



Grounding & Emotional Regulation

Practical, evidence-informed skills to reconnect with the present and respond to emotions with greater choice.

Start here: regulate, don't suppress

Grounding helps orient attention to the present. Emotional regulation helps you notice, understand, and respond to emotions without being driven entirely by them. The goal is **not** to force distress away; it is to create enough steadiness to choose your next step.

1 | Orient to the present (30–60 seconds)

Look around slowly. Name **five things you see, four things you feel physically, three sounds, two smells, and one taste** (or one thing you appreciate in this moment). This is a commonly taught grounding exercise; research supports grounding and present-moment attention broadly, but this exact sequence has limited direct trial evidence.

Try saying: “I am here, in this room, on this day. I can notice what is around me.”

2 | Feel your points of contact

Place both feet on the floor, if comfortable. Notice the chair supporting you, your feet touching the ground, or your hands resting on your legs. Gently press your feet down for a few seconds, then release. Describe sensations without needing to change them.

Alternative: Hold a textured object or name the temperature of a glass of water.

3 | Slow the breath—only if it helps

Breathe gently through the nose if comfortable. Try a slightly longer exhale than inhale (for example, in for 3 counts and out for 4–5) for 30–60 seconds. Keep the breath easy, not deep or forced. Slow breathing can support autonomic regulation; it is optional, and some people feel more uncomfortable focusing on breath.

If breath focus increases distress: Return to looking around, feeling your feet, or listening to sounds.

4 | Name the emotion and the need

Pause and complete: “**I notice I’m feeling ____.**” Then ask: “**What is this feeling signaling?**” and “**What would support me right now?**” Possible needs include reassurance, rest, connection, a boundary, movement, or time to process. Naming emotions can help create distance from an automatic reaction.

5 | Choose one small, values-aligned action

Ask: “**What is one helpful thing I can do in the next five minutes?**” Examples: step outside, drink water, text a trusted person, write down the next task, take a brief walk, or communicate a boundary. You do not have to feel fully calm before taking a constructive step.

When a technique doesn't help

If a practice makes you feel more activated, numb, or disconnected, stop and try a different anchor. Eyes-open, external grounding may be easier than inward body scanning for some trauma survivors. Skills are options—not tests you must pass.

My personal grounding plan

My early signs of activation: _____

A grounding strategy I can try: _____

A supportive next action or person: _____

Evidence & further reading

- World Health Organization. (2020). *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide*. (Grounding and noticing practices.)
- Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT Skills Training Manual* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. (Mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation.)
- Zaccaro, A., et al. (2018). How breath-control can change your life: A systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 12, 353. doi:10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2018, updated 2025). *Post-traumatic stress disorder (NG116)*. (Trauma-informed treatment context.)

Educational information only; not a substitute for individualized mental health care. If you feel unsafe or at immediate risk, seek urgent local support.