

Breathing & Grounding Exercises for Anxiety and Stress

Detailed, step-by-step practices you can use anywhere (5–10 minutes)

This handout provides structured, easy-to-follow techniques to calm your nervous system and refocus your attention. Use these steps exactly as written at first; over time, adapt the counts and pacing to what feels comfortable for your body.

How to Use This Handout

- 1 Choose one breathing exercise and one grounding exercise.
- 2 Set a timer for 2–5 minutes (or complete the number of rounds listed).
- 3 Go slowly. If you feel lightheaded, sit or lie down and return to normal breathing.
- 4 Record what worked (and what didn't) so you can refine your personal plan.

Tip: Pair one breathing exercise with one grounding exercise for 2–5 minutes. Practice 1–3 times daily.

Breathing Exercises

Box Breathing (4×4×4×4)

- 1 Sit upright or stand tall; relax shoulders and unclench your jaw.
- 2 Inhale gently through your nose for a count of 4, feeling your belly and ribs expand.
- 3 Hold your breath (no strain) for a count of 4.
- 4 Exhale slowly through your nose or pursed lips for a count of 4.
- 5 Hold with empty lungs for a count of 4.
- 6 Repeat for 4–6 rounds. If comfortable, you can increase each count to 5.

Tip: Keep the breath smooth (no gasping). Imagine tracing a square: up (inhale), across (hold), down (exhale), across (hold).

4–7–8 Breathing (Nervous-System Downshift)

- 1 Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge behind your front teeth (keep it there).
- 2 Inhale quietly through your nose for 4.
- 3 Hold your breath—gently—for 7 (no straining).
- 4 Exhale audibly through pursed lips for 8, like a slow 'whoosh'.
- 5 Complete 4 rounds. Beginners can start with 2 rounds and build up.

Tip: Make the exhale long and unforced; if holding for 7 is hard, shorten the counts proportionally (e.g., 3–5–6).

Coherent Breathing (5–6 breaths per minute)

- 1 Settle your posture and relax your shoulders.
- 2 Inhale through your nose for a smooth count of 5.
- 3 Exhale through your nose for a smooth count of 5.
- 4 Continue for 3–5 minutes, keeping breath gentle and even.

Tip: Use a metronome or count in your head. Aim for comfort—never force large breaths.

Physiological Sigh (Rapid Relief)

- 1 Take a deep inhale through your nose.
- 2 Add a short second 'sip' inhale through the nose to fully fill the lungs.
- 3 Exhale slowly and completely through the mouth, like a long sigh.
- 4 Repeat 3–5 times, then return to normal breathing.

Tip: This quickly reduces tension by releasing built-up carbon dioxide. Use before a tough call, meeting, or panic surge.

Diaphragmatic + Pursed-Lip Breathing

- 1 Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest; relax your shoulders.
- 2 Inhale through your nose for 4, letting the belly rise more than the chest.
- 3 Purse your lips (as if cooling hot soup) and exhale for 6–8, gently drawing the belly in.

- 4 Repeat for 2–3 minutes.

Tip: If you feel dizzy, slow down and shorten the counts. Comfort first.

5■Finger (Tracing) Breathing

- 1 Spread one hand like a star.
- 2 With the index finger of the other hand, trace up the outside of the thumb as you inhale.
- 3 Trace down the inside of the thumb as you exhale.
- 4 Repeat for each finger: inhale up, exhale down.
- 5 Complete both hands for 10 total breaths.

Tip: Eyes can be open or softly closed. Let the tactile tracing anchor your attention.

Grounding Exercises

5■4■3■2■1 Senses Reset

- 1 Look around and name 5 things you can SEE (colors, shapes, light/shadow).
- 2 Name 4 things you can FEEL (clothing on skin, chair, temperature, floor under feet).
- 3 Name 3 things you can HEAR (near/far, loud/soft).
- 4 Name 2 things you can SMELL (or recall favorite smells).
- 5 Name 1 thing you can TASTE (sip water, mint, or simply notice your mouth).

Tip: Speak your list out loud if possible. Move your eyes and head gently to scan your environment.

Category Naming (Cognitive Grounding)

- 1 Pick a neutral category (e.g., fruits, cities, animals, school supplies).
- 2 Name 10 items in that category—slowly and clearly.
- 3 If your mind races, pause and take a gentle breath between each item.
- 4 Switch categories and repeat once if needed.

Tip: Keep categories emotionally neutral to avoid triggering content.

Object Focus (Sensory Anchor)

- 1 Hold a small object (pen, key, coin, stone).
- 2 Describe 5 features in detail (weight, temperature, texture, color, edges).
- 3 Rotate it slowly; notice changes in light and feel.
- 4 If thoughts intrude, label them 'thinking' and return to the object.

Tip: Press the object lightly into your palm and notice the pressure and contact points.

Temperature Reset (Dive Reflex Light)

- 1 Splash cool (not icy) water on your face for ~30 seconds, or
- 2 Hold a cool pack or wrapped ice against your cheeks/forehead for 30–60 seconds.
- 3 Resume normal breathing and notice changes in your body's arousal level.

Tip: Avoid extreme cold; if you have cardiac issues, consult a clinician before using cold exposure.

Mini Body Scan

- 1 Place feet flat on the ground; lengthen your spine.
- 2 Slowly scan from the crown of your head to your toes.
- 3 When you find tension, soften that area and take 3 easy breaths into it.
- 4 Relax your jaw, drop your shoulders, and let your exhale lengthen.

Tip: Move at the speed of curiosity—noticing without judging or forcing change.

3×3 Ground

- 1 Name 3 things you can SEE, 3 you can HEAR, and 3 points of TOUCH (e.g., feet, back, hands).
- 2 Then name 2 of each.
- 3 Then name 1 of each.
- 4 Finish with one slow exhale.

Tip: If naming silently, press fingertips together lightly to mark each count.

Brief Progressive Muscle Release

- 1 Tighten your hands and forearms for 5 seconds, then release for 10 seconds.
- 2 Tighten face and shoulders for 5; release for 10.
- 3 Tighten chest and back for 5; release for 10.
- 4 Tighten belly and glutes for 5; release for 10.
- 5 Tighten thighs, then calves/feet for 5; release for 10.
- 6 Breathe naturally; notice the contrast between tension and relaxation.

Tip: Skip any area with pain or injury. Comfort first—never strain.

Anchor Phrase + Breath

- 1 Choose a short supportive phrase (e.g., “I am safe enough right now,” “This will pass,” “Inhale calm, exhale tension”).
- 2 On each inhale, say the first half silently; on each exhale, say the second half.
- 3 Continue for 1–2 minutes, syncing words with breath rhythm.

Tip: Use a phrase that feels believable and kind—not perfect or forced.

After-Practice Check-In

- 1 Rate your distress now (0–10). Did it change?
 - 2 Note the exercise(s) used and what helped most.
 - 3 Plan the next practice (what, when, where). Consistency builds skill.
- Quick 3 minute plan: Physiological Sigh (1 min), 5,4,3,2,1 (2 min), Check in.

Notes:

