Progressive Muscle Relaxation Exercise

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don’t even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches. Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

General procedures:

1. Take 3 deep breaths into abdomen. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Exhale slowly; imagine tension flowing out of your body as you exhale.

2. Now we are going to tense different parts of our bodies according to the sequence of instructions. We will tense that part of the body for about 5 seconds, and then relax as we breathe out for about 10 seconds.

3. When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to be alert and aware of your experience.

Relaxation sequence:

1. Both feet. Tense the muscles in feet by curling toes downward.

2. Lower legs. Tighten/squeeze your calf muscles.

3. Upper legs. The front, back, and sides of your thighs

4. The seat. Muscles in your hips and seat

5. Lower back and lower abdomen

6. Torso: Stomach, sides of the body and middle back

7. Chest: Breathe deeply, front of the chest, sides of the ribcage and thoracic spine

8. Shoulders: Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.

9. Hands and forearms: Make a fist and squeeze your fingers, wrists, and forearms

10. Upper arms: Flex your arm muscles like you are “making a muscle.”
11. **Neck:** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.

12. **Mouth and jaw:** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.

13. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut and scrunch your face.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practicing consistently is the key.