Progressive Muscle Release

NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
Therapists, clinicians, counselors, case managers, peers, aides, support staff, administrators

Description
This quick body exercise helps you release built-up stress and tension. When you feel overwhelmed, your muscles often tighten without you noticing. By gently tightening your muscles and then letting them relax, your muscles let go of stress.

When to Use
Try this exercise anytime you notice physical tension, especially:

- After intense or a challenging situation or interaction
- After a difficult client interaction
- Between appointments or tasks

WORKPLACE STRESS

Behavioral health work can be physically demanding, even though it may not always look that way from the outside. Staff often sit for long periods during sessions, spend hours typing notes, or move quickly between offices and crisis situations. Over time, these daily habits can take a toll on the body.

Many workers notice tight shoulders, sore backs, headaches, tired eyes, and general fatigue by the end of the day. Skipping meals, working through breaks, and staying “on alert” for long stretches can also leave the body feeling drained. When the body stays tense for too long, it can affect sleep, energy levels, and overall health.

THE PRACTICE

1. Bring your shoulders up toward your ears and gently make fists with your hands
2. Hold the tension for 5 seconds
3. Notice the feeling of tightness. Hold it gently—do not strain
4. Slowly relax and drop your shoulders and open your hands
5. Notice how your body feels as it relaxes. Pay attention to the difference between tension and relaxation.
6. Repeat 3 times, moving slowly and breathe normally as you repeat the steps.

WHY THIS HELPS

Short physical reset activities can help reduce this strain. Simple stretches, short walks, and slow breathing breaks improve blood flow and release muscle tension. These small habits help the body recover during the workday, not just after it ends. When workers feel better physically, they have more energy, comfort, and stamina to support clients safely and consistently.

WHY THIS WORKS

Stress causes muscles to tighten as part of the body's natural "fight-or-flight" response. If this tension stays in the body too long, it can lead to soreness, fatigue, and discomfort.

Tightening and relaxing your muscles helps release this built-up tension. This can:

- Lower physical stress
- Reduce anxiety
- Improve body awareness
- Help you feel calmer and more grounded

In just one minute, your body can feel more relaxed and ready to continue your work.

Resources:
Find additional wellness information on the NYS Trauma Informed Network and Resource Center at traumainformedny.org

Looking to go deeper?
Explore BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM) for weekly breathwork practice, expert tips, and a welcoming community.
Check out the website here for additional details.

Source:
Veteran Association (VA). *Progressive Muscle Relaxation - Whole Health Library.*