

Dr Natalie Raiher's Essential Grounding Tools

When we feel overwhelmed or very anxious, it can be hard to focus and settle ourselves so we can make good decisions. In fact, when our fear brain gets too active, our ability to plan or think clearly gets interrupted. Grounding exercises help to decrease the anxiety and panic so that we can access our thinking again and take action to improve the situation or help us to cope better.

Using the body and senses to ground yourself

- Wiggle your feet into the floor and feel the pull of gravity. Slowly stand up as if you were pulling yourself upwards from the base of the spine to the top of your head making your body as spacious and open as possible. Open your shoulders and chest. Feel yourself open, grounded and powerful from your feet up.
- Rub your hands together so they get warm and tingly - this is very grounding when fear makes us feel like we're not really here right now
- Run your hands under lukewarm water. Feel the water on your skin, soothing, calming. If the anxiety is very high, you can try cold water instead to bring you back to the present with a little more force.
- Use your five senses in any way possible:
 - Grounding smells are sharp and strong (vinegar, citrus, menthol) and soothing ones are more mellow (lavender, your favourite fabric softener on clean clothes).
 - For taste, grounding flavours are also sharp and strong (vinegar, mustard, mint, chilli) while soothing ones are lighter and comforting.
 - For sound, a loud sound can bring us back to earth but sound works best in a soothing sense. Find calming music, or listen to the birds outside, or the sound of running water.

- For touch, using our hands to feel the different textures around us can help to bring us back to the here-and-now. We can also use touch in a very focused way to soothe ourselves: place a soothing hand over your heart (like where you might put a baby to calm it) and feel your chest rise and fall with your breath as you offer comfort to yourself.
- For sight, focus on your immediate environment: name 5 things you can see, hear, smell, taste and touch or look around the room naming everything you can see in order: “blue chair, book shelf, pot plant...” This will help bring you back to the room when fear takes you away. You can also use sight to soothe yourself: watch the trees gently moving in the breeze, or the clouds in the sky, or even the stars at night.

You can be creative with whatever works for you with these tools - experiment and find the techniques that are grounding and soothing for you and practice them again and again.

- Make a coping card with supportive statements: “My name is _____. It is _____ (day or date). I am safe right now. I will get through this. I have gotten through difficult things before. This is a moment of suffering and it will pass.”

Or anything like this that can help - maybe a favourite quote or imagining what you might like whispered in your ear to support you. Keep the coping card with you (even on your phone) and look at it when you need support. You can even use pictures or photos of things that bring you comfort and strength.

Using exercise and meditation to turn off the fear brain and turn on the soothing brain

Any form of physical exercise or meditative activity will help to turn off threat centres in the brain and activate self-soothing centres. These systems cannot be activated at the same time.

- Consider using any meditation apps like Headspace, Buddhify or Calm. Otherwise there are a host of resources on You Tube. My top picks are Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness of Breathscape and Bodyscape <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbXUAg5tA0s> and Vicki Panagotacos’ 15 minute Mindfulness Meditation for Stress Relief <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v45WSuAeYI>

- You don't actually need to meditate to meditate! Any repetitive activity will help - washing dishes with focus, walking rhythmically, singing, grooming your pets, baking will all do the trick. Use all the senses you can to engage and just keep bringing your mind back to the task at hand everytime it drifts off (as it will).
- Physical exercise will help to get you back into your body and ground the panic brain. It will also help to burn off the adrenalin (needed for actual fighting or fleeing but not used in hiding out in our homes). Get out for a walk, run or cycle or use any home exercise videos that you can.

Calming more extreme panic

For more severe panic symptoms, the following grounding skills are very useful in tipping body chemistry to calm:

- Lower your body temperature: use ice/frozen peas on pulse points (always wrap ice in a tea towel)
- Slow your breathing down. Focus on the exhale, not the inhale. A useful count is in for 4, hold breath for 5, out as slow as you can for about 7
- Move - burn up the adrenalin with any physical activity. This will also help to ground you.
- You can also practice progressive muscle relaxation where you tighten and release different muscle groups in turn to remind the body of the difference between anxiety and relaxation. You can find the instructions online here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86HUcX8ZtAk> or
<https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/progressive-muscle-relaxation-script.pdf>
- Keep repeating either a single skill or combination until you feel little more settled and able to think again

Please don't hesitate to make your own grounding tools based on these principles. You probably already have many that you have developed over your lifetime. The key concept is to use your body and your senses.