

## Tense and Release

When we are holding onto worries and stress, our muscles can get really tight and start to ache. Most of the time we don't even notice how tense our bodies are. This can lead to headaches, stomach aches, and feeling exhausted by the end of the day. You can end up feeling like you just ran a marathon!

This exercise is about tensing and then relaxing all of the muscles in your body, **one at a time**. By first tensing your muscles and then relaxing them, you can feel even more loose and relaxed.

Some teens are so tense throughout the day that they don't even remember what being relaxed feels like!

### 10 Minute Tense and Release: How to do it

During this exercise you will be focusing on one muscle at a time, squeezing and contracting it for about 10 seconds and then totally letting go of the muscle. Let's practice the two steps before we begin.

#### Step 1: Tense

First, focus on one muscle group at a time (for example, your left hand). Next, take a slow, deep breath and squeeze those muscles until you feel warmth and some pressure for about 5–7 seconds. It is important to really feel the tension in the muscles, which may even be a bit uncomfortable or cause a little shaking. So for the left hand, you would be making a tight fist.

It is easy to accidentally tense surrounding muscles (for example, the shoulder or arm), so try to tense **only** the muscles in your hand and not the muscles in the other parts of your body. Isolating one muscle group at a time gets easier with practice.

Take care not to hurt yourself while tensing your muscles. You should never feel intense or shooting pain while completing this exercise. Make the muscle tension deliberate, yet gentle.

*Note: If you have problems with pulled muscles, broken bones, or any medical issues that would hinder physical activity, consult your doctor first. You could also consider skipping the tensing part and only doing the release and relax instructions for each muscle group.*

#### Step 2: Release

This step involves relaxing the tensed muscles. So, after tensing your muscles for about 5–7 seconds, let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles. Exhale as you do this step. Feel the muscles becoming loose and limp as the tension flows out. It can help to imagine that your muscles are like cooked spaghetti noodles and let them be as loose as possible.

It is important to focus on and notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. **This is the most important part of the whole exercise, as it will help you remember how to feel relaxed!**

Remain in this relaxed state for about 10 seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group. Repeat the tense-relax steps. After completing all of the muscle groups, take some time to enjoy the deep state of relaxation.

Try your best to isolate the various muscle groups while practicing (don't tense your shoulders if you are trying to squeeze your hands, for example). Tense only on muscle group at a time. You will get better at this with practice.

Okay, now that you know what to do, try it for real. Get ready to feel really chilled out and relaxed!

Before starting this exercise, find a quiet and comfortable place where you won't be distracted. Turn your cell phone off and close the door. You can either lie down or recline in a comfortable chair where your head is supported. Give yourself permission to take 10 minutes out of your day to take care of you. Everything else can wait.

**Helpful hints for the reader who is reading the script out loud:**

- When reading the script, speak slowly and use a calm and soothing voice.
- Make sure to pause after each instruction to allow enough time for the action to be carried out
- Make sure he or she is not tensing too hard. He or she should feel tightness in the muscles but not pain. He or she should be tensing each muscle for approximately 5-8 seconds before relaxing.

**You can record your own voice reading out the script (e.g. in your phone), or ask someone to read it out to you slowly.**

**Tense and Release Script:**

Take a slow, smooth breath in through your nose. Hold for a couple seconds. And now breathe out. Take another slow, smooth breath in through your nose, and out.

Now, pay attention to your body and how it feels. Start with your feet. Squeeze all the muscles in your feet. Curl your toes under as tight as you can. Now hold it...hold it. Now relax and exhale. Let your feet go completely limp. Notice the difference between the feeling of tension and relaxation. Feel the tension flow out of your feet like water.

Next, tense all the muscles in your legs. Squeeze your knees and thighs together and tense the muscles in your calves. Hold it...a little harder. Now completely let go and relax, let your legs go totally limp. Imagine that your legs are like jelly; relax all the muscles. Notice how heavy your legs feel. Now take a slow, gentle breath in, and hold...and breathe out.

Now, make a fist with your left hand and squeeze. Imagine that you are holding a lemon and you are squeezing out all of the juice. Feel the tightness in your hand...hold it. And now let your hand go completely limp. Notice how your muscles feel when they are relaxed. Now take a breath and hold...and breathe out. Now tighten all the muscles in your entire left arm while clenching your fist...hold it, tighter. And now totally relax and let your arm go limp. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Let the tension completely drain out of your arm.

Now make a fist with your right hand and squeeze tight. Again, imagine that you are squeezing a lemon. Feel the tightness in your hand and arm...hold it. And now let your hand go completely limp. Notice the feeling of relaxation. Now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out. Now tighten all the muscles in your whole right arm while clenching your fist...hold it...tighter. And now totally relax and let that arm go limp. Again, notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Let the tension completely drain out of your arm. Notice how loose and relaxed both of your arms feel now.

Let's move to your shoulders. Pull your shoulders up as high as you can. Try to touch your ears with your shoulders...hold it. Now let go and let your shoulders drop down. Let the tension in your shoulders melt away. Notice how relaxed you feel. Now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out.

Now, pull in your stomach muscles. Imagine that someone just put a bowling ball on your belly. Suck in all the muscles in your stomach...hold it, and relax. Let your stomach out. Relax all the muscles in your belly. Notice how your muscles feel when you relax them. Now take a deep breath and hold...and breathe out.

Now, squeeze your face as much as you can. Wrinkle your nose, squeeze your eyes shut, wrinkle up your forehead, and clench your jaw while pushing your lips together. Notice how tight the muscles in your face feel...hold it. Now let go, open the muscles in your face and let your lower jaw drop down. Notice how relaxed your face feels. Now take a deep breath in and hold...and breathe out.

Now, bring your attention to your whole body. Imagine you're floating and your body feels as light as air. Notice how all the tension has drained out of your muscles and how good this sensation feels...so relaxed...so calm. Now, take a deep breath and hold it...and breathe out. Continue to focus on your breathing and stay in this relaxed state for as long as you like. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and bring your attention back to your surroundings.

## The Quickie Version

Once you have learned how to do the whole **tense and release exercise**, you can do a short version by clumping some muscle groups together. This is helpful for when you don't have a lot of time. You still tense your muscles for 5–7 seconds and then release for 10 seconds, but this time you tense and release three groups of muscles one at a time in three steps:

1. legs, feet, and bum
2. stomach and chest
3. arms, shoulders, neck, and face

Doing this exercise can help you release anxiety even if you only do it for a few minutes. Don't forget to do some **calm breathing\*** at the same time.

*\*More information on calm breathing available on the website*