list.

For example: Instead of writing *“laundry”* you could write *“gather dirty clothes in laundry basket”*

After you have completed one step of a larger task, write down the next step on your to-do list. (Only one step on the list at a time.)

Beware of Perfectionism

Striving to maintain a perfectly organized or aesthetically pleasing to-do list will discourage you from using it. Give yourself permission to keep a messy, imperfect to-do list.

Increase Your Motivation

Not making progress on your to-do list?

Make sure your to-do list is placed somewhere you will see it.

Schedule alarms or automatic reminders to remind you to look at your to-do list throughout the day.

When adding tasks to your to-do list, try writing **why** completing the task is important to you. For example: Instead of writing *“fold laundry”* you could write *“fold laundry so my bedroom will be more tidy and restful”*

Common Barriers to Getting Tasks Done

Here are some common barriers to getting tasks done. Which barriers do you struggle with the most? How might you use your to-do list to overcome these barriers?

- “It’s hard for me to get started.”
- “I’m disorganized.”
- “I’m forgetful.”
- “I get distracted easily.”
- “I struggle to make a plan.”
- “I struggle to follow a plan.”
- “I feel overwhelmed.”
- “I get stuck doing one task and can’t change to another one.”

Make Your To-Do List SMART

The tasks on your to-do list should be

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Attainable**
- **Relevant**
- **Time-Bound**

Ask yourself the following questions to check if each task on your to-do list is SMART:

- **Specific** – Is the task a specific action?
- **Measurable** – Will I know when the task is complete?
- **Attainable** – Is the task realistic?
- **Relevant** – Why do I care about completing this task?
- **Time-bound** – Will the task take 30 minutes or less?

Consider sharing your to-do list with someone you trust and asking for their honest feedback. Do they think your tasks are SMART? Can they help you break big tasks into smaller ones? Can they help you brainstorm strategies for overcoming barriers to getting tasks done?

Practice Patience

Remember: It takes time to establish new habits. Changing old habits is hard at first, but will get easier over time.

Commit to using these tips every day for four weeks before you decide they won't work for you.

Record each day you used these tips for four weeks: (record your progress here)

Emotion Regulation

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Learn more at littlebetterzine.com

Managing my strong emotions is important to me because: (add your answer here)

Understanding Emotions

Most emotions are **reactions to situations**.

Emotions help in two different ways: emotions help you to **understand your needs** and express them to others, and emotions **motivate** you to cope with situations.

Here are common emotions everyone feels from time to time:

- **sadness** – reaction to a loss or setback
- **anger** – reaction to someone being treated unfairly
- **fear** – reaction to a perceived threat or physical danger
- **guilt** – reaction to your own disappointing behavior
- **shame** – reaction to rejection from others
- **enjoyment** – reaction to your needs being satisfied
- **love** – reaction to having a meaningful connection
- **pride** – reaction to achievement or recognition
- **surprise** – reaction to something unexpected
- **disgust** – reaction to something offensive

Every emotion has three components:

- **thoughts** – what you think about a situation
- **physical sensations** – changes felt in your body
- **behaviors and urges** – how you act out your feelings

Recall situations where you felt the emotions listed above and consider the thoughts, sensations, and behaviors/urges you experienced in those situations.

Anxiety and Avoidance

Anxiety is different than other emotions.

Anxiety is a reaction to uncertainty. People feel anxious when they don't know how they will cope with a future situation or with **another deeper emotion**.

Anxiety can motivate you to **avoid** situations and emotions that you think will be distressing or painful.

Avoidance is a **short-term coping strategy** for reducing anxiety, but frequent avoidance may cause **long-term problems** by preventing you from understanding deeper emotions and making it harder to achieve your goals.

Choosing the Situation

Before entering a situation or starting an activity, make a prediction about how you think it will make you feel. Be intentional about the situations you enter or avoid.

If you feel an urge to avoid a situation, consider the reasons and consequences. Will avoiding a situation because you feel anxious prevent you from achieving your goals? What deeper emotions (besides anxiety) might arise in the situation?

If it is important for you to enter a situation that you feel an urge to avoid, you can use the following skills to manage your emotions.

Changing the Situation

Identify which difficult emotion you are feeling in the situation.

If you are feeling anxiety, try to identify the **deeper emotion** that you are worried about feeling in the situation.

Consider **all parts** of the situation you might **change** in order to give the situation a different emotional impact. For example:

- change your location in the situation, or the location of others
- change how you interact or communicate with others
- change the physical environment
- change the timing or order of events in the situation
- change how you ask for help or offer it to others
- change the physical sensations you experience in the situation (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste)
- consider your personal strengths and change how you make use of them in the situation

Changing Your Focus

Sometimes people focus their thoughts on things that provoke or prolong negative emotions.

Notice the **repetitive thoughts** you have about **past events** that can't be changed, or **future events** that haven't happened yet.

Focus your attention on something in the **present moment** that makes you feel curious, peaceful, amused, safe, or grateful.

Changing Your Thoughts

How you think about a situation affects how you feel.

Many people have **automatic thoughts** (assumptions) about situations which lead to negative emotions:

- **fortune-telling** – assuming bad things will happen even when other outcomes are also possible
- **catastrophizing** – assuming unwanted events will lead to unbearable or overwhelming consequences
- **personalization** – assuming you are personally responsible for unwanted events, or assuming you are being intentionally targeted by others in negative interactions

Try to imagine **alternative outcomes** or **alternative explanations** for the situation that give it a different emotional impact.

Practice asking yourself these questions to challenge the automatic thoughts which cause negative emotions:

- What positive, neutral, and mildly negative outcomes are also possible in this situation?
- If an unwanted event or “worst case scenario” does actually happen, what are some different ways I could cope?
- What if a negative interaction with another person isn’t really about me? What are some alternative explanations for the negative interaction? (Assume I didn’t do anything wrong)

Take your time thinking through alternatives – don’t rush. Automatic thoughts happen quickly, but changing these thoughts with alternatives takes more time and effort.

Changing How You Feel Emotions

Some emotions are unavoidable, but **no feeling is final**.

Instead of resisting or avoiding unwanted emotions, imagine each emotion is a wave. You can ride the wave as it rises and falls ~

Healthy activities can also change how strong emotions feel:

- **physical activity** releases emotions from your body
- **creative activity** releases emotions from your mind
- **mindful activity** helps you learn what an emotion is teaching you about a situation

Tips for Better Sleep

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Getting enough quality sleep is important to me because: (add your answer here)

The Importance of Sleep

Sleep is considered a **pillar of health** – like nutrition and physical activity, we need good quality sleep or else our health will suffer.

Sleep has many health benefits:

- maintains physical and mental health
- stabilizes mood
- lowers blood pressure
- restores immune system
- improves memory and concentration
- decreases stress and prevents stress-related illness

Most adults need **at least 7 hours** of uninterrupted sleep each night, and most teens need 8 or more hours of sleep per night.

Your Sleep Environment

Your bedroom should be **dark, quiet, and cool** (but not cold).

Remove or turn off electronics that create light and noise.

Wear a sleep mask or use blackout curtains to keep your bedroom as dark as possible.

If you can't make your bedroom silent, use a white noise or sound machine to softly block out background noises.

Make your bed and your bedroom as comfy as possible – a tidy, personalized, soothing environment will invite better sleep.

Sleep in loose, comfortable clothes.

Make your bed a “**sleep only**” **space** – try not to bring work, entertainment, or other wakeful activities into your bed if possible (sex and intimacy are the exception).

Establishing a Bedtime Routine

Bedtime routines help your mind and body learn when to relax and prepare for sleep each night.

Go to sleep and wake up at the **same time every day**, even on weekends. Set an alarm for starting your bedtime routine in the evening just as you set an alarm for waking up in the morning.

Make a **30-60 minute** bedtime routine that is restful and easy for you to do every day. Your bedtime routine might include some of the following relaxing activities:

- personal care (brush teeth, wash face, etc.)
- change into comfortable sleeping clothes
- put away smartphone and other electronic devices
- dim lights
- read a book
- listen to calming music
- drink warm milk or herbal tea (caffeine free only)
- mindful breathing or meditation
- light stretching
- prayer

Record each day you did your bedtime routine for two weeks: (record your progress here)

Productivity and Sleep

The director of sleep medicine at Harvard Medical School, Dr. Russell Sanna, once said “sleep is the enemy of capitalism” because we aren’t productive while we sleep.

How do demands for **productivity** make it harder for me to get healthy sleep? What other demands make it harder for me to get healthy sleep?

(add your answer here)

Barriers to Sleep

Some activities and behaviors can interfere with good quality sleep. Try to avoid or minimize the following barriers which can make falling asleep or staying asleep more difficult:

- avoid caffeine and nicotine
- avoid alcohol in the evening
- avoid exercise in the evening
- avoid large, heavy meals before bedtime
- avoid hot baths and hot showers before bedtime
- avoid naps – and if you need to nap, keep naps brief (less than 30 minutes) and limit napping to early in the day

- avoid smartphones screens and other electronic devices for at least **30 minutes** before bedtime
- avoid activities before bedtime that may be exciting, upsetting, or unpredictable – like viewing social media
- avoid checking the time repeatedly while falling asleep, and consider moving clocks out of view

Some medications can also interfere with sleep – talk to a pharmacist or prescriber about possible sleep-related side effects of any medications you take.

When You Can't Sleep

If you are unable to fall asleep after 30 minutes, try to determine why you can't sleep:

- I'm not tired enough to sleep, *or*
- I'm tired, but too emotionally upset or distracted to sleep

If you are not tired enough to sleep, get out of bed and try a calm activity – but avoid the sleep barriers listed above. After 30-60 minutes, or when you feel tired, try going back to bed.

If you are too upset or distracted to sleep, explore skills for relaxation and emotion regulation, like the skills you can learn about on littlebetterzine.com

Sleep Apnea

Talk to a doctor if you notice signs of **sleep apnea**: loud snoring or gasping, frequent waking during the night, feeling tired all day even after getting a full night of sleep

Words of Wisdom for Healing and Growth

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Even though it is often difficult, healing and growing as a person are important to me because: (add your answer here)

It takes courage to recover from painful experiences and grow into your full potential. These quotations were selected to inspire vulnerability, connection, acceptance, and wisdom for healing and growth.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." – *James Baldwin*

"If we change within, our outer life will change also." – *Jean Shinoda Bolen*

"How we spend our days is how we spend our lives." – *Annie Dillard*

"It is never too late to be what you might have been." – *George Eliot*

"Between grief and nothing, I will take grief." – *William Faulkner*

"The only way out is through." – *Robert Frost*

"Practice makes different." – *Ruth Wilson Gilmore*

"You must arrive at a place before you can leave it." – *Leslie Greenberg*

"Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out." – *Václav Havel*

"Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life." – *Judith Herman*

"You are not responsible for being down, but you are responsible for getting up." – *Jesse Jackson*

"If you don't risk anything, you risk even more." – *Erica Jong*

"To love is to be vulnerable." – *C. S. Lewis*

"Acceptance alone does not change a difficult situation, but it makes change possible or more likely. In fact, acceptance is essential to bringing about change." – *Marsha Linehan*

“Next time, ask: What’s the worst that will happen? Then push yourself a little further than you dare. Once you start to speak, people will yell at you. They will interrupt you, put you down and suggest it’s personal. And the world won’t end. And the speaking will get easier and easier. And you will find you have fallen in love with your own vision, which you may never have realized you had. And you will lose some friends and lovers, and realize you don’t miss them. And new ones will find you and cherish you. And you will still flirt and paint your nails, dress up and party, because, as I think Emma Goldman said, ‘If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.’ And at last you’ll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking.” – *Audre Lorde*

“How do you survive whole? Sometimes you don’t survive whole, you just survive in part. But the grandeur of life is the attempt. It’s not about the solution. It is about being as fearless as one can, and behaving as beautifully as one can, under completely impossible circumstances.” – *Toni Morrison*

“What the hands do, the heart learns.” – *Movement Generation*

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” – *Anaïs Nin*

“The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.” – *Colin Murray Parkes*

“No feeling is final.” – *Rainer Maria Rilke*

“It’s an awful risky thing, to live.” – *Carl Rogers*

“Not every pain comes to harm you.” – *Sicilian proverb*

“Suffering does not make people better. It just makes them suffer.” – *Art Spiegelman*

“It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” – *Rabbi Tarfon*

“May I be alive when I die.” – *Donald Winnicott*