

Easing Around



Why?

When our muscles are tense our automatic protective stress systems go on higher alert, ready for danger. These stress systems cause the muscles to get tense in case we need to spring into action. A vicious cycle can start, where increasing muscle tension further activates the stress systems causing yet more muscle tension and so more stress system activation...

Fortunately it works the other way around as well – the more our muscles are at ease, loose and at rest the more the stress systems calm down. And as the stress systems calm down they stop causing the muscles to be tense. This is a virtuous cycle – the more the muscles loosen up the more the stress systems calm down, further loosening up the muscles.

Even when we have tense muscles that are staying tense we can significantly reduce the level of stress system activation by easing up and loosening up *around* these tense muscles. This effectively gives a message to the stress systems that, even though some muscles are tense, overall we are ok.

When and Where?

It is helpful to cultivate the habit of checking into your body, scanning through so that you notice where muscles are tight and where they are loose. The more you practice the faster you will be able to check -out any tension hot-spots.

By getting into the habit of doing this in routine, low intensity situations you make it easier to remember and to be able to do this in higher intensity situations.

Practicing Easing Around in bed when going to sleep (and also if you wake in the night) is particularly helpful for more restful sleep. Practicing on waking in the morning helps to start the day with a feeling of ease.

How?

1. **Scan.** Spend a few moments scanning through your body. Notice where there are tight, tense, rigid, braced, active or working muscles. Notice where the muscles are looser, at ease, are soft or at rest. You might find it helps to systematically scan through different areas of your body from head to toe. Each of us has our own tension hot-spots where muscles tend to tighten in reaction to stress or difficulties. Even when we are lying flat we will find some muscles are active.

A good example is when we are holding the phone during a difficult call. Some muscles need to be active to hold the phone and support our posture, but we often find other muscles join in – the other hand might be tense or our face or brow. And how tightly is the phone being held? We may find that we are gripping it really tightly.

The aim as we are scanning is to notice where there is unnecessary tension, where the muscles are working usefully and where the muscles are at ease. It may be hard to notice exact boundaries but that doesn't matter – just a general feel across different areas of the body is fine.

2. **Notice.** Having checked out the muscles of the body, take a few moments to notice what else is going on around you and inside you. Explore how it is to just let what is happening with the muscles to carry on undisturbed for a few moments – you are holding off from adjusting or changing things just for a little while. Notice what is present in your surroundings, what you can see, hear and, perhaps, feel (such as wind, warmth, movements or vibrations). Notice what is present inside you: What other body sensations are present alongside the tension in your muscles? What thoughts, images, memories or emotional feelings are present?

You are taking a few moments to tune in to the feeling tone of what is going on right now. This can help you notice whether there is anything present that is linked in some way to muscles tightening or bracing. Such tightening or bracing often happens as an unconscious reaction and by pausing before you adjust the muscles you might find you can track what is triggering any automatic reactions affecting the muscles.

3. **Easing Around.** Invite the tense or tight muscles to ease up and loosen a little. Sometimes just noticing tension in a muscle is all that is needed to encourage it to loosen up. Initially explore doing this without changing the body position (unless you are in a risky or damaging posture). The focus here is not so much on fixing things, but on finding ways to ease up around what is unpleasant or uncomfortable. It's a bit like melting chocolate – if melted chocolate surrounds an unmelted chunk then it will tend to soften and melt as well – it may just take a little while. If muscles want to hold on to tension, you can experiment with just allowing this to be how it is, right now. You may be aware of discomfort and aches, of a strong feeling of wanting things to be different or perhaps an urge to immediately adjust the body to get rid of the tension. How is it to allow whatever is going on just to be as it is for just a few brief moments?

Explore loosening up the muscles around the tight ones. Widening out from the place of tension, loosen and soften muscles in progressively more distant areas. Allow the weight of the body to rest into what is supporting the body: give up some of the body weight, allowing the body to be supported. It is helpful to repeat this process of loosening up through the whole body a number of times. Each time you loosen up muscles in other areas of the body you may find the ones nearer or within an area of tightness loosen up a little more.

Sometimes the out-breath is helpful: during a relaxed out-breath the muscles have an innate tendency to loosen up a little. You may find allowing whatever is present to be as it is during the time of the in-breath and then loosening and easing during the out-breath is a helpful rhythm.

Decide whether adjusting the posture may help ease areas of tension. Make the adjustments slowly so you can notice the fine detail of how the shifts of posture cause ripples of changing sensation through the body.

4. **Ending.** Notice how your muscles respond as you continue with your next activity.

Easing Around Guide: Brief Version

1. **Scan.** Notice where there is tension or bracing in the body and where the body is loose and at ease.
2. **Notice.** For a few moments, check in to what is going on around you and inside you. What is present alongside any tension present in the body?
3. **Easing Around.** Invite the tense muscles to loosen a little. Loosen the muscles around the area of tension. Loosen more distant muscles. Allow the weight of the body to be supported. Repeat this cycle a few times. You may find that muscles helpfully loosen a little during a relaxed out-breath.
4. **Ending.** Notice how your muscles respond as you continue with your next activity.