

Grounding Techniques When Triggered



Introduction

When we become anxious, we can become 'ungrounded', find our anxiety growing, begin to lose contact with reality as our thoughts get more panicked or fearful, and as our body reacts with tightening or sensations.

If we have experienced any kind of trauma, it can happen that certain things such as specific smells, tastes, touches, shadows, images or something someone says or does can trigger us into a traumatic reaction. We may find ourselves suddenly in a state that feels like panic or terror, blanked out, or mentally transported back to a traumatic event so that it feels like it is happening in the present.

We can also sometimes find ourselves feeling collapsed, numb, flatlining.

There are some techniques that can really help: here are some possibilities.

Try them out, adapt them, some may work for you, others may not. Some may not suit you at all because of associations they hold for you.

These techniques need to be practiced. This will allow you to find out which techniques work for you, and if you practice them throughout the day, they will help to regulate anxiety, keep you grounded and present, and you will be able to access them easily when you need to.

Using our taste and smell

- ❖ Eat something with a strong taste.
- ❖ Smells can help. Pierce the flesh of an orange, lime or a lemon and draw in the scent. Maybe there is a smell you find comforting? Break fresh ginger and inhale it. Cook, and smell the spices as you do. Draw in the scent of coffee.
- ❖ If going into a possibly triggering situation, wear a strong scent that is associated with comfort or safety, and breathe it in when needed.

Using our breath

- ❖ When you breathe, the breath quite literally goes right down through the centre of your body, and will centre and align and ground you if you allow it. As you breathe, feel this and allow your body to align and balance around your breath.

- ❖ Focus on breathing slowly and deeply rather than shallowly and rapidly. Place your hand on your tummy so that you can feel it rise as the breath comes in. You may place your other hand against your chest, and feel how that contains and supports you.
- ❖ When you are hyperaroused – anxious, thoughts moving fast, body tight, breathing shallow – breathe so that the in breath is shorter than the out breath – for example breathe in for the count of 4 and out for 7, or in for 6 and out for 9.
- ❖ If you are feeling flat, numb, lethargic, let the outbreath be shorter than the in breath – for example, breathe in for six and out – phew! – for four.
- ❖ Sometimes focusing on breathing can increase panic and anxiety: if this is the case, stop focusing.
- ❖ A short mindfulness exercise could become part of your daily routine e.g. a 3-minute breathing space. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1P0TKL8> This will keep your system calmer, and your body will respond more to the use of your breath when you are activated.
- ❖ You may like to keep brief breathing and calming exercises on your phone so that you can listen to them during the day or when anxious or panicky.

Using our vision can be helpful, and bringing our thinking brain back on line through concrete describing of what we see

- ❖ Make eye contact with a supportive person, or pet.
- ❖ Open your eyes and really study and notice the detail of the things around you: ask yourself about colour, shape, image, design..... describe an object or picture to yourself, try to find the right word for the colour, the texture, the shapes.
- ❖ Name what you see around you: look around the room and name what you see on the walls, the furniture.
- ❖ Count how many objects there are: these activities bring the thinking brain back online.

Using imagery

- ❖ Spend time developing grounding images so that you can access and use them easily when triggered: allow yourself to imagine and deepen into a felt image of being in a safe place; being on top of a mountain feeling expanded; being in a soft bubble; with a supporter at your side...
- ❖ Are there images that bring on feelings of comfort and security, of calm? If so think of having these on your phone or nearby at home.

Using our bodies to ground ourselves

- ❖ Rub your feet flat on the ground. Take your shoes off, if you can to do this. Walk on the grass in your bare feet.

- ❖ Rub one hand against another. Rub the back of your neck. Feel a texture, the ribbed sleeve of your sweater, the arms of your chair. Lean back against the chair, feel its solid support.
- ❖ Your body may feel frozen in place: If you can, move your body or some part of it. Get up and move around, if you can. Wave or stretch your arms. Jump. Stamp around, feel and hear your feet contact the ground.
- ❖ If you are in a situation where you cannot stand up or move around, make small movements eg rotate your shoulder or ankle, or move your elbows, wiggle your toes, notice how this feels, the rhythm of it.
- ❖ Comb or brush your hair. A lot of people 'play with their hair' in different ways – this is often an unconscious self-soothing or grounding mechanism. If you do something like this, notice, and notice in what way it helps you.
- ❖ Hold your hands under cold or warm running water and savour the sensation.
- ❖ Wash your hands, while noticing yourself doing so.
- ❖ Hold an ice cube, or place your hands around the sides of a cup of warm drink.
- ❖ Splash water on your face. Wash your face carefully, noticing each sensation.
- ❖ Bring your hands together. Fold them over each other. Stroke one with another. Bring them together palm to palm: notice which ways of holding and moving your hands help you to feel grounded, steady, held.

Using our thinking

- ❖ Use a thought, for example say to yourself "That was then, this is now". Calmly and gently ask yourself to listen and to hear this 'Did you hear – I said that was then, and this is now. None of that is happening right here, right now'. Say it aloud if possible.
- ❖ You may prefer to use words or short phrases such as 'I am safe here and now'. Try out some words and phrases, say them and listen to them, notice which words or phrases calm and ground you; which ones steady you; which ones give you support or hope.
- ❖ Be aware and remind yourself of what is different in this place than what was in the place from the past you have been triggered into.

Using Music

- ❖ When anxious or panicked, calming music can be very helpful. What music calms you? When numb or low, music that has strong rhythm can be helpful – bluegrass, salsa. Sometimes we need first to listen to the music that reflects where we are at the moment – fast music when anxious, moving to a slower piece, moving to calm; - calm and comforting music when numb or dispirited, moving to music with more energy and rhythm. Think of making your own playlist you can use when anxiety begins to rise, or your energy lowers.
- ❖ Sing a song, paying attention to the words. Think about what song might support you when anxious or panicky, so that you don't have to think of one at the time.

- ❖ Experiment with humming or singing different tunes: which ones calm you, which ones give you energy, which ones bring a smile, which ones comfort your sadness or aloneness, which ones give you hope

Concentrating on what we hear

- ❖ Listen to and really pay attention to sounds: the clock ticking, the birds outside, the tinkle of your bracelet, the tapping of the keys on a keyboard.
- ❖ Listen to a piece of music, follow one voice or instrument throughout.

Using touch

- ❖ Get up and touch objects. See 5 things. Name 5 things. Touch 5 things.
- ❖ Stroke and/or talk to a pet.
- ❖ Stroke and/or talk to a cuddly toy.
- ❖ Take a hug and give a hug.
- ❖ Massage or comforting touch from a trusted person
- ❖ Touch and feel an object that connects you with a support – the necklace your friend gave you, the spiritual emblem you wear, the small teddy on your key ring.

Our relationships

- ❖ If there is someone else around and available, talk to them. Call or text a friend, if no one is home.
- ❖ Imagine a supportive person, think of what they would say to you now.
- ❖ Name what is happening if you are with others and you get anxious or dissociate: 'I just left there for a moment', 'I got disconnected'.

To become anxious, to experience panic or to collapse and experience low energy are very common.

These suggestions may be helpful, or experimenting with them may lead you to find your own individual ways of supporting yourself when these things happen to you.

Remember: You can call the DRCC National 24-Hour Freephone Helpline at 1800 77 8888 at any time to receive support.

issued March 2020