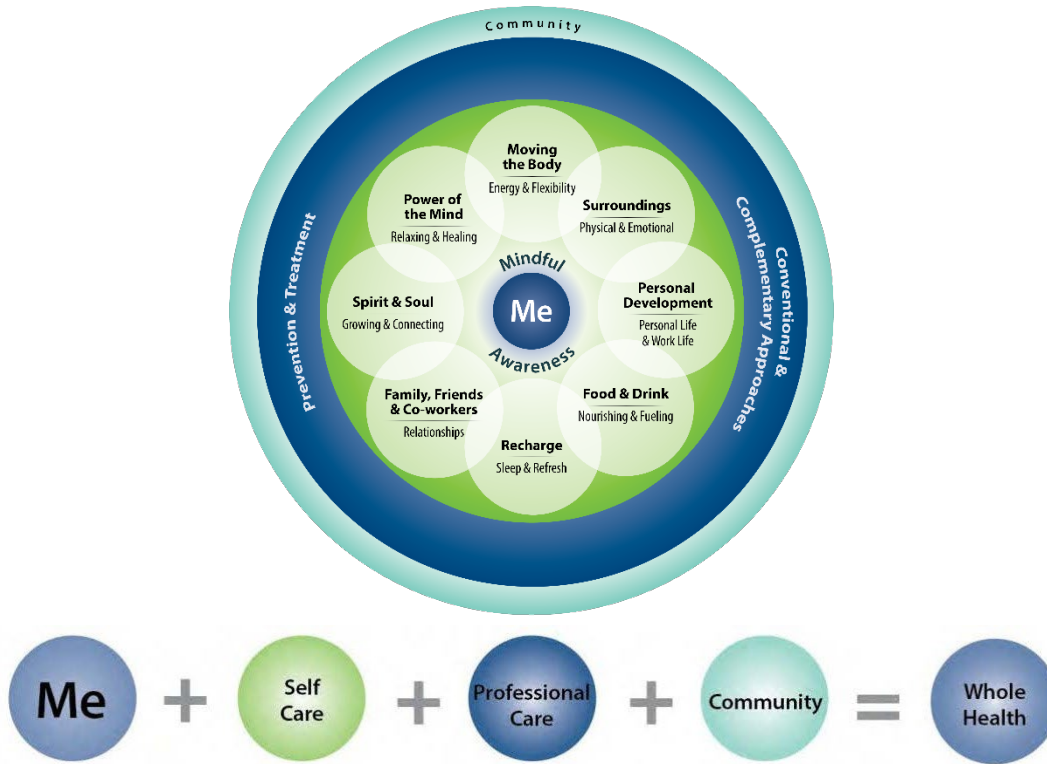


# WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Progressive Relaxation



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

## **Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Progressive Relaxation**

### **What is progressive muscle relaxation?**

Progressive muscle relaxation, or PMR, is a two-step practice that you can do to reduce stress and help relax. First, you tighten and then, you relax certain groups of muscles one after another. After practicing, you might be able to feel the difference between a tight and relaxed muscle. Practicing multiple times may make you more aware of the feelings in your body, and help your mind and body to relax.

### **How can progressive muscle relaxation help me?**

PMR can help many medical conditions. For example, it can help with anxiety, headaches, insomnia, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), and high blood pressure.<sup>1-3</sup>

### **Who shouldn't do progressive muscle relaxation?**

If you have a history of muscle spasms, serious injuries, or chronic pain, you may not want to do this practice. This is because PMR can be hard to do when you are dealing with pain or discomfort in your body. Talk with your health care team before doing PMR.

### **How can I do progressive muscle relaxation?**

There are many different ways to practice PMR. One method is described below and shown in the diagram on page 4. It takes about 10-15 minutes the first time you do it. After practicing a few times, you may not need as much time.

Before starting, find a place where you won't be bothered. Find a comfortable position. You can lie or sit down. If you wear contact lenses, consider removing them before you begin. Let your eyes close or find a point to look at without straining. Take several slow and deep breaths.

Do the following for each of the 14 muscle groups listed below:

1. Inhale and tighten the muscles for approximately 5 seconds.
2. Note how your body feels and what thoughts you have.
3. Exhale and release the muscles for approximately 5 seconds.
4. Notice how your body and mind feel.
5. Move onto the next group of muscles and repeat steps 1-5.

Muscle groups (if you can, do left and right at the same time):

1. Hands: Make fists and clench them.
2. Arms (biceps): Bend your elbows and make a muscle.
3. Arms (triceps): Straighten your arms and tighten the backs of your arms.
4. Shoulders: Shrug your shoulders.
5. Forehead: Wrinkle your forehead.
6. Eyes: Close your eyes as tight as you can.
7. Jaw: Clench your jaw.
8. Mouth: Smile as big as you can.
9. Neck: Move your chin down to your chest then, on your next breath, look up above your head.
10. Lower back: Arch your back away from the ground or chair.

11. Abdomen/stomach: Tighten your stomach muscles.
12. Buttocks: Tighten your buttock muscles.
13. Thighs: Tighten your thighs; this may cause your legs to come off the ground.
14. Lower legs: Point your toes away from your head then, on your next breath, point them toward your head.

### **How can I do progressive relaxation?**

If you don't like tightening your muscles or if it causes pain, you can practice progressive relaxation (PR) instead. In PR, you focus on relaxing each of the 14 muscle groups listed above. Like PMR, you can prepare by finding a quiet place, a comfortable position, and taking several deep breaths. Then do the following steps:

1. Focus your mind on the muscles.
2. Think about relaxing and softening the muscles, instead of tightening them.
3. Notice how your body and mind feel.
4. Take several slow and deep breaths before moving to the next group of muscles.
5. Repeat steps 1-5 for each of the muscle groups.

If taking slow, deep breaths is too hard or you don't like it, you can breathe normally while doing this instead. Just be sure to breathe!

### **What are other ways I can do progressive muscle relaxation?**

- You can stay on one body part for multiple rounds if that is helpful. Tighten the muscle a little less each time.
- After doing PMR a few times, you can focus on fewer muscle groups. For example, do only the arms, or just the jaw.
- You can explore other ways to tighten the muscle groups. For example, you can frown instead of smile for the mouth part.
- If you would prefer to hear someone talk you through the relaxation, you can buy or download recordings online. Search for "progressive muscle relaxation." You can also find recording on the VA website at [https://www.columbiamo.va.gov/services/Relaxation\\_Recordings.asp](https://www.columbiamo.va.gov/services/Relaxation_Recordings.asp) (Refer to Track Number 3).

### **Am I doing progressive muscle relaxation the right way?**

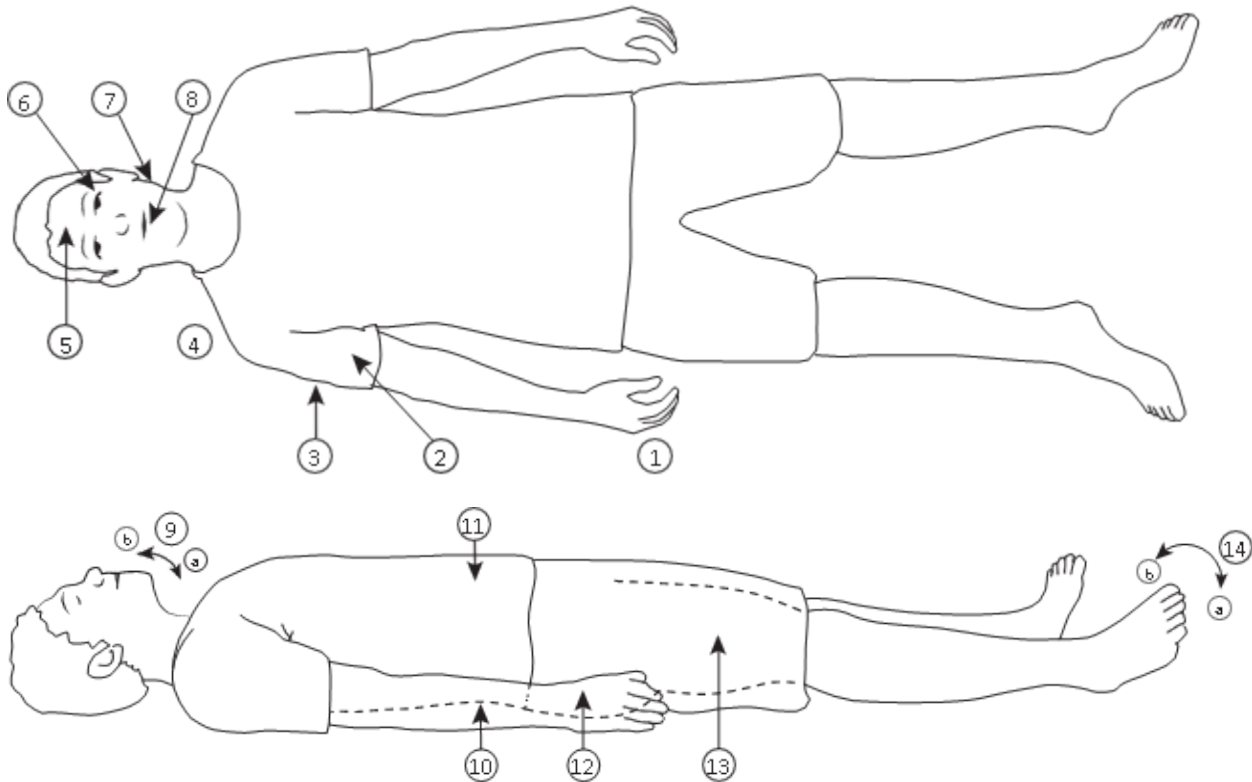
Be careful of the following things when practicing PMR:

- You should NOT have pain, cramping, or discomfort. If this is happening to you, stop the practice. When you practice again, try squeezing the muscle less. You can also try PR, which doesn't involve tightening the muscles. (Review instructions above.)
- Keep breathing. Do not hold your breath while practicing. If this is happening to you, try saying "inhale" when you tighten the muscle and "exhale" when you release the muscle.
- If your mind wanders, that is okay and normal! When you're able, return to the practice.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Do the following for each of the muscle groups (1-14) marked on the graphic below.

| Inhale   | Take Note  | Exhale  | Notice                       | Move on  |
|--|--|---|------------------------------|--|
| And tighten the muscles for approximately 5 seconds. | Of how your body feels and what thoughts you have. | And release the muscles for approximately 5 seconds | How your body and mind feel. | To the next group of muscles and repeat steps 1-5. |



**Muscle groups (if it applies, do left and right at the same time):**

- 1) Hands: make fists and clench them
- 2) Arms (biceps): bend your elbows and make a muscle
- 3) Arms (triceps): straighten your arms and tighten the back of your arms
- 4) Shoulders: shrug your shoulders
- 5) Forehead: wrinkle your forehead
- 6) Eyes: close your eyes as tight as you can
- 7) Jaw: clench your jaw
- 8) Mouth: smile as big as you can
- 9) Neck: move your chin to your chest then, on your next breath, look up above your head
- 10) Lower back: arch your back away from the ground or chair
- 11) Abdomen/stomach: tighten your stomach muscles
- 12) Buttocks: tighten your buttock muscles
- 13) Thighs: tighten your thighs; this may cause your legs to come off the ground
- 14) Lower legs: point your toes away from your head then, on your next breath, point them toward your head



You should NOT have pain, cramping or discomfort. If so, stop the practice. You can try easing your effort level.



Keep breathing! Do NOT hold your breath while practicing.



If your mind wanders, it's OK! Refocus and resume.

**For you to consider:**

- Do you think PMR or PR is something you'd like to try? If so, when will you try it? What time of day will work best for you? How often will you do it?
- How do you think PMR or PR would be helpful for you?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

**For more information:**

| ORGANIZATION                   | RESOURCES  | WEBSITE   |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Veterans Health Administration | Whole Health handouts on a variety of ways to use the power of your mind | <a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp</a> |

*This handout was written for the Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) by Mara Motley, MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on tools for clinicians "Progressive Muscle Relaxation" and "Progressive Relaxation" by Shilagh Mirgain, PhD and Janice Singles, PsyD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.*

**References**

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2. Carlson CR, Hoyle RH. Efficacy of abbreviated progressive muscle relaxation training: a quantitative review of behavioral medicine research. *J Consult Clin Psychol*. 1993;61(6):1059-1067.
3. Heymann-Monnikes I, Arnold R, Florin I, Herda C, Melfsen S, Monnikes H. The combination of medical treatment plus multicomponent behavioral therapy is superior to medical treatment alone in the therapy of irritable bowel syndrome. *Am J Gastroenterol*. 2000;95(4):981-994. doi: 10.1111/j.1572-0241.2000.01937.x.

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