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Catch and Release: Tension

Have you occasionally caught yourself clenching your teeth? Driving with tense arms and rigid hands? Finding your shoulders around your ears? Furrowing your brow while reading your email?

Catching yourself when you tense up is an important step in learning how to release the stress that builds up in your body.

Recognizing the early signs and symptoms of unhealthy muscle tension can be challenging as, over time, your brain may not recognize when your muscles have not returned to a healthy state of relaxation. This is called sensory motor amnesia, which describes the negative effects of developing muscle memory, the state in which we have lost sensation and voluntary control of a movement or posture because it has become so deeply learned. *You may feel like you don't even know how to relax anymore!*

A degree of muscular tension is required to help keep our bodies toned, mobile, and ready for action. However, continuous unnecessary body tension can lead to chronic pain and other health problems.

Carrying tension in the body

When muscles remain contracted for long periods of time, these spots of tension may create trigger points within the muscle tissue that can be tender to touch or regularly radiate pain. These trigger points are a buildup of lactic acid resulting from over-contraction of your muscles. Hyper-tensed muscles can be caused by stress, poor posture, and physical over-exertion. When the muscles in your shoulders, jaw, or hips are clenched, blood cannot flow freely to that area.

Why does stress cause muscle tension?

We know that when we activate the stress response in our brain, a flow of adrenaline and cortisol is triggered that prepares us to protect ourselves from harm. Muscle tension is one of these quick responses, even if the harm is perceived rather than actually before you. As far as your brain is concerned, stress is stress.

Where do most of us carry muscle tension due to stress?

It differs as to where people carry the most tension. Tension in the upper body is held in the:

- Head – this may show up as tension headaches
- Jaw – this may manifest as tensing or clenching your jaw, and grinding your teeth while you sleep
- Neck and shoulders – this can be caused by posture, or rising shoulders which tense the neck

Tension in the mid-body includes:

- Stomach – often a feeling of tightness
- Hips – often linked to tension in the upper thighs as your body prepares for ‘flight’. It has been found in yoga practices that stretching the hip muscles can release built-up emotions and unconscious tension which demonstrates how much emotion can be stored in the body!
- Hands – we may be storing a considerable amount of tension in our hands, not only from gripping phones or steering wheels, but even from subconsciously making a fist.
- Tension in the lower extremities is found in our legs and feet. When we are stressed, and adrenaline pumps to our vital organs to protect us, this may result in less blood flow to our legs, ankles, and feet. This can cause discomfort and tension that needs to be released.

[Check out this interesting article](#) from Psychology Today on what may be the cause of your stress, depending on where you store it in your body. Do you think this applies to you?

Catch ...

Chronic stress and tension can cause significant health challenges beyond muscle tension and pain. Those with chronic stress need to take care of their well-being by seeking out supports and resources to help them mitigate and manage their stress.

For now, find ways throughout your day to pause and notice if and where you are carrying your stress and tension. While catching yourself tensing may be tricky, as soon as you are aware that you are tensing and the muscles involved, small interventions can relax that region of your body.

One suggestion is to pay attention for one week, and jot down on a body map where you feel the tension and what was happening at the time. For example, when a particular contact phones, are you gritting your teeth? When sitting in a meeting, are you gripping your pen?

You can print off this one page [‘body map’](#) and circle where you feel the muscle stress and tension. Write down keywords that describe when you felt this tension in that part of your body.

You are now in a better position to pay daily attention to where you personally hold tension, and to check on that location regularly while practicing ways to release tension.

...and Release

Releasing tension and relaxing muscle groups will help you feel better throughout your day.

One way to release tension quickly is through somatic release. Somatic release involves a series of small movements intended to relieve pain and excess tension to help calm your body and mind. These movements can be done in place – standing or sitting – and no equipment is required. Somatic release can include:

- Unclenching your jaw
- Dropping your tongue from the roof of your mouth
- Moving your eyes from side to side
- Relaxing your forehead

- Dropping your shoulders
- Turning your head from side to side
- Shaking out your hands
- Relaxing or breathing from your stomach
- Taking three deep, slow breaths

While researching this article, I came across a series on deeper somatic practices, researched and posted by Johns Hopkins Medicine. Here is [Practice #1: Body Scan](#), and there are many other series you can check out.

Depending on where you hold your stress, there are different ways to help you relax and release, including:

- Deep breathing, and envisioning breathing: Take five deep breaths into the area of your body that is tense, and feel for a release. Repeat as needed.
- Self-massage: You can find videos and tips online to learn self-massage on your jaw, your shoulders, even your hands. These are quick massage tips that take only minutes, but when done often enough can help create deeper relaxation over time.
- Stretching: Slow, easy stretches while breathing deeply can help release and relax tense muscles.

Here are some ideas for different areas of tension:

Jaw: Release the jaw by a simple [Lion's breath](#) (or if you're in an open office, you try yawning or sighing with an open mouth).

Tension headaches: Check out these [simple, releasing self exercises](#) to release the neck and jaw muscles contributing to the tension headaches.

Brow: Release your forehead by raising and lowering your eyebrows two to three times. Try inhaling deeply while closing and squinting your eyes tightly, and then exhale while you release the tension, and open your eyes.

Neck: Return blood flow to your neck muscles by rolling your head gently from one side to the other, and repeat in the opposite direction.

Shoulders: With an inhale, lift your shoulders to your ears. Exhale and draw your shoulders down and back, guiding the shoulder blades downwards and towards each other.

Hip release: [These stretches](#) can help release hip tension.

Here are [some other ways to release tension](#).

Being mindful of holding stress in your muscles, and learning to catch it quickly, enables you to respond in a number of ways – with a somatic response, a deep breath, a stretch, or massage – releasing tension so that you can go about your day feeling relaxed and well.

Sources:

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.