



Essential Tremor (ET)

Exercise for relaxation & improve life's quality

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Relaxing is a key to good health, and is essential to reduce tremor. There are many methods to calm our tremor through relaxation. The natural body cycle is a process of “tense and relax.” When we exert more tension than relaxation, our bodies are out of balance. This article is written to assist us in learning how to release muscle tension, relax the body, and soothe the savage beast within.

Mona Reeva, co-author, is a psychotherapist in private practice in the San Francisco-East Bay Area of California. Through professional experience, coupled with her own journey with ET, Dr. Reeva first became aware of the ways in which people attempt to cover or control tremor.

The most common method seems to be to tighten our muscles. It is as if by holding the areas the tremor will get better or at least not be visible to others. Unfortunately, the opposite generally happens.

Tightening and holding the muscles in the area of tremor may be detrimental to reducing tremor and to general health. Feeling comfortable with the physical manifestation and learning how to relax these areas facilitates reduction in the tremor. This has been essential to Dr. Reeva's own ongoing process.

In our culture the message of productivity is primary. In fact, it is so strong that we often lose track of our body sense and body messages. The body provides signals that we have learned to ignore. When we push against our own body's tolerance for extended and continuous activity, a condition like tremor will worsen.

Body-mind connection is not myth. In fact, Dr. Reeva sometimes wonders if the purpose— not the cause, but the purpose— of her tremor is a reminder that she has gone beyond her body's tolerance for a particular activity.

Dr. Reeva has established relationships with practitioners who soothe the body. After her head tremor manifested physically, she sought people who studied, learned, and practiced in the realm of the body. She believes that tremor has physical, emotional, and psychological components, and that it is difficult to differentiate between the tremor, its emotional aftermath, and the emotions that influence its severity.

We understand that those who suffer with tremor do not cause their tremor, and that if we work toward achieving wholeness, then the notion of cause becomes less important. Clearly, if biochemical imbalance, genetics, environmental pollutants, or other physical reasons cause tremor, the cure may be more readily treatable if and when research uncovers causation.

Self-blame, though, is detrimental to well-being. As we begin to look beyond self-blame, our willingness to take responsibility for our healing becomes the most significant part of feeling better. Healing is not the same as curing the tremor. Healing is about improving our quality of life and experiencing life as worthwhile.

Noting the physical manifestation, Dr. Reeva found Ms. Doris Campbell, who is a licensed massage therapist.

Ms. Campbell, a former engineer, studies her craft on a continuous basis. She is smart, funny and caring—a dynamite combination—and she is open to consulting with her teachers about symptoms finds puzzling. We began to work together a few years ago, and while occasionally Ms. Campbell does full body massage, we have concentrated on cranial sacral work. Cranial sacral work assists in aligning and relaxing the tissue around the area of the head tremor. Because of Ms. Campbell's abilities, Dr. Reeva sought her as co-author. Another person who works with orthopedic problems is Ms. Arlene Suda, a licensed physical therapist with many years of study and practice.

Ms. Suda is a master at understanding the mechanics of the body. She has an uncanny ability to shift and align the spine and other areas of the body. Her work reduces pressures within. Ms. Suda makes suggestions for appropriate exercises that promote the healing of aches and pains. She graciously consented to review our Exercise for Relaxation program.

There are many methods that will help us learn how to relax, soften the muscles, and balance into our lives, such as massage, physical therapy, Rosen Method, Feldenkrais, Hannah Somatic Stretching, Yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong, etc.

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Choosing a Masseur/Body Worker

Selecting a body practitioner can be a challenging process. The following is designed to help you find the words to describe what kind of experience you might like to have.

Type of touch

- With lotion on the skin
- On the skin without lotion
- On the body while you are wearing clothing
- Above the skin in the space around the body

Intention of the work

- Relaxation
- Movement of soft tissue (muscles, tendons, fascia, etc.) and bone for healing
- Stretching of the body
- Reduction of pain
- Movement of lymphatic system
- Work on the meridians of the body (Chinese medicine)

Depth of touch

- Deep tissue
- Lighter tissue
- Subtle (extremely light touch)
- Energy (extremely light or just slightly above the body)

While these lists are not exclusive, they create a frame of reference from which you can begin. One approach might be to select a few of the above listed criteria that are important to you. Call a few practitioners and ask if their work is consistent with what you have chosen as vital.

Searching your neighborhood for practitioners will reap rewards. Often, classes are offered through adult education programs, senior centers, and with private practitioners. The best way to find a body practitioner is through a referral. Ask friends and associates if they are receiving massage, and if so, get the name of their body worker. The most important aspect, as it is with choosing any type of therapist, is that you feel a great deal of comfort and trust with that person.

One intention in writing this article is to acquaint readers with a number of exercises that can be undertaken in your home, in the garden, or elsewhere. They are designed to be simple, easy to follow, and will add to your personal repertoire of relaxation methods. We recommend doing only one series at a time. Add to your routine each week.

It is important to develop an exercise series that is doable. This means that the exercises feel good, are not stressful, and accomplish relaxation. We want tools by which we can relax. Part of this process of relaxing is to begin to relearn body signals that tell us when to slow down, to stop and take breathers with our goal-oriented productivity.

Sometimes, especially initially, we may find we like or gravitate to certain exercises, leaving out others. Frequently, the ones we leave out are addressing the area(s) of greatest tension! Here we offer directions for Exercise for Relaxation that may change your life. Arlene Suda, physical therapist, has reviewed these.

Preliminary guidelines

- Where there are pre-existing injuries, check with your healthcare provider.
- Practice in a place that you find peaceful.
- If you enjoy relaxing and soothing music, play some while practicing.
- Set aside a specific amount of time on a regular schedule.
- Ask others in your home to not disturb you for the length of time you choose to engage in your exercises and relaxation. If you feel better doing this work with someone, then ask another person to practice with you.
- Consider turning off the ring of your telephone.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Work on the floor—a mat can be useful, or in a straight-backed chair or a stool. If you feel physically strong, some of these can be done while standing.
- Do each exercise slowly. Rushing to be done increases stress and tension.
- Repeat each exercise as desired.
- Take note of where your body is tense when you begin.
- Remember to breathe while doing each exercise.
- Allow time before and after to breathe and rest.
- If you feel yourself tensing, rest for a few minutes.
- When you finish, note how your body feels.
- In all exercise, move only as far as is comfortable without extreme or hurtful strain.

About breathing

While practicing these stretches, use your breath. Initially this means just to pay attention to your breath, noticing when you are straining. If you notice that it is hard to breathe, allow yourself to slightly release from the tension of the exercise. If you find yourself straining by making faces or noises in order to hold the position, allow yourself to slightly back out of the position, release the tension, and breathe clearly.

The breath can also be used to help you increase your range of motion in a particular position. Once you are in the stretch or position of tension, envision sending your breath to the place in your body where there is tension or a slight pain from the position. Remember that pain is not the objective. Back out of the position until there is less pain or a general feeling of stretching and hold. Think of your breath as providing more space for release and motion to occur.

When trying to open and create space in the body we move back slightly out of the position on inhale, and further into a position during exhale. This is to allow the space the body needs to hold the breath on inhale, and on exhale, taking advantage of the new space created by the exiting breath to increase the stretch.

In general, attention on the breath is a form of meditation. It is important to watch our breath. Often we may have shallow breathing or we may hold our breath while we are concentrating and trying to do the exercises properly. When you notice that you are doing either, take one or two deep, slow breaths, and allow natural breathing to begin again. Feel your body relaxing.

The breath can be used to gauge the length of a movement or how long you stay in any one position. Start by holding a position for two to three breaths, and see how it feels to hold for more. Note: At rest, most adults breathe 15 times per minute. Allow yourself to move on from there. You can also gauge some positions by your heartbeat. Notice if, and in which positions, you can sense your pulse or your heart.

About repetitions—getting in touch with your body

The following are three series of exercises. Each one is a set and may be repeated to increase the state of strength and relaxation. Remember that it is important to start slowly, building strength as you do each exercise in each set. This series will allow repetition of each particular exercise and enable you to do more.

Reducing negative self-judgement

An important purpose of these exercises is to help each of us become familiar with our normally held tension.

For example, while writing this article, Ms. Campbell noticed how high her shoulders had become. They almost touched her ears in her effort to concentrate. As she became aware of this tension, she began to repeatedly drop her shoulders to release the tension that had developed. Ms. Campbell indicated that she tries to not have a scolding air with herself such as “Oh, no, these shoulders will never get it right.” What she does is to acknowledge whatever state she is in: “Good, I noticed that I had some tension and I do feel better when it is released.”

“Tense and release” is the normal cycle for working muscles. The muscles are bathed in a fluid, which contains chemicals that deliver the messages of when to tense. The contraction cycles help the body to move blood, lymph, and the fluids between cells through the action of pumping. When we experience tension, there is an opportunity to create release and complete the cycle that supports the movement of these fluids.

Series A

1. Shoulder Shrugs Start: Either sitting, standing or lying on your back, arms at your sides, eyes forward. Begin by raising your shoulders upward towards the top of your head, moving them as far as they can go, tensing your muscles. When you feel your muscles beginning to tire, release your shoulders, letting them drop and relax as completely. Variation: Do one shoulder at a time.

2. Shoulder Rotation Start: sitting or standing, arms at your sides, eyes forward. Begin by rotating your shoulders up, back, down and forward. Repeat this rotation several times until you feel the release of tensions. Then reverse the direction, and as before, repeat.

3. Head Turning Start: Sitting, standing or lying on your back eyes forward. Begin with your shoulders relaxed. Keeping your chin level, lead with your eyes, moving them to the right and turn your head to the right as far as it will go comfortably

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without strain. Now hold your head for a few seconds in that position. Return your head to center position and slowly relax, noting that your shoulders are in their dropped and relaxed position. Repeat the same rotation of your head and eyes to the left. Note that if you do this regularly, your head will begin to rotate more easily and your range of motion will increase. Variation: Start the exercise by moving your eyes to the extreme left and then rotating your head to the right. When you switch directions, allow your eyes to move in the direction opposite from your head.

4. Arm Turning Start: Either sitting, standing or lying on your back, arms straight and raised to shoulder level, palms facing down. Begin by rotating your arms in the shoulder socket first forward and then backward one direction then the other. Although your arms are straight they should be soft and flexible at the elbow joints.

5. Hand Tightening & Relaxing Start: In any position where you have enough room to move your hands. Begin by tightening your hands into a fist, holding them for a moment then releasing them. Allow a few moments to completely relax.

6. Waist Bend & Head Release Start: In a standing position, feet shoulder-width apart (6-8 inches), or sitting in a chair with your legs 6-8 inches apart at the knees with feet solidly on the floor. Begin by bending at the neck and folding forward, one vertebra at a time. Take your time. Bend forward as far as you can comfortably go, allowing your arms and head to hang loosely. Release everything completely so that you feel the loosening in your neck, shoulders, arms and hands. Rest a moment or two. Slowly raise yourself upright, either in your standing or sitting position.

Series B

1. Wrist Circle Rotators Start: Sit, stand or lie down with arms at sides, elbows bent. Begin by rotating your wrists slowly first in one direction then the other. You want to move slowly in areas that feel stiff or resistant. Remember to breathe.

2. Wrist Table Stretch Start: Sit or stand no more than a foot in front of a stable object that you can push against. Begin by bending your elbows in front of you, with your upper arms held against the body and turning the hands so that your palms are facing upwards. Now, place your fingertips on the stationary object (table edge, wall) in front of you and gently bend your wrists leaning into the stationary object, so that the palms of your hands are moving towards the object. Eventually in this move towards the object, your wrists will be parallel with your body. Hold this position, gently breathing for a moment or two, and then release and repeat.

3. Ear to Shoulder Start: Standing or sitting with head facing straight in front of you. Begin by allowing your head to drop towards your right shoulder until you feel a stretch in your neck on the left side. Keep both shoulders level. Do not lift your shoulder to meet your ear. Move slowly and deliberately. Hold for a few moments and slowly come back to the starting position (head forward). Then repeat the exercise on the left side.

4. Face Stretch: Scrunch & Release Start: Standing, sitting or lying on your back. Begin by drawing the face muscles towards center, looking like you might if you had just bitten into a nice juicy lemon. Hold this position for a few moments and then release. Pay attention to whatever areas of your face that might still be hiding tension. Repeat: This is a great exercise to do while sitting in traffic.

5. Face Stretch: "O" Start: Standing, Sitting or lying on your back. Begin by bringing your mouth and eyes into a big "O" position, as if you had just been surprised. Let the jaw drop so that you get a nice big circle in the mouth. Hold then release, again, being aware of any areas where tension might be lingering.

6. Hip Tilt Start: Lying on your back, knees gently bent, feet flat on the floor and roughly hip distance apart (4-6 inches). Begin by flexing the hips back and down bringing the lower back and spine into contact with the floor. After a moment gently release the hips, pulling the lower back up off the floor and extending the spine. Breathing out assists this motion when flattening the spine against the floor and tightening the stomach muscles. Then exhale and release the abdomen while extending the spine.

Series C

1. Wrist Flex & Extend Start: Standing or sitting. Raise your arms so that they are parallel to the floor with palms facing the floor. Begin by bending your wrists downwards and draw your hands into fists feeling the stretch along the back of your hand. Be sure that your shoulders are not raised. Hold for a moment and then release, straightening the hand and bending the wrist in the opposite direction so the fingertips are headed for the ceiling. Repeat several times.

2. Chest/Shoulder/Arm/Wrist Stretch Start: Standing near a wall or a doorway. Raise one arm so that it is at or nearly at shoulder level. Place palm of the hand on the flat surface of the doorway or wall with the wrist bent so that the fingertips are facing away from you, i.e. backwards. Feet should be shoulder width apart, one in front of the other. Begin by bending the forward knee so that you begin to feel a stretch across the shoulder and chest. You may also feel the stretch in any section of the arm. If you are using a wall instead of a doorway you may need to twist in the waist in order to achieve a stretch. After a few moments, switch arms. Variation: Alter the height of the arm on the wall or doorway and note how that changes the location of the stretch.

3. Neck/Head Stretch Start: Standing or sitting. It is important that the chest and abdomen are held in a firm and tightened posture. Begin by bringing your eyes downward and then allow your head to follow. Bend forward so that your chin is headed for or touching your chest. Do not allow your spine to bend below your neck and keep your shoulders soft and straight. Relax as much of your head and neck as you can. Then, slowly bring your head and eyes up so that you are again facing forward. Repeat as desired, feeling the stretch and holding your stretch softly.

4. Stretch of Life: Back & Leg Stretch Start: In a standing position facing something that you can rest your leg upon, between knee and waist height (a little higher height for those of you who are more flexible). If the step stool or chair is a little higher than comfortable, bend your knee a bit more. Face forward with the heel of one of your feet resting upon your object. Begin by gently bending forward at the waist bringing your arms forward with the objective of touching your toes. Ideally, you want to keep your knee straight, but that is not necessary in order to feel a stretch. Hold this position for a good long time so don't go too far in the beginning. Really use your breath on this one to let yourself ease into the stretch. On inhale bring yourself slightly out of the stretch by straightening at the waist. As you exhale work to straighten your knee while trying to get your hands close to your feet and head closer to the knee. Work on this gently for at least 10 breaths and then release, slowly coming back to standing one vertebra at a time. Repeat, using the other leg. This is a great stretch because you can easily measure your progress. You are addressing the important muscles in big muscles in the back of the leg. Caution: If you experience pain, tingling or numbness, slowly back off from this exercise as you have stretched too far.

5. Trunk Twist: Do the Twist Start: In a standing position, near a wall. Face the wall and place both hands, palms forward, fingers facing upward, against the wall. This can also be done from a sitting position by placing a stool near the wall so that you can the back and the comfortably place your hands on the wall as above. Begin by slightly leaning against the wall. Begin to move both feet in the same direction so that your toes are not facing the wall. Taking small steps (carving an arc with the movement of the feet) continue to turn your feet until you feel a good stretch in the trunk. Allow your head to look back over your shoulder in the opposite direction than the feet. This is a good for a few moments as you are working so many muscles. Release the stretch a bit on inhale and really work to move into the stretch on exhale. Remember to slowly return to center. Repeat on other side.

6. Leg Bend & Stretch Start: Lie on the floor on your back with arms at your sides. Place a pillow under your knees. Begin by raising one leg, bending it at the knee and tucking it to your chest by hugging it with stretch to hold your arms. Allow the other leg to rest gently on the floor holding the raised leg just tightly enough so that the straight leg can continue to rest on the floor. Stay in this position for several breaths. Feel the press of your leg against your abdomen. Allow the raised leg to return slowly to the floor and raise the other leg and repeat. Again, stay in the position for a good time, relaxing, and noticing the press of the breathing against the pressure of the bent leg. Finally bring both legs up and fold them against your chest, hugging your arms around your legs and holding for a nice long time. Use the opportunity your tremor has presented to improve the quality of your life.

Conclusion

You have now completed this entire series of stretch and relaxation exercises. Consider repeating two to four times per week. Keep track of your physical and emotional state of being before, during and after the exercises. Your tremor may or may not feel stressed by these movements, depending upon your individualized tremor and response to exercise.

If the tremor has increased, give yourself sufficient time until your next activity to allow the tremor to return to its normal and/or improved state. If you find that any of these activities stress your tremor to the point that the tremor has increased for a long period of time, slow down the process or do not do that particular movement. Perhaps you need to do less each time. For many, this series of stretches and relaxation will loosen your body, increase how you feel positively about yourself, and generally help you to feel fit.

Relaxation aids in coping with the stressors we find in daily living and in those that are part of the unusual events that occur in life. We all experience these events, as they are part of life. Trauma, losses, shocking experiences, loved one's pain, excitement, and tension have profound impact upon us whether we acknowledge them or not. Our bodies carry a great deal of stress that results from these kinds of situations. How we face our fears and pain, and how we find the inner strength to assist us in coping and working through these issues all influence the quality of our lives. Inner strength and coping skills come not only from our own history and experience; they also emerge when we join with others in mutual support and caring. Learning comes within groups, formal or informal.

Learning coping skills also comes from good friends, a partner, and/or relative with whom you feel an inner resonance of communion. Spiritual relationships can be of great assistance as well. You have the power to choose the opportunity presented by your tremor to improve your quality of life. We trust that you will make this happen.



Our Mission:

The IETF funds research to find the cause of essential tremor (ET) that leads to treatments and a cure, increases awareness, and provides educational materials, tools, and support for healthcare providers, the public, and those affected by ET.