

Applied Relaxation Training

Learning to notice tension and respond earlier

Applied Relaxation Training is a practical method for becoming more aware of physical tension and learning to release it intentionally.

The training begins with a longer exercise practiced in comfortable conditions. As the method becomes more familiar, you gradually learn to use shorter forms, practice in ordinary settings, and eventually apply the skill when you notice stress or tension beginning to rise.

The goal is not to remain calm all the time or eliminate normal emotions. It is to notice activation earlier, reduce unnecessary physical tension when that would be helpful, and create a brief pause before deciding what to do next.

Why practice is gradual

Relaxation is a skill. Like other skills, it is usually easier to learn under simple conditions before trying to use it in more difficult situations.

At first, the exercise requires time and attention. You may need written instructions or verbal guidance to remember the sequence.

With practice:

- the steps become more familiar;
- you become better at recognizing tension;
- less time may be needed;
- the exercise becomes easier to use in everyday life; and
- you may be able to respond earlier when tension begins to rise.

Progress does not require becoming deeply relaxed during every practice. A small release in the shoulders, jaw, hands, breathing, or posture may be useful.

The five stages

1. Active Relaxation

You briefly tense and release different muscle groups.

This helps you notice the contrast between muscular tension and release. The exercise is initially practiced slowly in a quiet or low-distraction setting.

2. Passive Relaxation

You move through the same areas of the body without deliberately tensing them first.

Instead, you bring your attention to each area and invite unnecessary tension to soften.

3. Shortened Relaxation

You gradually practice shorter versions of the exercise.

The aim is not necessarily deeper relaxation. It is to become able to create a useful shift in less time.

4. Relaxation in Everyday Situations

You begin practicing in ordinary settings rather than depending on silence, privacy, closed eyes, or ideal conditions.

The practice may be brief and unobtrusive.

5. Applied Relaxation During Stress

You use the skill when you notice early signs of increasing tension or activation.

These signs might include:

- raised shoulders;
- a clenched jaw;
- tight hands;
- restricted breathing;
- restlessness;
- repetitive or racing thoughts;
- impatience; or
- an urge to react quickly.

The aim is to notice, release what tension you can, observe what is happening, and then choose your response.

Using the handouts

Each handout describes one stage of the training.

You do not need to learn all five stages at once. Use the handout that corresponds to the exercise currently being practiced with your clinician.

The handouts are intended to:

- reinforce verbal instructions;
- help you remember the steps;
- provide reminders between sessions;
- identify practical adaptations; and
- support regular practice.

Bring questions, difficulties, or unusual reactions to your clinician so that the exercise can be adjusted when necessary.

What to expect

Relaxation can feel different from one practice to another.

You might notice:

- a clear release of tension;
- a small physical shift;
- greater awareness of where you hold tension;

- difficulty sensing certain areas;
- restlessness or distraction;
- very little immediate change; or
- that another strategy would be more helpful at that moment.

None of these experiences determines whether you are doing the exercise correctly.

The most useful signs of progress are often:

- noticing tension earlier;
- using less physical effort;
- intentionally releasing at least some areas;
- remembering the method more easily;
- recovering more readily after activation; and
- pausing before reacting automatically.

Important reminders

Relaxation should remain comfortable and adaptable.

- Do not continue through pain.
- Keep breathing natural and unforced.
- Your eyes may remain open.
- Reduce or skip movements that are uncomfortable or medically restricted.
- You may pause, shorten, modify, or stop an exercise at any time.
- Do not practice while driving or during activities that require your full attention.

Relaxation is mainly useful when physical or emotional activation is too high. If you feel very faint, shut down, unreal, or disconnected from yourself or your surroundings, further relaxation may not be helpful. Looking around the room, moving gently, engaging your senses, feeling your feet against the floor, or contacting a supportive person may be a better response.

Discuss significant pain, dizziness, breathing difficulty, fear of losing control, disconnection, or other recurring concerns with your clinician.

Beginning the training

The first exercise is **Active Relaxation**.

You will learn to move through the body using moderate, comfortable muscle tension followed by release. This provides the foundation for the shorter and more portable practices that follow.

You are learning a skill, not performing a test.