

We hold a lot of physical tension in our bodies, especially when we're distressed. By tensing and releasing groups of muscles, they become more relaxed. When we bring attention to relaxed physical sensations, we are more likely to stay relaxed.

Here are the steps to complete a paired muscle relaxation exercise yourself, or to lead someone else through the exercise:

1. Start by mentally rating how distressed or tense you feel from 0 (none) to 10 (maximum).
2. The goal of this exercise is to tense and release different groups of muscles. Each time you tense a group of muscles, **breathe in** and hold the tension for 5-10 seconds. Each time you release a group of muscles, **breathe out**, let go of the tension, and **say to yourself, "Relax"** for 5-10 seconds.
3. Each time you relax, focus on the feeling of physical tension draining away.
4. Repeat the exercise, using the guide below to focus on increasingly large muscle groups\*.

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| <div style="border-left: 1px dashed teal; border-right: 1px dashed teal; height: 100px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>hands and wrists:</b> make fists and bend wrists in</li> <li>2. <b>lower and upper arms:</b> make fists and pull them to shoulders</li> <li>3. <b>shoulders:</b> pull shoulders to ears</li> </ol>  | <div style="border-left: 1px dashed teal; border-right: 1px dashed teal; height: 100px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. <b>neck:</b> push head into chair, floor, or bed, or pull chin to chest</li> <li>10. <b>chest:</b> expand chest with a deep breath</li> <li>11. <b>back:</b> arch back, bring shoulder blades together</li> </ol>   |
| <div style="border-left: 1px solid teal; border-right: 1px solid teal; height: 100px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. <b>forehead:</b> pull eyebrows together and wrinkle forehead</li> <li>5. <b>eyes:</b> shut eyes tightly</li> <li>6. <b>nose and upper cheeks:</b> scrunch nose, pull lips and cheeks towards eyes</li> <li>7. <b>lips and lower face:</b> press lips together, pull lips back towards ears</li> <li>8. <b>tongue and mouth:</b> press teeth together, press tongue to roof of mouth</li> </ol> | <div style="border-left: 1px solid teal; border-right: 1px solid teal; height: 100px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. <b>stomach:</b> squeeze stomach muscles in</li> <li>13. <b>buttocks:</b> squeeze buttocks together</li> <li>14. <b>upper legs and thighs:</b> stretch legs out and tense thighs</li> <li>15. <b>calves:</b> stretch legs out, point toes</li> <li>16. <b>ankles:</b> stretch legs out, point toes together with heels out and toes curled</li> </ol> |

**\*Tense and release muscles in increasingly large groups:**

1. Tense and release each of the 16 muscle sets individually (i.e., start with just hands and wrists, then lower and upper arms, then shoulders).
2. Then try tensing and releasing small groups of muscle sets, which are grouped with dotted brackets (i.e., start by tensing hands, wrists, lower arms, and upper arms at the same time).
3. Then try tensing and releasing large groups of muscle sets, which are grouped with solid brackets (i.e., start by tensing hands, wrists, lower arms, upper arms, and shoulders).
4. Finally, try tensing your entire body at once.

5. Mentally rate how distressed or tense you feel from 0-10 again.

\*This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.



# Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

## You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



**325+**  
Companies Reviewed



**3,625+**  
Hours of Firsthand Experience



**1,545+**  
Data Points Analyzed



### [Best Online Therapy](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

### [Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



### [Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

### [Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.





# Tools for Self-Assessment and Psychoeducation

Figuring out the next step in your mental health journey can be overwhelming. Developed by psychologists, the tools at [ChoosingTherapy.com](https://www.ChoosingTherapy.com) can help. Our mental health self-assessment quizzes can help you explore common symptoms of mental health concerns, as well as find the best therapy style for you. Our mental health worksheets can guide you through therapy concepts and how to use them in your life.

## [Learn More with Mental Health Quizzes](#)

Our collection of psychologist-developed mental health quizzes can help you learn if you are experiencing mild, moderate, or concerning levels of anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and more. Each quiz also provides targeted resources based on your answers. These self-assessments are designed to offer insight, not diagnoses, and can be a helpful first step in recognizing symptoms and deciding whether to seek further support. If you have concerns about your mental health or your quiz results, we recommend you reach out to a licensed mental health professional.



## [Free Mental Health Worksheets](#)

Search our collection of therapy worksheets by mental health topic, therapy modality, or demographic group. Our free, psychologist-developed worksheets make therapy exercises understandable and relevant to daily life. Find worksheets for help with ADHD, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, and other common mental health challenges.