

Exercises for Stress Management and Trauma Recovery

Intro

I encourage you to experiment with each of these techniques, to observe which ones work for you and in what ways. Practice them for the first few times when you are experiencing mild stress or discomfort, rather than expecting yourself to spontaneously use them when you are experiencing moderate or intense discomfort. Not all of the exercises will be helpful to you, but hopefully you will find 2 or 3 of them that do help alleviate stress and bring you back to the present moment. These techniques will be helpful to you during therapy sessions, but they can have an even bigger impact when they are integrated into your routines and used regularly in your daily life.

5-4-3-2-1

This technique gets you to use all your five senses to help you to get back to the present. It starts with you sitting comfortably, closing your eyes and taking a couple of deep breathes. In through your nose (count to 3), out through your mouth (to the count of 3). Now open your eyes and look around you. Name out loud:

- 5 – things you can see (you can look within the room and out of the window)
- 4 – things you can feel (the material on your chair or your clothes, your feet on the floor)
- 3 – things you can hear (traffic noise or birds outside, when you are quiet and actually listening to things in your room constantly make a noise but typically we don't hear them).
- 2 – things you can smell (perhaps you have some leftover soap on your hand, or can grab something nearby with a scent, alternatively, thinking of 2 things you enjoy the smell of)
- 1 – thing you can taste (it might be a good idea to keep a mint or piece of chocolate handy in case you are doing this grounding exercise! You can always leave your chair for this one and when you taste whatever it is that you have chosen, take a small bite and let it swirl around your mouth for a couple of seconds, really savoring the flavor).
- Bonus - name 1 thing you like about yourself

Take a deep breath to end.

*HINT: You don't need to worry about the order and the numbers - just slowing down to notice any of your senses in the moment can help bring you back into the present. The more intense the dysregulation, the more senses you should try to engage.

Cross-Crawl

Stand with your feet apart and your arms open parallel to the ground. Shift your weight to your right foot, lift your left knee and touch it with your right hand. Step back to both feet and immediately shift weight to on your left foot as you lift your right knee and touch it with your left hand. Repeat this several times in a comfortable, upbeat, rhythmic way. Breathe fully.



Draw Around Your Foot In Your Mind

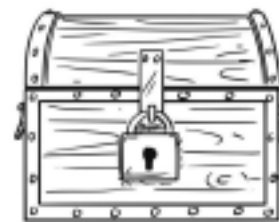


Place your feet on the ground and in your imagination (eyes open or closed) draw an imaginary outline around each foot. Start at the heel and using your imaginary pencil slowly go up the side of your foot to your pinky toe and then make sure you draw around each toe and then go back towards the heel. Repeat on the other foot. You can choose any shape to trace with your eyes (a star, the outline of a province, spelling out letters).

This technique can be especially helpful when experiencing intrusive thoughts or images, or PTSD triggers.

Containment Imagery

If you are experiencing unpleasant thoughts, memories, images, sensations or emotions, lead your mind to put them somewhere else. Containment imagery exercises are a way to put distance between you and your painful or intense emotions, thoughts and sensations, until they can be processed safely. The purpose of containment is to give you the freedom to decide when and where to process your experiences.



Containment is achieved by imagining placing whatever is troubling you in a container that can be open and closed (such as a box, safe, vault, chest, but whatever comes to your mind is fine, as long as it is large and secure). Imagine filtering whatever is troubling you, into this container and sealing it. The container will hold these emotions, thoughts and sensations until you feel ready and safe to approach them. Furthermore, once the container is sealed, you can continue to add negative emotions, thoughts and sensations throughout the day, storing them in this safe place until you decide to open them.

The goal of this exercise is not to ignore the information your brain is reminding you of, but to create distance between yourself and the distressing information, so that it can be processed at a better time.

Somatic Shaking/Shaking Meditation

To try shaking meditation, stand with your feet hip-width apart and soften your knees and drop your shoulders. Begin shaking and feeling the bounce through your knees and let the vibration spread to your arms and shoulders. Try to shake your entire body with little trembles and full body shakes. You can even play some music if you want. Experiment with different types of movements in different parts of your body. There is no right or wrong way to shake.

Get Your Adrenaline-Fueled Energy Out

Some people feel unable to focus on grounding exercises due to restlessness or high adrenaline, I suggest starting with physical activity to release pent-up energy and increase the felt sense of the body. Afterwards, return to preferred grounding techniques to continue the grounding and relaxation exercise.

- Run up and down the stairs
- Take a brisk walk or run outside
- Dance around the house (or clean) while listening to loud music
- Lay down on a bed and kick and punch the mattress
- Lay down on a bed and kick and punch the mattress

Self-Compassion Break (Dr Kristin Neff)

Take a deep breathe in, and then a large exhale while you sigh. Now, say to yourself:

1. "This is a moment of suffering"

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- "This hurts."
- "Ouch."
- "This is stress/anxiety/trauma"

2. "Suffering is a part of life"

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- "Other people feel this way."
- "I'm not alone."
- "We all struggle in our lives."
- If trauma-related- "I'm being reminded of something from the past."

Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest. Or adopt the soothing touch that feels right for you. Say to yourself:

3. "May I be kind to myself"

You can also ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?" Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- "*May I give myself the compassion that I need*"
- "*May I learn to accept myself as I am*"
- "*May I forgive myself*"
- "*May I be strong.*"
- "*May I be patient*"

This practice can be used any time of day or night, and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

Left to Right Re-Orientation

Keeping your eyes open, take note of your surroundings by turning your head to the left, naming the things you see out loud, then the center, and then to the right. You may need to practice turning your head to the left and then right and naming things a few times.

Afterwards, answer the following questions:

- Where am I?
- What is the date?
- How old am I?
- What are some of my strengths and/or resources (internal and external)?

Quick Tense and Relax

Help the body relax by tensing different muscle groups (without strain or injury) for a few moments, and then relaxing them and you exhale. Notice the sensations in your body after you have relaxed the previously tensed muscles.

The muscle groups are:

1. Lower limbs (feet and legs)
2. Stomach and chest
3. Arms, shoulders, and neck
4. Face

To enhance this exercise, add a grounding phrase when you release the muscle tension and exhale such as: I am safe, I can be at ease, or this feeling/sensation(s) will pass.

Other Activities to Try

- Place one hand on your chest, the other on your abdomen, and notice the sensations as you inhale deeply through the nose and exhale completely through the mouth
- Place a hand on your head where your forehead meets your hairline, repeat out loud "I am safe" or another comforting phrase for 60 seconds
- Take a hot or cold shower (or alternate between hot and cold)
- Run cold water over your hands, splash your face, or hold an ice cube in your hand
- Go outside and lay on the earth
- Play an instrument, sing a song
- Hug an animal, groom a pet
- Drink a hot or cold beverage
- Eat something with interesting texture (e.g, crunchy) or strong flavour