



Grounding Basics

A client-friendly guide to calming the body, returning to the present, and creating a sense of safety.

Grounding is a practical skill for reconnecting with the present moment. When stress, anxiety, trauma reminders, panic, anger, or emotional numbness take over, the nervous system can act as if danger is happening right now. Grounding uses the senses, breath, movement, and focused attention to help the brain and body notice: "I am here, I am in the present, and I can take the next step."

When grounding may help

- Feeling anxious, panicky, flooded, angry, numb, or disconnected
- Trauma reminders, intrusive memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Racing thoughts, shutdown, dissociation, or feeling "not here"
- Conflict, criticism, loud noises, crowds, medical stress, or grief triggers
- Before or after difficult therapy work, hard conversations, or sleep

What grounding is not

- It is not pretending the problem is gone.
- It is not "just calm down."
- It is not a test you can fail.
- It is not only for crisis moments; it works best with practice.
- It does not replace therapy, safety planning, or medical care when those are needed.

Why grounding works

Strong emotions and trauma responses can pull attention into threat mode. Grounding gives the brain new information through the body: present-time sights, sounds, touch, breath, movement, and choice. This can reduce intensity, slow impulsive reactions, and help a person use coping skills more effectively.

1 Notice

Name what is happening: "My body is activated" or "This is a trigger."

2 Orient

Look around and identify where you are, the date, and one sign that you are safe enough right now.

3 Act

Use one small grounding tool for 30-90 seconds, then choose the next helpful step.

Quick grounding skills to practice

5-4-3-2-1 senses: Name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste or appreciate.

Feet and pressure: Put both feet flat on the floor. Press your heels down, notice the support under you, and slowly release tension from your shoulders.

Longer exhale: Breathe in for 4 seconds and exhale for 6 seconds. Repeat 5 rounds. Do not force deep breathing if it increases panic; keep it gentle.

Cold or texture: Hold a cold drink, ice pack wrapped in cloth, keys, a smooth stone, or textured fabric. Describe it in detail.

Build a personal grounding plan

- Choose 2 skills for home, 2 for work/school, and 1 for public places.
- Write down early warning signs: tension, racing thoughts, numbness, irritability, or avoidance.
- Practice when calm so the skill is easier to use when distressed.
- Rate distress 0-10 before and after. Look for even a 1-point shift.
- Pair grounding with support: therapist, trusted person, coping card, prayer, or values-based reminder.

When grounding is not enough

Grounding can lower intensity, but it may not fully resolve trauma, anxiety, depression, dissociation, or unsafe situations. Ask for more support if symptoms interfere with sleep, relationships, work, school, parenting, faith, or daily functioning. Get immediate help for thoughts of suicide, self-harm, feeling unable to stay safe, or danger from another person: call/text 988 in the U.S. or contact emergency services.