

CLINICAL NOTE

Clinical Tip: Relax and Relax More

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Sit comfortably. Raise your shoulders, hold, relax . . . relax more. What did you experience? If you are like most people, you noted that the second instruction to relax more, you may have felt your shoulders dropping even more and relaxed even deeper.

In our teaching and clinical experience we have observed that muscle tension often does not decrease completely after instructing the person to relax. When we add the second instruction, “relax more” (or “let go” or “drop”), the muscles relax significantly more. The initial relatively low level of muscle tension after the first relaxation appears to be beneath awareness since many people report that they are relaxed when they physiologically are not (Peper, Booiman, Tallard, & Takebayashi, 2010; Whatmore & Kohli, 1974). The low level of muscle tension appears more prevalent in people who are having or had a history of muscle stiffness or pain or in athletes whose coaches report they look “tight.” It is only after the second command for awareness and release that they notice a change and experience a deeper relaxation. For a few people even two commands are not sufficient for them to “feel” or know when they are totally relaxed. These individuals can benefit from having surface electromyography (SEMG) feedback to learn to identify and quantify

the degree of muscle tension. With this information the person can make the invisible muscle contractions “visible” and the unfelt tension “felt,” thus developing awareness and control.

The usefulness of giving a second instruction, relax more, after the first instruction, relax, is illustrated by the SEMG recording from the upper left and right trapezius muscle of a 68-year-old male with chronic back pain. While sitting upright without experiencing any pain, he was instructed to lift his shoulders, briefly hold the tension, and then relax (Peper, Tylova, Gibney, Harvey, & Combatalade, 2008; Sella, 1995). When the SEMG of the trapezius muscles did not decrease to the relaxed state, he was asked to relax more as is shown in Figure 1.

Although the subject felt that he was relaxed after the first instruction to relax, he continued to hold a low level of muscle tension. Most likely, his chronic stiffness was the result of this covert (unaware) low level of muscle tension. We have observed this same process in hundreds of clients and students while teaching SEMG guided relaxation and progressive muscle relaxation.

A similar process is illustrated by the SEMG wireless recording from the trapezius muscle from a professional tennis player while practicing on the court. To perform smooth strokes with more power, relaxed shoulders are imported important. The total relaxation allows the muscles to quickly regenerate. Some athletes need the two commands to totally relax the muscles as is shown in Figure 2.

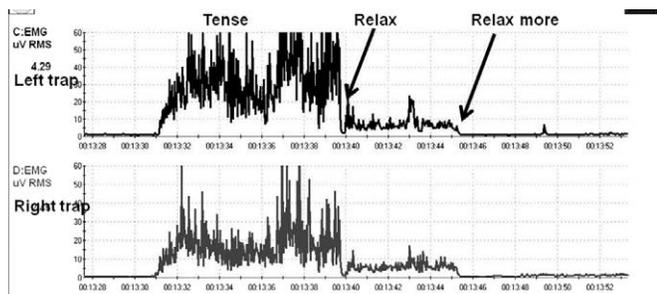


Figure 1. SEMG recordings of the left and right upper trapezius when the client was asked to lift his shoulders, hold, relax, and relax more. Only after the second instruction did the muscle tension decrease to the relaxed baseline level.

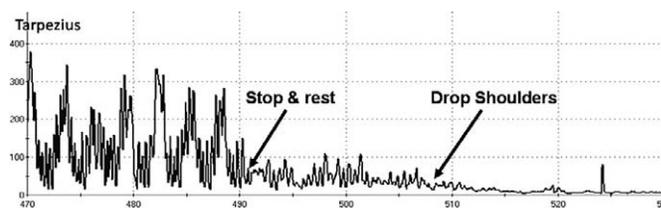


Figure 2. Trapezius SEMG recorded from a professional tennis player while practicing smooth strokes. When instructed to stop and rest, he needed a second command to allow the muscles to relax totally.

Thus, we recommend that practitioners teaching relaxation instruct their clients after tightening a muscle, such as lifting the shoulder, to repeat the relaxation instruction at least twice so that the muscle can totally relax before it is reactivated.

References

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