

Grounding Exercises

Use these grounding exercises to help calm your emotions after you have been triggered or you feel your emotions rising.

Grounding Exercise #1: Diaphragmatic Deep Breathing

Many of us breathe shallowly on a regular basis, and stress can worsen this tendency. Shallow breathing is one of the body's fight flight responses, and the more we do it the more our body will feel under threat. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is our bodies' relaxation response, and is a remedy to the fight flight response activated by stress. Deep diaphragmatic breathing is the most important skill you can have in your healthy coping toolbox. By practicing the skill of deep breathing on a regular basis, you also build up a "reserve of calm" that protects against automatic stress reactions, giving you a greater sense of control of your thoughts, behaviors, and choices.

Steps:

1. Sit comfortably with your eyes open or closed.
2. Make sure your feet are resting flat on the floor.
3. Breathe in through your nose for 4 counts.
4. Hold for 2-3 seconds.
5. Breathe out through your mouth for 8 counts. You can silently say, "relax".
6. Repeat.

Grounding Exercise #2: Senses

This exercise focuses on using our 5 senses to bring us back to the present moment by helping us take note of what is around us, what is in the present, and in our control. When you feel triggered or your emotions escalating, you can do this 5-4-3-2-1 exercise to feel calm and return to the present moment.

Steps:

1. Get comfortable where you are now – sitting or standing, it doesn't matter.
2. Look around the room and notice **5** things you can **SEE**.
3. Next, notice **4** things you can **TOUCH**. Touch them.
4. Now, notice **3** things that you can **HEAR**. Focus on your breath or background noises.
5. Notice **2** things you can **SMELL**. This could be the detergent in your clothes or the smell of the room you are in.
6. Notice **1** thing you can **TASTE**. Chew a piece of gum, drink something, or just notice the taste in your mouth.
7. Finish with a nice deep breath by inhaling through the nose for 4 (1-2-3-4), holding for 2-3 seconds, and then exhaling through the mouth for 8 (1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8).



Grounding Exercise #3: Progressive Muscle Relaxation*

In this exercise, you will be alternately tensing and relaxing specific groups of muscles from your head down to your feet. The tension and relaxation of muscles will allow you to achieve a deeper state of relaxation. With practice, you will recognize tension in any specific muscle and be able to reduce that tension. This exercise may be especially helpful for people with chronic pain and/or dissociation.

Note: If you have medical issues in your muscles or bones, or any other issues that make physical activity difficult, consult your doctor first. Do not do exercises that hurt. If you have pain in an area, skip that area.

Steps:

1. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down. Get as comfortable as possible and do not cross your legs. You can close your eyes or keep them open.
2. For 10 seconds, take a deep breath, and as you breathe in, tense the muscles in your face. Feel and hold onto the tension, as tightly as you can without discomfort.
3. Breathe out for 10 seconds, and as you do so release the tension by relaxing the muscles in your face. Allow the anxiety and other tense emotions to be released from your face.
4. You can move on to the other parts of your body, until you have tense and relaxed all the way down to your calves:
 - Shoulders
 - Arms
 - Hands
 - Chest
 - Buttocks
 - Thighs
 - Calves
5. Now tense your feet and toes. As you tighten them, scan your body for any remaining anxiety or other stressful emotions, send them down your feet and toes, and release them as you relax the muscles.
6. To close the exercise, imagine in your mind's eye a big blank chalkboard with the word "relax" written on it. Take a few deep, slow breaths, and with each breath focus on the word "relax". Continue to breathe in and out until you are ready to end the exercise.

*Adapted from *Treating Survivors of Childhood Abuse and Interpersonal Trauma, Second Edition: STAIR Narrative Therapy* by Marylene Clotire, Lisa R. Cohen, Kile M. Ortigo, Christie Jackson, and Karestan C. Koenen. © 2020 The Guilford Press.

