

5: Progressive muscle relaxation

The progressive muscle relaxation exercise is an expansion on the 'muscle tense and release' exercise earlier in this series. This is a great exercise to do lying in bed if you are having difficulty falling asleep, as by the end of it, every muscle in your body will have been given a chance to loosen and relax.

You can do this progressive muscle relaxation exercise either lying down flat on your back with your arms out from your sides, your legs just loosely on the ground, ankles flopping outward; or you can find a comfortable position in your chair.

During a progressive muscle relaxation it is important that there is no physical movement. If you need to adjust your body posture, please do so with mindfulness – noticing which part of your body needs to be adjusted.

It is useful to keep your eyes closed. Now take a deep breath and as you breathe out, feel the cares and worries of the day flow out of you.

In this practice, you're going to develop the feeling of relaxation in the body. It's not necessary to make any movements or deliberately relax your muscles but simply to fall into the feeling of relaxation.

It's a little like the feeling you have just before sleep. But in this practice, it's better to try to keep yourself awake. You can say to yourself: I will not sleep. I will remain awake throughout the practice. You will be functioning on levels of hearing and awareness, but the important thing is to follow my voice. It's not necessary to intellectualise or analyse the instructions, just following the voice with total attention and feeling, and if thoughts come to disturb you from time to time, do not worry, just continue with the practice.

Allow yourself to become calm and steady. And when you are doing this practice in your own time, allow a few minutes for this settling in period. And bring about a feeling of inner relaxation in the whole body. Concentrating on the body and becoming aware of complete stillness. Complete stillness and complete awareness of the whole body. Becoming aware of the fact that you are going to practice a progressive muscle relaxation.

We're now going to begin a rotation of consciousness, rotation of awareness, by taking a trip through the different parts of the body, as quickly as possible, the awareness is to go from part to part. Repeat the part in your mind and at the same time become aware of that part of the body. Just keeping yourself alert but not concentrating or working too hard at it, and letting that part soften.

Becoming aware of your right hand. Right hand thumb, second finger, third finger, fourth finger, fifth finger, palm of the right hand, become aware of your palm. Back of the hand, the wrist, lower arm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder, armpit, right waist, right hip, right thigh. The kneecap, calf muscle, ankle, heel, sole of the right foot, top of the right foot. Big toe, second toe, third toe, fourth toe, fifth toe.

Become aware of the left-hand thumb. Second finger, third finger, fourth finger, fifth finger. Palm of the left hand, back of the left hand. Wrist, lower arm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder, armpit, left waist, left hip, left thigh, kneecap, calf muscle, ankle, heel, sole of the left foot, top of the left foot. Big toe, second toe, third toe, fourth toe, fifth toe.

Now to the back. Become aware of the right shoulder blade, the left shoulder blade, the right buttock, the left buttock. The spine – the whole back together.

Now go to the top of the head. Top of the head, forehead, both sides of the head, right eyebrow, left eyebrow, the space between the eyebrows. The right eyelid, the left eyelid, the

right eye, the left eye, the right ear, the left ear. The right cheek the left cheek, the nose, tip of the nose, upper lip, lower lip, chin, throat.

Right side of the chest, left side of the chest, middle of the chest. Navel, abdomen, the groin. Whole of the right leg, whole of the left leg. Both legs together. The whole of the right arm, the whole of the left arm, both arms together. The whole of the back, buttocks, spine, shoulder blades, the whole of the front, groin, abdomen chest.

The whole of the back and front together; the whole of the head, the whole body together... the whole body together... the whole body, together. The whole body on the floor or in the chair. See your body, lying or sitting perfectly still, in this room. Visualise this image in your mind.

Now draw your mind to an awareness of your breathing. Become aware of your natural breath. Awareness of the whole body and awareness of breathing. Your body... totally relaxed... on the floor or in the chair... breathing quietly and slowly... develop awareness of your body from the top of your head to the tips of your toes.

Breathing gently, in stillness... and now becoming aware of the floor or the chair and the position of your body lying on the floor or sitting in the chair... visualize the room around you. Become aware of your surroundings, and when you're ready, just slowly starting to move your hands, maybe turning your ankles in circles, maybe stretching just taking your time. Making sure that you are wide awake, opening your eyes, taking note of your surroundings and coming back to the space you are now in.