

GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

Grounding techniques can be very useful when we feel really distressed, particularly when the distress makes us feel very unreal or detached, or it feels like we are in a different situation to where we really are.

Anxiety often makes us feel very detached, dissociated, or unreal. Grounding techniques help to bring us back to the here and now, with an awareness of our own bodies. They are strategies that help us to be in the present moment, in reality, rather than in the current distress.

Practise them, and learn what works best for you - whether it's a mental strategy like telling yourself you're safe now, or maybe doing something more physical. The aim is to turn your focus of attention away from the past or current distress, and into the here and now of reality and safety.

Look around the room, notice the colours, the people, the shapes of things. Make it more real.

Listen to and really notice the sounds around you: the traffic, voices, washing machine, music etc.

Notice your body, the boundary of your skin, how your clothes feel on your skin, movement in your hair as you move your head, really feel the chair or floor supporting you - how that feels in your feet, your legs, your body.

Stand up and put your feet firmly on the ground

Move about: stretch, stamp your feet, jump up and down, dance, run on the spot, rub your arms and legs, clap your hands, walk, remind yourself where you are right now.

Use **5,4,3,2,1**: Think about 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch (and touch them), 2 things you can smell or like the smell of, and 1 slow, deep breath.

Notice what is **right now** - and notice how different it is to the distressing thought.

Breathe mindfully: in for 5, hold for 5, out for 5. Breathe deeply down to your belly; put your hand there (just above your navel) and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down. Imagine you have a balloon in your tummy, inflating it as you breathe in, and deflating as you breathe out. When we get scared, we breathe too quickly and shallowly and our body begins to panic because we're not getting enough oxygen. This causes dizziness, shakiness and more panic. Breathing slower and deeper will stop the panic.

Rub your arms and legs. If you have lost a sense of your body, rub your arms and legs so you can feel where your body starts and ends, the boundary of you. Wrap yourself in a blanket and feel it around you.

Tense and release: in the part of your body where you feel most anxious

Walk, and really think about walking - mindfully. Notice the way your body moves, how your feet move and feel as you walk, notice your leg muscles, and the way your arms feel as they swing. Notice the movement in your hair, and the sensation of moving air on your skin. Notice the sensations of breathing as you walk.

Describe (and say out loud if appropriate) what you are doing right now, in great detail. Or describe doing a routine activity.

Try to **think about different things**, almost like playing mental games, for example: count backwards in 7s from 100, think of 10 different animals, 10 blue things, one animal or country for each letter of the alphabet, say the alphabet slowly, say the alphabet backwards etc.

Carry a **grounding object** with you. Some people carry a stone or other small object, perhaps which has personal meaning, to comfort and touch when you need to.

Ask yourself questions in order to bring yourself into the present. Write down your own questions, for example:

- Where am I, right now?
- What day is it?
- What year is it?
- How old am I?
- Where do I live?

Use **Positive Coping Statements**. You might prepare a coping statement, for example: "I am (name), I am safe right now, this is just a thought - that was then and this is now. I am in (place) and the date is (date). This anxiety will pass".

Make an **emergency or soothe box** you can use another time, and fill it with meaningful and helpful objects or reminders.

Self Care: Take time to look after yourself. You could have a warm, relaxing bath or a sleep, a warm drink, play some soothing **music**, or just take some quiet time for yourself. Be kind to yourself.

CALMING TECHNIQUE

Breathing is a powerful determinant of our physical state. When our breathing rate becomes elevated, a number of physiological changes begin to occur. Perhaps you've noticed this yourself when you've had a fright; you might suddenly gasp, feel a little breathless and a little light-headed, as well as feeling some tingling sensations around your body. Believe it or not, the way we breathe is a major factor in producing these and other sensations are noticeable when we are anxious.

Anxious breathing – you might already know that we breathe in oxygen – which is used by the body – and we breathe out carbon dioxide. In order for the body to run efficiently there needs to be a balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide, and this balance is maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe. Of course, the body needs different amounts of oxygen depending on our level of activity. When we exercise there is an increase in both oxygen and carbon dioxide; in relaxation there is a decrease in both oxygen and carbon dioxide. In both cases the balance is maintained.

When we are anxious though, this balance is disrupted. Essentially, we take in more oxygen than the body needs – in other words we overbreathe or hyperventilate. When this imbalance is detected the body responds with a number of chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increase in heart rate to pump more blood around, numbness and tingling in the extremities, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness.

The normal rate of breathing is 10-12 breaths per minute – what's your breathing rate?

The calming technique – while overbreathing and hyperventilation are not specifically dangerous, continued overbreathing can leave you feeling exhausted or on edge so that you're more likely to respond to stressful situations with intense anxiety and panic.

Gaining control over your breathing involves both slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. Use the calming technique by following these steps and you'll be on your way to developing a better breathing habit:

- 1) Ensure you are sitting comfortably or laying down
- 2) Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through the nose if possible)
- 3) Hold the breath for 2 seconds
- 4) Release the breath taking 6 seconds (through the nose if possible) then pause slightly before breathing again
- 5) Practice, practice, practice

Breathing tips

- When you first begin changing your breathing, it may be difficult to slow your breathing down to this rate. You may wish to try using a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate to start off with.
- When you are doing your breathing exercises, make sure that you are using a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Try to practice at least once or twice a day at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distractions. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. The key to progress really is practice, so try to set aside some time each day.

By using the calming technique, you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general level of anxiety. With enough practice, it can even help to reduce your anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION TECHNIQUE

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling tense, or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you tense up when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become stiff. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practice this technique consistently.

Preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have physical injuries, or a history of physical symptoms that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses such as turning off the TV and radio and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably supports your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants such as alcohol.

General Procedure

- 1) Once you have set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2) When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3) Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like “Relax” as you relax the muscle.
- 4) When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

- 1) Right hand and forearm. Make a fist with your right hand.
- 2) Right upper arm. Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to “make a muscle”.
- 3) Left hand and forearm. Repeat as for right hand and forearm.
- 4) Left upper arm. Repeat as for right upper arm.
- 5) Forehead. Raise your eyebrows as high as they will do, as though you were surprised by something
- 6) Eyes and cheeks. Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
- 7) Mouth and jaw. Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you are yawning.
- 8) Neck. Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
- 9) Shoulders. Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
- 10) Shoulder blades/back. Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
- 11) Chest and stomach. Breathe in deeply, filling you're your lungs and chest with air.
- 12) Hips and buttocks. Squeeze your buttock muscles.
- 13) Right upper leg. Tighten your right thigh.
- 14) Right lower leg. Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
- 15) Right foot. Curl your toes downwards.
- 16) Left upper leg. Repeat as for right upper leg.
- 17) Left lower leg. Repeat as for right lower leg.
- 18) Left foot, Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practicing consistently is the key.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the quality of being present and fully engaged with whatever we're doing at the moment — free from distraction or judgment, and aware of our thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them.

Mindfulness resources

Online workshops, audio downloads and access to apps available on the Manchester University Counselling Website