

Feeling Anxious? Try the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

Use this exercise to find calm amidst chaotic thoughts

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When we're feeling anxious or panicked, our mind races and our thoughts bounce from one worst case scenario to another. In the midst of this spiral, it can be hard to see a way out.

However, there are simple exercises that can help us regain control of our thoughts. They're known as grounding techniques, because they help us anchor ourselves in the present moment.

The 5-4-3-2-1 method is one of the most popular grounding techniques. "A mindfulness exercise, this technique helps us come out of anxiety, unpleasant thoughts, or worries and come into what is right here, right now in the present, through our senses," says Stephanie Strauss, a yoga, meditation, and mindfulness expert.

In this article, we explore the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique, taking a look at how it works, how to practice it successfully, and the benefits it offers. This technique can be a valuable tool, whether you're facing a moment of intense anxiety or simply trying to be more mindful in your daily life.

At a Glance

Feeling anxious or overwhelmed? This technique can help. All you have to do is identify:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

This simple yet powerful exercise uses your senses to anchor you in the present moment, helping you find some calm amidst the chaos.

Understanding Grounding Techniques

Grounding techniques are mental and emotional exercises that help us reconnect with the present moment and reduce feelings of anxiety, stress, or dissociation.

When our thoughts start to get away from us, using a grounding technique can help us pull our focus away from those thoughts and back to what's happening right now, in our body and in our environment. This can help interrupt our stress response and bring a sense of calm.

There are in fact several types of grounding techniques, including:

- **Sensory grounding:** These techniques involve using our senses, i.e. touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell, to anchor ourselves in the present moment. The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique is a type of sensory grounding exercise.
- **Physical grounding:** These techniques involve physical movements or actions that bring our attention back to our body and the present moment. Examples include deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, or tapping exercises.
- **Cognitive grounding:** These techniques involve engaging our mind in mental activities that shift our focus away from distressing thoughts or emotions. Examples include counting backwards, reciting a comforting mantra, or doing a problem-solving puzzle.
- **Environmental grounding:** These techniques involve creating a safe and soothing environment to help regulate our emotions and reduce our anxiety. Examples include creating a calming playlist, surrounding ourselves with comforting objects, or organizing our physical space.

Mindful Moment

Need a breather? Take this free 8-minute meditation focused on mindfulness—or choose from our guided meditation library to find another one that will help you feel your best.

How to Do the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

If you want to try the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique, here's how to do it.

Identify 5 Things You Can See

The first step is to look around you and identify five things you can see right now. Feel free to say them out loud or whisper them in your mind as you describe each item in detail to yourself, says Strauss.

They could be anything, like a plant in the corner, a painting on the wall, a crack in the tile, a bird outside the window, or a charger plugged into a socket.

Identify 4 Things You Can Feel

The next step is to pay attention to how you feel. For this step, you can close your eyes, if that feels comfortable, or gently fix your gaze downward, says Strauss.

Now, list four things that you can feel. It could be a slight breeze, the warmth of the sun, the fabric of your clothes against your skin, the texture of your couch against your arm, or your breath as it goes in and out.

Identify 3 Things You Can Hear

Then, pay attention to the sounds around you and identify three things you can hear. It could be a horn blaring in the background, the low hum of the heater, or the television playing in another room.

For this step, you can continue to keep your eyes closed or your gaze downward, Strauss says. Notice the variety of sounds and their qualities.

Identify 2 Things You Can Smell

Next, engage your sense of smell. With your eyes still focused or closed, take a moment to notice two things you can smell right now, says Strauss. It could be the fumes of traffic, the air freshener in the room, or the aroma of food wafting toward you from a nearby eatery.

If you're having trouble identifying any smells, you can take a sniff of your coffee, a nearby flower, or even just the air itself.

Identify 1 Thing You Can Taste

Finally, bring your attention to your taste buds and identify one thing you can taste. It can be the balm on your lips, the gum you're chewing, or the lingering flavor of the lemonade you had earlier.

For this one, you can also close your eyes and imagine the taste of something, like your favorite tacos, the pizza you ate last night, or the meatloaf that makes you think of home.

How the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique Works

Here's how the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique works:

- **Promotes sensory awareness:** The exercise makes us more aware of our sensory experiences. By identifying things we can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste, we actively engage with our surroundings and ground ourselves in the present reality.
- **Activates neural pathways:** The act of mindfully observing and describing sensory details activates neural pathways associated with awareness and attention.
- **Interrupts the anxiety loop:** This exercise acts as an immediate distraction that diverts our attention away from intrusive thoughts by engaging our senses, says Strauss. By consciously engaging with the world around us, we interrupt those thoughts and redirect our focus outward.
- **Relaxes the body:** Focusing on sensory input can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and turn on the body's relaxation response, which counteracts the physiological arousal that comes with anxiety, says Strauss.

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This exercise acts as an immediate distraction that diverts our attention away from anxious thoughts, by engaging our senses. It moves us from an overthinking, worrying, or ruminating mindset to a noticing and describing mindset.”

— STEPH STRAUSS, MINDFULNESS EXPERT

Tips for Practicing the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

These are some tips that can help you practice the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique successfully:

- **Recognize when you need it:** It's important to realize when you're feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or panicked, so you can take a step back and do the exercise, says Strauss. “Developing this awareness is often the hardest part.”
- **Do it thoroughly:** Don't rush the exercise. Strauss recommends going through each step slowly and deliberately, if your time permits, so you get to experience each sensation fully. However, if you're pressed for time, do as many of the steps as you can.
- **Avoid judgment:** When you do the exercise, avoid passing judgment on the things you see, hear, smell, feel, or taste, as that can make you feel more anxious. Just notice and describe the sensations objectively.
- **Check in with yourself:** Once you complete the exercise, Strauss recommends taking a moment to check-in with yourself to see how you're feeling and whether there has been any change. “It's OK if nothing has changed. This is just an opportunity to get curious as to what is here now.”
- **Repeat the exercise as needed:** You can repeat the exercise as many times as you need to, until you feel calmer. Try to notice different sensations each time.
- **Experiment with different variations:** Try variations of the technique to find what works best for you, says Strauss. For example, you can get creative and try to identify things around you that start with a certain letter, to make the exercise more challenging and engaging.
- **Be kind to yourself:** Approach each practice with kindness and self-compassion, says Strauss. “You may find that one day the practice works well and the next day it doesn't, especially if the mind is extra busy that day.” Either way, be gentle and understanding with yourself.

Benefits of the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

These are some of the benefits of practicing the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique:

- **Reduces anxiety:** Research shows us that mindfulness-based interventions can help with several anxiety disorders. By shifting our focus away from anxious thoughts, this exercise can interrupt anxiety spirals and lessen their intensity.
- **Improves mindfulness:** Focusing on our senses encourages us to be fully present and aware of our surroundings. This helps us be more mindful of our physical and emotional experiences. Increased mindfulness is linked to higher levels of happiness and lower levels of anxiety and depression.
- **Regulates emotions:** The calming effect of grounding ourselves in the present moment can help us regulate our emotional state. Instead of letting anxiety control us, we can control our reaction to it.
- **Relieves stress and anxiety:** By engaging our senses, we activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps us relax and counters the fight-or-flight response triggered by anxiety.
- **Counters negative thoughts:** The exercise serves as a distraction from negative or intrusive thoughts. By shifting our attention to sensory details, we create mental space away from rumination, worry, or anxiety-provoking thoughts.
- **Improves concentration:** Regularly practicing the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique can improve our focus and concentration. By training our mind to pay attention to specific sensory inputs, we sharpen our cognitive skills and reduce mental distractions.

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This technique can empower us to take an active role in managing our anxiety and stress levels, giving us a sense of control and self-efficacy.”

— STEPH STRAUSS, MINDFULNESS EXPERT

When to Use the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

You can use the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique whenever you feel overwhelmed by anxiety, stress, or strong emotions. Here are some situations where it may be particularly helpful:

- **During anxiety episodes:** When you experience heightened anxiety or a panic attack, the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique can help bring your focus back to the present moment and reduce feelings of distress.
- **Before an important event:** You can use this technique to calm your nerves and ground yourself before situations that may cause stress or anxiety, such as important meetings or presentations, says Strauss.
- **When feeling overwhelmed:** If you're feeling overwhelmed by a busy schedule, multiple tasks, or conflicting priorities, you can take a few minutes to practice the grounding technique. Engaging your senses can help you regain your focus and clarity, says Strauss.
- **During emotional upsets:** If you're dealing with intense emotions like anger, sadness, or frustration, the exercise can help you calm down and keep you from reacting impulsively.
- **While dealing with delays:** While waiting in lines or bumper to bumper traffic, Strauss says you can try this technique as a coping strategy to help with feelings of impatience and agitation.
- **Before bedtime:** Strauss recommends adding this technique to your bedtime routine, to help you unwind and quiet a restless mind, for a better night's sleep.

The best part is that this practice can be done discreetly, pretty much anywhere—on the bus, in a meeting, before a speech, or when you're having a difficult conversation, says Strauss.

Takeaways

The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique can be a helpful addition to your stress management toolkit. You can use it to calm down and divert your attention in situations when you're feeling anxious, impatient, angry, or upset.

If you like, you can also choose to practice it regularly, as a part of your self-care routine, to help you become more mindful in your daily life.

4 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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