

5-4-3-2-1 SENSORY GROUNDING & CONTAINMENT EXERCISE

OVERVIEW

The following exercise is to be used in conjunction with our book, “*What Is PTSD? 3 Steps to Healing Trauma*” for best effect. Please visit www.WhatIsPTSD.com for additional resources.

GOAL

This technique assists in developing the capacity to *self-rescue* from moments where you are feeling upset and unable to settle your emotions easily. In this exercise, you are encouraged to break your attention free from traumatic images, thoughts and feelings by, instead, focusing on and connecting with your current external surroundings through the intentional use of your senses (here and now), with the goal of reducing upsetting anxious feelings. This technique will assist you in recognizing safe environments in the present context and the value of using your sensory skills (sight, touch, smell, hearing, and even taste) to *ground* yourself to safety in your present.

You do not have to be upset in this moment to begin using this exercise because once you know the pattern you can use it at any time or place when you are upset but not in danger. Or, you can begin the exercise when you are in a safe place but still upset about a past memory or a current reminder of a past event.

TIME OUT

Always reflect on your inner state and notice if you need a break from the exercise to find your inner calm.

MATERIALS AND LAYOUT

Pen or pencil, timer, and the form we have provided below.

PATH TO COMPLETE

1. If you are upset in the moment, begin by taking an SUD's rating (SUD's stands for Subjective Units of Distress), which is a rating from one to ten that describes a feeling of distress, where 1 = feeling calm; 5 = somewhat upset but I can handle it; and 10 = the worst feelings of distress. I feel out of control.

2. Rate your current distress from one to ten. After the exercise, you can check the number again to see if there is any change in your feelings.

3. Ensure that you are in a physically safe situation. In other words, there is no real danger present and there is nothing that you have to respond to immediately to keep yourself out of danger. If there is, then we have to start by correcting it first. If not, we can begin this exercise. Name out loud, or in your mind make a mental note of, five objects that you can see in the room you are currently in. Be certain that these are physical, and not imagined objects.

4. Now identify aloud, or in your mind make a mental note of, five (5) *real world* sounds that you can currently hear while sitting in the room (the sound can be beyond the room, please be certain that you are actually able to perceive it, like the sound of an air conditioner, tapping pen, squeaking chair, your own words, etc.).

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5. Now identify aloud, or in your mind make a mental note of, five (5) things you can sense or feel. These are things like, your breath moving in and out of the body, the feeling of your legs supported by the chair, or the sensation of a warm breeze.

6. Now identify four (4) *real world* objects that you can see in the room (they may be the same or different from what you saw before). Now, identify four (4) sounds. Now, identify four (4) things you can feel or sense.

7. Now identify three (3) *real world* objects that you can see in the room (they may be the same or different from what you saw before). Now identify three (3) sounds. Now identify, three (3) things you can feel or sense:

8. Now identify two (2) *real world* objects that you can see in the room (they may be the same or different from what you saw before). Now identify two (2) sounds. Now, identify two (2) things you can feel or sense

9. Now identify one (1) *real world* object that you can see in the room (this may be the same or different from what you saw before). Now identify one (1) sound. Now, identify one (1) thing you can feel or sense.

10. Now that you have completed this exercise, ask yourself, "What has happened to my feelings of distress?" What number would best reflect your feelings of distress on the 1-10 SUD rating? Is it higher? Lower? Or the same? If you were not upset before, are you feeling even calmer now? You can use this exercise wherever and whenever you feel it will help.

You can also choose to do this exercise while thinking of a place that you truly enjoy being in, such as a favorite park or a part of your home that is most comforting to you (as long as it is not associated with the trauma). One client chose a museum where there was an extensive rock collection. She would think of the details of the environment - the rocks that she would see, the quiet of the space and the fresh clean smell in the air. All of these features would reinforce her feelings of comfort in the moment even when she was not at the museum. This is a wonderful way to remind us of how powerful our minds are. Harnessing this power can take us out of feelings of panic and into feelings of comfort very quickly – especially with practice.