

5-4-3-2-1 GROUNDING EXERCISE

A step-by-step activity for bringing attention back to what is around you

This grounding exercise gives your attention five small jobs. You move through what you can see, feel, hear, smell and taste. It can be useful when thoughts are racing or anxiety feels overwhelming, but there is no requirement to finish every step.

5 - SEE

Find five things. Go beyond naming them: notice colours, edges, shadows, patterns and tiny details.

4 - FEEL

Notice four safe physical sensations: the floor under your feet, clothing, a chair, or an object in your hand.

3 - HEAR

Listen for three sounds. Try one close by, one further away and one quiet sound.

2 - SMELL

Notice two smells if this sense is comfortable. It is completely fine to skip this step.

1 - TASTE

Notice one taste if comfortable - or replace this with another sight, touch or sound.

This is not a test. Sensory differences, trauma, ARFID, migraine, nausea and many other experiences can make particular senses difficult. Change the exercise to suit you.

5 - WHAT CAN I SEE?

Slow the search down. The detail is part of the grounding.

THING 1

I can see _____ A detail I notice _____

THING 2

I can see _____ A detail I notice _____

THING 3

I can see _____ A detail I notice _____

THING 4

I can see _____ A detail I notice _____

THING 5

I can see _____ A detail I notice _____

Visual challenge: Find something with a straight edge, something curved, something lighter than the objects around it, and something you had not noticed before.

4 - WHAT CAN I FEEL?

Choose sensations that feel neutral or safe. You do not need to focus inside your body.

1 - FEET

What do your feet notice? Floor, socks, shoes, pressure, warmth or something else?

2 - SUPPORT

What is supporting you - chair, bed, wall or floor?

3 - HANDS

Touch an object. Describe texture, shape, weight or temperature.

4 - CLOTHING OR AIR

Notice fabric against your skin or air around you.

Words I could use: smooth / rough / soft / firm / cool / warm / heavy / light / still / moving / textured

3 - WHAT CAN I HEAR?

Listen outward. You are locating sounds, not trying to make your mind silent.

A SOUND CLOSE TO ME

What is it? _____

Is it steady, changing, quiet, loud or rhythmic? _____

A SOUND FURTHER AWAY

What is it? _____

Which direction is it coming from? _____

THE QUIETEST SOUND I CAN FIND

What changes when I listen carefully? _____

If sound is overwhelming, skip this stage or choose one predictable sound to focus on rather than searching for three.

2 - SMELL & 1 - TASTE

These two steps are optional. Grounding should not force you into difficult sensory experiences.

2 THINGS I CAN SMELL

1. _____

2. _____

If there is no clear smell, you can simply notice the quality of the air - or skip this step.

1 THING I CAN TASTE

You might notice a familiar drink, a safe food, toothpaste or simply the taste already present. If taste is difficult, replace it with one more thing you can see, hear or touch.

My preferred replacement sense, if I need one: _____

BACK TO RIGHT NOW

After the senses, orient yourself to the ordinary facts of this moment.

I AM HERE

Where are you? _____

IT IS NOW

What day/time of day is it? _____

I AM DOING

What are you doing right now? _____

MY NEXT SMALL STEP

What is the next manageable thing - not the whole day? _____

Finish one sentence:

Right now I can see that...

For the next five minutes I need...

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

The standard 5-4-3-2-1 order is only one version. Build one that works for your nervous system.

SENSES I LIKE USING

SENSES I WOULD RATHER SKIP

OBJECTS THAT HELP ME GROUND

PLACES WHERE THIS COULD HELP

MY OWN ORDER

_____ - _____ - _____ - _____ - _____

My quickest version for a difficult moment:

AFTER THE EXERCISE

Notice any change without expecting anxiety to disappear.

Before: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

After: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

WHAT HELPED MOST?

WHAT DID NOT HELP?

WHAT WILL I TRY NEXT TIME?

Grounding is one coping strategy. If anxiety or panic is frequent, severe or affecting daily life, additional professional support may be useful. New or concerning physical symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be anxiety.