

# Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation: Notes To Accompany The Recording

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These instructions for the Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation are intended to help you slow down, to develop greater awareness of tension in your body and to help you let it go. Strange as it may seem, many people do not know that their muscles have become increasingly tense. However, tension can creep up on us in a stealthy way and before long it can overtake us. The exercises enable you to recognise what muscles feel like when they are tense and when they are relaxed. It works on the principle that muscles are most relaxed after they have been contracted (Karpinski).



Using the instructions is a bit like going to the gym. It's important to practise daily. You would not go to the gym and expect to build muscle after only a few sessions. You build it into your daily and weekly routines and, after much dedication and hard work, you might get the body you prefer. The same applies to relaxation, though it is probably less hard work. For full benefits, you are advised to complete one session each day. You can also fit in shorter sessions (5 minutes) throughout the day, on the train, on the bus, in lectures etc. (though you will probably not lie on the floor!).

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## Mindfulness & Awareness

Mindfulness is like being a witness to your own process, putting what you are doing and your felt experience under the microscope. Unlike concentration, which has connotations of control, witnessing has a quality of allowing the object of attention to be there, just as it is, experiencing it without judgement. Mindfulness is not an action but the quality of attention that we bring to the action. Mindfulness cannot be 'done' any more than we can force ourselves to relax or force ourselves to concentrate. The act of

exerting pressure is in itself self-defeating.

The exercises will enable you to bring detailed awareness to each part of your body, paying attention to all parts and treating all parts (large and small, inner and outer) equally. In time, you may begin to notice even minute developments in your muscles, your digestive and circulation systems and your inner sensations. You may for example, notice the flow of the blood in your body, little twinges in the muscles, varying levels of heat, slow and sudden changes.

Bringing awareness to the body can help you to deal with emotions, since emotions are often harboured in the body. For example, tension in the chest, hollowness in the stomach, a burdened and bent-over posture. People often try to think their way out of troubling feelings. An equally valuable approach is to start with the body and this involves bringing awareness to how emotion is experienced in the body.

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## Incorporating Some Principles

As you do the exercises, become aware of your negative and judgemental thoughts and emotions (e.g. *I'm no good at this.* *I hate my stomach.* *My face is unattractive.* Notice if particular feelings arise, e.g. sadness, anger, feelings of shame or inferiority. While these exercises can be effective on their own, you may also find it helpful to incorporate the following principles, into your life in general:

- Endeavour to develop a non-judgemental attitude to yourself. Avoid criticising yourself and finding fault with what you do. If you do the same in relation to others, you will be amazed to discover how much more at ease **you** feel.
- Accept what's there (even if it's difficult or painful) without pushing it away. Everything that arises, from pleasure to pain, falling asleep or becoming bored, is all grist for the mill of curiosity and attention.
- Be curious about what's happening in your life and in your body. Ask yourself things: *'That's interesting, what can it be about?'* *'Let me get to know this more.'* *'That's an interesting feeling, let me stay with it longer to see what it's telling me.'* *'I wonder why I reacted that way.'*
- Try to develop gentleness and compassion towards yourself and other people. remember, you and others are entitled to be treated kindly and you are entitled to a fresh start when you have made an error.

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### Practicalities

Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Decide how long you will give to the session. If you are pushed for time then you could reduce it to 15 – 20 minutes, but the longer you take the more beneficial the exercise will be. It's not too important that you cover every detail of the instructions though the more detail you cover, the greater the benefits you will gain. Choose a warm space, as cold spaces can bring on cramps. It is helpful and more comfortable to place something soft, such as a towel or a thin cushion below your head. Do not use a bed. This has associations with sleep and the softness and support of the mattress will prevent you from feeling the tension and being able to release it fully. Remove your shoes and loosen any tight clothing, buttons and belts. Lie on the floor face upwards, legs stretched out and slightly apart, feet angled outwards (roughly in the 11 o'clock and 1 o'clock positions), and with your hands by your side, palms upwards. If you find that lying down causes you to fall asleep, then you can use a chair and ensure that your body is not neither too rigid nor slumped.



Pay attention to your breathing, breathing in and out through your nose. Don't force your breathing but notice its trail through your nose, down the back of your throat, into your chest and deep into your stomach. Try to get a regular breathing pace before beginning the work on the rest of your body. You will be asked to tense your muscles in the exercises. You will notice that when you do so, your breathing may become faster and more shallow. This is natural but it can be a factor in the development of anxiety and panic. Your awareness of it is also an opportunity to do it differently. As you notice your breath speeding up or becoming shallow, ask yourself to 'slow down' and to breathe deeply. It might sound strange but, I suggest you actually talk to yourself in this caring way, giving yourself advice.

The exercises are unapologetically repetitive. They will ask you to scan slowly and systematically scan your body:

- **Noticing** how things currently feel.
- **Tensing** each part of the body in turn.
- **Holding** the tension for several seconds (long enough to feel the tension but not so long as to strain yourself).
- **Noticing** how this feels and noticing the effect of the tension on the rest of your body, on your breathing and on how you feel.
- **Releasing** the tension and **notice** the difference in how your muscles feel.

The various stages of **noticing** (mindfulness) are very important, as important as the tensing and releasing itself. Begin at the lower end of your body and work slowly upwards. One way of thinking about this is to imagine a large scanner moving slowly up over your body. As it moves, it notices and reads every little detail. The whole process should take somewhere between 20 or 30 minutes.

I wish you well with the exercise!