

Grounding Exercise Instructions

You can use the following steps to conduct grounding exercises with clients, co-workers, or loved ones.

Step 1: Determine if you should conduct a grounding exercise with the client

It is appropriate to use a grounding exercise with:

- A client who is relaxed, engaged, and low on their feeling thermometer. These clients will be more open to engaging in the grounding exercise, learning how they might be able to administer it themselves when they might feel triggered or at heightened emotions, when they really need it.
- A client who has been triggered, or whose feelings are escalating or high on the feeling thermometer. These clients are often quite upset, agitated, or irritable. In this case, you would use grounding to calm their emotions and bring them to the present to where they can communicate and move towards their goals.

Step 2: Explain what grounding exercises are

To a client who is low on their feeling thermometer, you could say:

- *“Different people have different techniques for calming feelings and becoming more present when they may be feeling heightened emotions.”*

For a client who has escalating emotions or is high on their feeling thermometer, you could say:

- *“It sounds like you are upset right now. There are some exercises I’ve shared with other clients that they’ve found helpful to manage their emotions when they’ve experienced heightened emotions like you are.”*

Step 3: Ask for permission

Always ask the client for permission to conduct the ground exercise before beginning:

- *“If you’re open to it, can I do a grounding exercise with you? It only takes a minute, and if you find it helpful you can use it on your own at a later time when you might be experiencing heightened emotions.”*

Step 4: Conduct the grounding exercise

Use the instructions and sample scripts below to conduct a grounding exercise.

Grounding Exercise #1: Diaphragmatic Deep Breathing

1. Thank the client for agreeing to let you do the grounding exercise with them.
2. Describe the importance of diaphragmatic breathing:
 - *“Many of us breathe shallowly on a regular basis, and stress only exacerbates or worsens 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.”

3. Describe the exercise and prepare the client:

- *“First, sit comfortably in your chair with your eyes open, or you can close them if you feel comfortable. Your feet should be resting flat on the floor.*
- *“Next, we will do a 4-count inhale, then hold for a few seconds, then exhale for 8 counts. If this is too difficult you can take shorter breaths, but always remember to try and double the length of your exhalation. For example, inhale for 2 seconds, then pause, then exhale for 4 seconds.”*

4. Conduct the exercise:

- *“Let’s try this breathing now. Breathe in through your nose, (smell the flowers) pushing your abdomen out as far as possible, finally lifting your chest as the air fills the lower chest and then the upper. Hold for a moment. Now exhale the breath through your mouth, (blow out the candles) on a long, slow exhalation, sucking your abdomen to push the air out. As you exhale, you might want to silently say “Relax”. You may feel some light-headedness. This will pass with practice and the lightheadedness should dissipate.”*

5. Practice breathing in for 4 counts, holding, and breathing out for 8 a few more times.

Grounding Exercise #2: 5 Senses

1. Thank the client for agreeing to let you do the grounding exercise with them.

2. Describe the importance of this grounding exercise:

- *“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. It helps the thinking brain become activated and helps us focus. This takes us away from thinking about our anxieties about the future and what is out of our control and back to the present moment.*
- *“When you feel triggered or your emotions escalating, you can quickly do this 5-4-3-2-1 exercise to feel calm and return to the present moment.”*

3. Conduct the exercise.

- *“I’d like you to get comfortable where you are now. Sitting or standing, it doesn’t matter.*
- *“First, I want you to look around the room and notice **5** things you can **SEE**. Maybe something you normally don’t focus on, like the windowsill, dirt on the floor, or a detail in a painting or picture on the wall.*
- *“Now, I want you to notice **4** things that can **TOUCH**. I want you to touch them.*



- *“Now notice **3** things that can **HEAR**. Focus on your breath or background noises, like any humming you hear or even the birds chirping outside.*
- *“Now notice **2** things you can **SMELL**. This could be the detergent in your clothes or the smell of the room you’re in.*
- *“Lastly, I want you to notice **1** thing you can **TASTE**. Chew a piece of gum, drink something, or just notice the taste in your mouth.*
- *“Finish with a nice deep breath by inhaling through the nose for 4 (1-2-3-4), hold, and then exhaling through the mouth for 8 (1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8).”*

Grounding Exercise #3: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

1. Thank the client for agreeing to let you do this exercise with them.
2. Describe the importance of the grounding exercise.
 - *“This exercise helps you to achieve a deeper state of relaxation by alternately tensing and relaxing specific groups of muscles from your head down to your feet. With practice, you will be able to recognize tension in your muscles and reduce that tension using this technique. It is important not to do exercises that hurt. If you have pain in an area, don’t try to force it, and feel free to skip that area.”*
3. Conduct the exercise.
 - *“To prepare for this exercise, you can sit in a chair or lie down. Get as comfortable as possible and do not cross your legs. You can close your eyes or leave them open.”*
 - *“Now to begin. 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.”*
 - *“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.”*
 - Continue the exercise with the client by moving through the following muscle groups:
 - Shoulders
 - Arms
 - Hands
 - Chest
 - Buttocks
 - Thighs
 - Calves

- Direct the client: *“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 your muscles.”*
- *“To close this 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, and when you are ready, you can end the exercise.”*

Step 5: Provide the client with information to do grounding exercises on their own

Provide the client with information about how to do the grounding exercises on their own. You can share the instructional handout with these grounding exercises and let them know that when they have been triggered or are experiencing signs that their emotions are escalating, they can use these exercises to calm themselves down and stay low on the feeling thermometer, moving them towards their goals, and enabling them to communicate effectively.