

Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Hugh Clarke - February 2009

If you have any comments on this Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation Programme, the author will be pleased to hear from you. Please feel free to contact: Hugh Clarke, Senior Counsellor, Counselling & Wellbeing Service, London Metropolitan University (h.clarke@londonmet.ac.uk). You may also be interested in coming to one of the mindfulness-based meditation sessions at the university.

Introduction

Everyone gets stressed and tense. Some people get severely so. Some people have been stressed and tense for so long that they don't know anything different. Through modern living, we can get caught up in the fast pace which is set by others, or come under pressure to meet deadlines, to keep doing things. A famous psychologist, Rollo May, offered this advice: *'Don't just do something, stand there.'* In other words, 'stop 'doing' and start 'being.'

These instructions for the **Mindfulness** Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation are intended to help you slow down and to stop doing. They will also help you to identify, monitor and release your body tension. However, this is not an instant fix. It is 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.



What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is like being a witness to your own process. 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.

You can follow the programme in either of two ways: (a) one half hour session daily or (b) two fifteen minute sessions, one at the start and another at the end of the day. You can also fit in shorter sessions (5 minutes) throughout the day, on the train, on the bus, in lectures etc. Some people find it useful to record these instructions, at a gentle pace, and then to play it back when needed. Another possibility is to have a trusted friend to read the instructions to you.

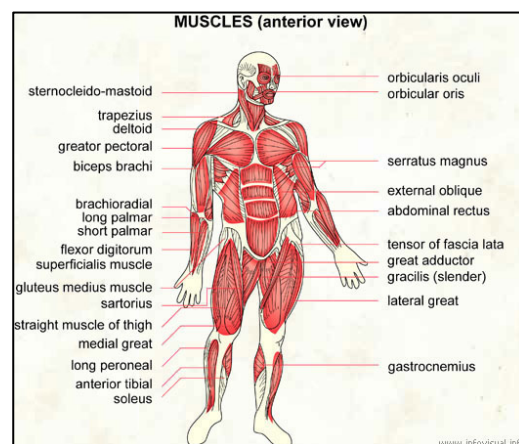
The Progressive Muscular Relaxation routine enables you to recognise what muscles feel like when they are tense and when they are relaxed. It works on the principle that muscles are most relaxed after they have been contracted (Karpinski). Where appropriate, some additional information is included (**Green Boxes**). Some yoga postures have been included (**Blue Boxes**) for varying the programme but these are optional and should be followed only if you are familiar with yoga.

Optional Addition - Before starting the routine, think of something short term, which you would like to achieve or do well. Be aware that the mind is more open to suggestion when you are feeling relaxed. Think loosely about this, so that it does not become a persecutory **Injunction**, something demanding and stress inducing. In doing it 'well', you may find it helpful to ask yourself - Whose standards am I trying to meet?

Purposes of Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation

1. 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.



2. To give you the experience of keeping your attention focused over a sustained period of time. In the process, this develops concentration, calmness, flexibility of attention and mindfulness.

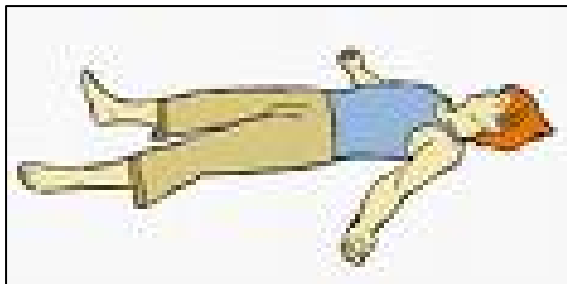
3. To enable you to see, that by observing your own process, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, impulses and mind states, you can relate to them differently as opposed to identifying with them. In other words, your processes are not you nor are they permanent.

4. To become aware of your negative and judgemental thoughts and emotions (e.g. I hate my stomach, my face is unattractive, it's sad paying attention to my chest, feelings of shame or inferiority). To develop a non-judgemental awareness, which is coupled with gentleness and curiosity.

Preparation

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 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.

While completing the instructions it is important that you be aware of the **performance related injunctions** that might arise for you about doing it 'right'. These injunctions can be contributing to your stress, so the object is not to remove them but to learn to recognise them and in so doing, to be able to respond to them more skilfully. We could paraphrase and emphasise the words of Ayya Khema, that the body scan is really about 'going no where' - there is no goal or objective, nor anything to be achieved. Everything that arises, from pleasure to pain, falling asleep or becoming bored, is all grist for the mill of curiosity and attention.

Mindfulness Based Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Slowly and systematically go through the dynamic tension and relaxation techniques below, i.e. **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) and **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. Then **release** 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.

5 Stages

1. Tensing
2. Holding
3. Noticing 4. Releasing
5. Noticing

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 (less if necessary) and is most effective when carried out each day or (if your tension is extreme) twice each day.

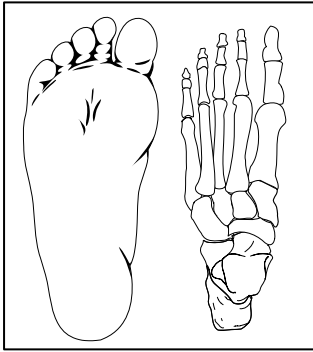
What Are Performance Related Injunctions?

We could say that these are little thought viruses that have got into our minds, affecting how we feel and behave.

Most have been inherited from early childhood, mainly from our care-givers and teachers. They tell us how we should be doing things, they nag at us, they criticise us and they generate bad feelings like shame and a sense of failure. Sometimes they stop us doing things we want to do.

Examples

I must be best at everything. I must get it right. I have to be better than others. I am bad at this. There's no point even trying.



Toes – Scrunch the toes on both feet, hold and pay attention to how this feels and noticing the effect of the tension on the rest of your body, on your breathing and on how you feel emotionally. Release and notice the difference. Relax and pay attention to your breath, slowly in and out through your nose and deep into your belly.

Feet – Stretch your feet outwards from your body, making your body longer and not turning your feet to the side. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath. Now stretch inwards towards the body. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Yoga: Posture For The Legs

Lie on the floor with your legs spread about 50cm apart, feet relaxed and falling slightly to the side. Raise your right leg about 5cm off the ground, tense the muscles and then release them allowing your foot to fall gently to the floor. Repeat with the left leg.

Calf Muscles - Tense and release your calf muscle in each leg in turn. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat the process tensing both muscles together. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Yoga: The Locust Posture

This posture affects the buttocks and also gives a backward bend to the spine.

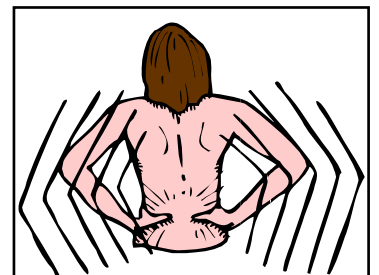
Begin with a 'half locust': Lie face down with legs stretched out and hands down the side, palms facing upwards. The chin should be stretched forwards and resting on the ground. Inhale and raise the left leg without twisting the hips or bending the knee. Hold for about five breaths. Exhale as the leg is lowered slowly to the ground. Repeat with the right leg. Now complete the 'full locust' as follows. Lie face down with legs stretched out and hands down the side, palms facing upwards. Inhale deeply and raise both legs at the same time. Hold for about five breaths. Exhale as the leg is lowered slowly to the ground.

your lower back slightly of the ground. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Thighs - Tense and release your thigh muscle in each leg in turn. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat tensing both muscles together. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Buttocks – Staying flat on the floor, tense both your hip muscles together. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Lower Back – Pushing down gently on your heels, head and shoulders, lift

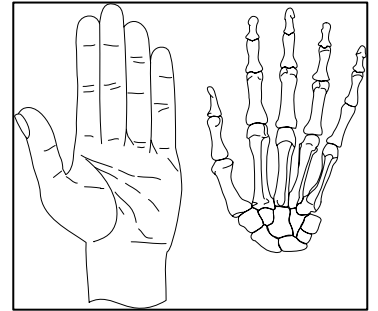


Upper Back - Gently lift your head and shoulders about 10 cm from the ground. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Shoulders – Staying in a lying position, pull your shoulders up towards your ears (as in a shrug) as far as possible. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Arms – Turn the palms of your hands downwards and using your hands push gently down upon the ground to bring tension into your arms. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Hands – Tighten your hands into a fist. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.



Fingers – Turn your hand so that the palms are facing downwards. Spread your fingers to form a five-legged stool. Push into the ground. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Gently move your fingers from a stretched out position into a loose fist. Do not tighten the fist. Repeat this several times. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Stomach & Chest – Breathing in, push your stomach outwards to form a large balloon. Hold and push the balloon while breathing normally. Hold. Notice the effects. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Neck & Throat – Push your head backwards, putting gentle pressure on the ground. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath. Now, using your mouth and chest, tense up your throat. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

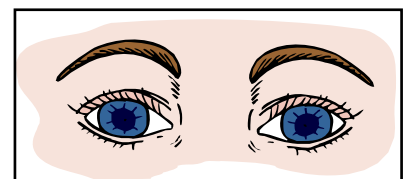
What Is The Silent Scream?

The silent scream is a scream without noise. It helps to expand the muscles of the jaw and face.

Open your mouth wide as if you are screaming without the noise. Stick out your tongue as far as it will go.

Mouth, Chin & Jaw – Allow the lower jaw to drop open and hang loose. Notice how this feels. Follow this with a **Silent Scream**. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Slowly roll your head from side to side and return to the centre.



Mouth & Eyes – Make what is called the monkey face – closing your eyes tightly and squeezing the muscles of your mouth and face. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more.

Rub the palms of your hands together briskly until they begin to feel hot. Close your eyes and place the palms of your hands over your eyes and allow your eyes to be nourished by the heat. Relax and pay attention to your breath.

Use your fingers to gently stroke your face, starting at the top of your forehead and moving slowly and gently downwards towards your mouth. Imagine any stress in your face being swept up and brushed out through your chin. Repeat several times. Bring a gentle smile to your face and notice how this feels.

Forehead – Frown deeply, half closing your eyes. Hold. Notice the effects. Release and notice the difference. Repeat once more. Relax and pay attention to your breath.



Overall Body Scan – Lie still and be aware of your breathing. In your awareness, scan your body from top to bottom for evidence of tension. Where you notice this, release the tension while saying to yourself the words 'ease down' or 'let go' several times.

Suggestion – Note that your mind is more open to suggestion when you are relaxed.

Recall the thing you identified that you want to do well. Imagine this scenario and run it in your head like a little film. Picture yourself looking well, feeling at ease, saying or doing the appropriate things.

Returning - Having completed the scan, slowly get off the ground with gracefully, paying attention to your breathing and noticing and letting go of any tension that re-enters your body. Now, think of the thing you brought to mind earlier, that you wanted to do well.

Thereafter, from day to day, in your routine activities, notice when tension is entering your body and let it go as you use the words 'ease down' or 'let go'.

Yoga: Neck Rolls

Adopt a comfortable sitting position with your back straight and your chest erect. Only the head and shoulders should move.

1. Hang your head forwards and rest your chin on your chest, feel the back of the neck stretch. Now drop the head back as far as possible as if trying to touch your spine. Repeat several times.
2. Without twisting your head, bring the right ear down towards the right shoulder. Hold then bring your head to the centre and then stretch to the left. Hold. Repeat several times.
3. Without moving your shoulders, turn your head to look over your right shoulder.
4. Return to the centre and then look to the left. Repeat several times.
5. Drop your chin to your chest and rotate your head clockwise 2 or 3 times.
6. Bring your head to the centre and start again in a counter-clockwise direction.

Summary

The progressive muscular relaxation can be summed up in five stages. These involve tensing, noticing and releasing:

- Tension - Work from feet upwards, tensing each part of the body in turn
- Holding – Hold the tension for about 10-15 seconds
- Notice – Notice how this feels and the effect on: (a) The rest of your body, including muscles, circulation system and inner sensations; (b) your breathing and (c) your emotions and overall sense of wellbeing.
- Release – Gently release the tension in the body.
- Notice – Notice how your muscles feel.

References

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- Khema A. (2002) *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere*. London: Wisdom
- May, R. (1982). *Man's Search For Himself*. New York (NY): Souvenir Press