



Grounding, Mindfulness, and Relaxation Techniques

The parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for calming and regulating the body and mind. Many techniques and strategies exist to activate the parasympathetic nervous system. Here are grounding exercises that could potentially support you in distress. The goal of a grounding exercise is to regulate the body's physiological response to trauma and to help you remain in the present moment.

Grounding

5-4-3-2-1: Tap into the five senses. Identify five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Bilateral stimulation: Cross your arms (either over your torso in an X or rest your palms face down on opposite knees) and alternate tapping your shoulders/thighs. You may also rock back and forth or side to side while tapping.

Activating the left brain: Place feet soundly on the floor and be aware of physical surroundings by counting backwards, practicing English, or doing math problems.

Shifting temperature: Shock your nervous system by changing the temperature—hold ice, stand outside, take a cold shower, drink a glass of cold water, etc.

Raise your heart rate and increase oxygenation by engaging in movement—jumping jacks, running, burpees, dancing to a favorite song, any kind of short-spurt, high intensity movement.

Mindfulness/Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is an embodied practice where you tense the muscles in discrete areas of the body before intentionally releasing the tension. Some people prefer to begin at the feet and move up through the body toward the head, and others prefer to begin at the crown of the head and move down.

Visualization: Imagine standing by a gently moving river surrounded by trees. Imagine yourself picking up a fallen leaf and placing a challenging thought, emotion, or memory on its back before lowering the leaf to the water. Watch the leaf, and the thought/emotion/memory, floating down the river away from you. Alternatively, imagine attaching challenging thoughts, emotions, or memories to a balloon and releasing the balloon to watch it float away from you, up toward the sky.

Connecting with nature: Go for a walk, run, or hike, or stop by a local community garden or park.

Connecting with your senses: Smell something you enjoy, listen to something soothing, or dance or walk to connect with your body. Dancing to well-loved music is almost universal in releasing anxiety or anger, and brisk walking is also helpful.

Deep and intentional breathing: Gradually increase the length of each inhale/exhale or place a hand on your belly, ensuring you can feel it rise and fall as you breathe.

Paced breathing ensures oxygen reaches the brain and staves off hyperventilation/panic responses. Count out inhales or exhales, follow a guided breathing video online, or sit back-to-back with a support person and try to match the pace of their breathing.