
RELAXING TENSE MUSCLES

The process of relaxing tense muscles was described previously and will not be repeated here. However, you may have some muscle groups that become so tense that you need to apply the Identify-Tense-Relax (ITR) process. These muscle groups are the shoulder muscles and those at the base of the head and neck, which can be relaxed using the Turtle exercise; the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), the joint that links the lower jaw to the upper jaw, which can be relaxed using the Piranha exercise; and the upper legs and calves, which can be relaxed using the Ballerina exercise.

The trapezius muscles are the large muscles on the shoulders that support the neck. They, along with the muscles at the base of skull, are *stress susceptible*, as are the other muscle groups discussed in this section. Fortunately, this muscle group can be easily relaxed using the following exercise, which I call the Turtle:

1. Sit erect in your coach-class seat.
2. Simultaneously shrug your shoulders and pull in your neck like a turtle would if it was pulling its head into its shell. Try as hard as you can to pull your head in and touch your ears with the tops of your shoulders. Make your neck disappear.
3. Hold the tension and as you count—one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand five—tilt your head backward and rotate it around to massage the base of the neck.
4. Release the tension at the count of five and tell yourself to *relax*. Just let your shoulder muscles fall back into a normal position and feel the muscle tension drain away.
5. Repeat three to five times or until the neck and shoulder muscles are soft and relaxed.

The Turtle is also a good exercise to use if you get tense driving an automobile. So is the Piranha. The TMJ can get so tense that it requires medication to relax in some instances. However, you can relax it by pretending you are a fish with an underbite—the Piranha:

1. Start by extending your lower jaw as far forward as you can, trying to extend it beyond the teeth in the upper jaw.

2. When you have extended it as far as you can, count: one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand five.
3. Release the tension, tell yourself to *relax*, and let your jaw return to its normal position.
4. Repeat three to five times.

The muscles in the upper and lower legs frequently become very tense before and during a flight. I have seen this tension result in uncontrollable shaking of the legs. Even in this condition, your legs will support you if you need to walk around. However, you can take control of the tension by doing another coach-class exercise, the Ballerina. If you have ever watched dancers, particularly ballet dancers, warm up, you know they go through extensive stretching exercises to prepare their body for the rigors of dancing. In one of these exercises, they point their toes away from themselves and then rotate the foot to point their toes toward inward. This is exactly what you do in the Ballerina:

1. Slide your feet under the seat in front of you. There is not much room, so your feet will have to stay near the floor. Remember, this is a coach-class exercise.
2. Now lift one foot just off the floor, arch your foot, and point your toes away from you toward the front of the airplane (this will tense the large muscles on the top of the leg). Count: one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand five.
3. Now rotate your foot so that your toe is pointing toward you (this will stretch the muscles along the back of the leg all the way to the buttocks). Try to point your toes at your chin and, as you do, count: one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand five.
4. Now tell yourself to *relax*. Allow your foot to drop to the floor of the plane and repeat with the other leg.
5. Repeat three to five times with each leg.