

## **Grounding techniques to manage anxiety and stress.**

Given the current situation that we have all been living with since the first lockdown that started in March of 2020 it is true to say that we have all been tested in one way or another. Experiencing occasional stress and anxiety is a normal part of life. However, living as if we are under continual threat and repeated activation of our stress response can take its toll on our minds and bodies, sometimes with catastrophic consequences.

There are many causes that can attribute to difficulties with our mental health. We may be carrying unresolved traumas from our past, have financial worries, relationship difficulties or simply the pressures of daily life and a lack of a work/life balance.

If you feel that your own mental health is having a significant impact on your functioning day to day, I would firstly advise that you speak with your GP or mental health practitioner for advice or signposting to the most appropriate service that would suit your needs.

There are many things we can do to support our mental wellbeing. If you feel that you are in a position to manage a few basic steps to reducing the impact of your symptoms, then you may find this worksheet helpful.

Taking care of the basics of our 'self-care' like eating well, exercising, having a good sleeping pattern and spending less time on our devices is key. You can also seek the support of a counsellor or psychotherapist, use meditation or mindfulness and discussing a course of medication with your GP can also help.

You may be familiar with the term 'self-care' particularly as it has been banded around a lot since the COVID outbreak. Self-care is not just about eating well, exercising, taking salt baths or eating cake! True self-care shouldn't actually be something that we resort to because we are so exhausted that we need some reprieve from our own relentless internal pressure. It is making a choice to build a life that you don't need to regularly escape from. That often means doing the things we least want to do.

One of the things that we can all do to help us manage difficult emotions or challenging situations is to use some grounding activities. I would like to share with you some grounding activities that may help you manage difficult emotions or challenging situations that you may find yourself in. Unfortunately to reap the benefits of these grounding activities we do have to make time to practice them!

### **What does it actually mean to be grounded?**

Being grounded means being in your body, you feel your emotions and you are fully aware of your present moment experience. It also means you are feeling responsible and in control of your safety and wellbeing.

The feeling of being grounded is something we can all develop and a helpful therapeutic approach for managing anxiety, stress and feelings of being overwhelmed, flashbacks and other symptoms of PTSD, and for improving our overall mental health.

Grounding helps to strengthen our parasympathetic response. This is our bodies own natural ability to return to calm and normal functioning. The parasympathetic response counteracts the

fight, flight or freeze response. Grounding activities help us to activate that safe feeling in our brain and body by reminding ourselves that we are in the present moment and we are safe.

When we are grounded and calm, we are able to work through emotions and memories in a healthy way and we are more likely to be able to rational and find solutions to our problems more readily. Our bodies have a natural ability to resolve trauma and to work through emotions but when we are feeling panicked or overwhelmed, we go into the fight, flight, or freeze responses and our brains shut down those natural abilities. This is because our body thinks its' survival is at stake'.

We can train ourselves to trigger a calming response in the body by practicing grounding techniques. As I said earlier It is important to practice these exercises over and over again so that they become habitual and we can draw on them at times of stress and anxiety.

Many of the grounding techniques focus on our breath, and although this is something that happens automatically, we can maintain some level of control over it. This can help to create change in the limbic system the part of the brain responsible for the fight, flight or freeze responses and create a sense of calm. It also enables us to reconnect with the body and reassert a sense of control and reorientate us to the context we are actually in: the present moment.

Listed below are some grounding techniques that you may find helpful.

### **Breath counting**

Find a place to sit comfortably and become aware of your breathing paying close attention to your breath going in through the nose and out through the mouth. Try to make the breaths slow, deep and long. Once you find your breath, you can go through the following steps to help ground yourself. Breath in through the nose and out through the mouth and count 1. Then breath in and out again and then count 2. Continue with breathing and counting to 3 and 4 until you get to 5 and then reverse count backwards to 1.

You may wish to do this for up to 10 mins or how ever long you need. If you lose count or go to 6 or 7 then your mind has wandered and you are, therefore, not remaining present.

### **Butterfly hugs or hug of self love**

A butterfly hug is another way to calm ourselves down if we are feeling anxious, sad, angry, ashamed or fearful. It is a really simple technique and can offer us a feeling of safety and security. You place your hands together linking your thumbs and create the shape of the wings of a butterfly Then place your hands under your collar bone near the top of your chest. Then simply tap the top of your chest in an alternating rhythm. You may wish to close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Keep tapping slowly, again slow your breathing down making the breaths slow, deep and long during this exercise. Keep repeating this for about 2-5 minutes or longer until you feel your symptoms subside.

You may wish to wrap your arms around yourself so that each hand touches the opposite upper arm and tap in an alternating rhythm. This technique works great with children!

## **54321 exercise**

Before starting this exercise, again pay attention to your breathing, making the breaths slow, long and deep, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. We then work backwards from 5-1 adding activities that use our 5 senses.

5: Acknowledge FIVE things you see around you. It could be a pen, a spot on the ceiling or anything in your surroundings.

4: Acknowledge FOUR things you can touch around you. It could be your hair, a pillow, or the ground under your feet.

3: Acknowledge THREE things you hear. This could be any external sound. If you can hear your belly rumbling that counts! Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.

2: Acknowledge TWO things you can smell. Maybe you are in your kitchen and smell coffee or maybe you are in your bedroom and smell a pillow or bottle of scent. If you need to, take a brief walk to find a scent like soap in your bathroom, or nature outside then do it.

1: Acknowledge ONE thing you can taste. What does the inside of your mouth taste like—gum, coffee, or the sandwich from lunch?

When you are initially learning these grounding exercises it is best to try to practice them when you are in a safe and calm environment. It's not advisable to try and do them when you are stressed out or in a chaotic environment. It is also important to try to practice them every day for a few weeks. The more you practice them the more instinctual they will become.

Anxiety and stress or any disturbance can often leave us feeling inadequate or have us believing that we are getting worked up over nothing or that there is something wrong with us. Taking time to address our feelings is an accomplishment. Try and take time often to remind yourself of the many good things about yourself and your life. And remember it IS possible to prevent the anxiety spiral and ground yourself in the present moment so that you can feel calm, connected and enjoy the little things in life.

We hope that this resource has been helpful and please look out for some further self-help resources and wellbeing courses coming up on my website

[www.leylaswantherapy.co.uk](http://www.leylaswantherapy.co.uk)

**Stay safe and well X**