



Grounding Exercises

A How-To Guide

thriv·ol·o·gy

Thrivology translates research to practice to create practical resources youth-supporting professionals can use in the real world.

The Guide

This guide is designed to accompany and enhance your experience using the Thrivology Grounding Exercises, making it easier to integrate grounding practices into your daily routine. When you're feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or disconnected, grounding exercises offer a simple and effective way to bring yourself back to the present moment. When you are ready for grounding, this guide will help you choose the most appropriate exercise for your situation, empowering you to take control of your emotional well-being.

Whether you're new to grounding or looking to deepen your practice, this guide provides a step-by-step approach to make using the Thrivology Grounding Exercises deck simple, effective, and accessible. We encourage you to use this guide as a tool for incorporating grounding techniques into your daily routine. While grounding exercises can provide immediate relief during moments of emotional distress, consistent use can lead to long-term improvements in emotional regulation and resilience.¹

This guide breaks down six simple steps to help you get the most out of your grounding practice. You'll learn how to:

1. Notice intense emotions and identify when grounding is needed
2. Choose the right exercise for your current emotional state
3. Complete a grounding exercise with intention and focus
4. Notice the effects of the grounding exercise on your body and mind
5. Reflect on when and how to use grounding exercises in the future.

Feedback

We're always looking for ways to improve our work and make sure we are creating practical, accessible, user-friendly resources. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the Grounding Exercises How-To Guide. We welcome you to share your feedback:

www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org/Thrivology/Resources/Grounding-Exercises/#howto

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What Is Stress?

A typical response to everyday challenges



Can impact the whole person, mentally and physically

Activates the body's fight-or-flight response in the moment



Can be helpful in the short term and harmful in the long term



Can often be managed with healthy coping skills



What Is Trauma?

An overwhelming response to an intense experience or series of experiences

Keeps the nervous system in an elevated fight-or-flight response over time

Can come from one event or ongoing harm

Can have harmful lasting effects if not addressed

Everyone experiences it differently

Recovery is possible, often with support or therapy

Understanding Stress, Trauma, and Our Body's Response

Stress is your body's way of responding to something demanding, challenging, or uncertain. Sometimes it's caused by something easy to identify, such as an argument or a difficult situation. It can also show up during big life changes or meaningful moments, such as having a child, changing jobs, or moving to a new location.

When you feel stress, your body activates its “fight or flight” response. This causes hormones that raise your heart rate, tense your muscles, and sharpen your focus to help you react quickly.² In small doses, stress can be helpful—it gives you an extra boost to meet deadlines, handle emergencies, or get through a tough day. But stress isn't meant to last forever. When stress becomes chronic or constant, it can take a toll on your physical and emotional health because the tense muscles, higher heart rate, and alertness that come from stress hormones can cause harm if activated for too long.³ Once a scary situation passes or you get the support you need, your body is designed to return to its neutral state.

Trauma is different from stress. It happens when something feels like too much, too soon, or too fast for your nervous system to handle.⁴ Trauma is personal, and it happens to someone, not because of

them. It happens unrelated to the characteristics or choices of a person. Trauma isn't defined by the event itself, but by how it's experienced. It can result from a single event, like an accident or witnessing violence, or from ongoing exposure to harm, such as racism, instability, or unsafe environments. Two people can experience the same situation, and one may recover quickly while the other may carry lasting effects. This difference isn't about "toughness"; it's about how the nervous system responds, which is shaped by past experiences, support systems, and timing.

Even after the danger has passed, trauma can undermine a person's sense of safety in the world and leave a lasting imprint on how they think, feel, and relate to others. For example, someone who witnessed violence at school might feel on edge later in a similar setting or when they hear loud noises or see kids roughhousing. This reaction is because their body remembers the event before their brain has even had time to process it.

Trauma overwhelms the brain's ability to process what's happening and can leave the body in a state of high alert—or sometimes, completely shut down.⁵ When trauma goes unaddressed, it can keep the body in survival mode, making it hard to relax, connect with others, or regulate emotions.⁶ Over time, this can impact both physical and emotional health, as the body struggles to reset and regain balance.⁷

For people who support others, especially youth-supporting professionals, trauma can show up in other ways, too. You might not have experienced trauma yourself, but hearing about or witnessing the pain of others can take a real toll. This experience is known as **secondary trauma**—an emotional response that can emerge after hearing difficult stories or supporting someone in crisis. Over time, repeated exposure can lead to **vicarious trauma**, which may shift how you see the world or affect your sense of safety and trust.^{8, 9}

Both secondary and vicarious trauma can cause the nervous system to respond as if you're carrying someone else's pain in your body. If you've experienced trauma yourself, you may be even more sensitive to these effects. Over time, this can lead to burnout, fatigue, or emotional disconnection—even if you love the work you do. Taking care of your nervous system and tending to your emotional well-being doesn't just protect you—it helps you show up more fully and sustainably for the young people and communities who count on you.^{10, 11} Remember, healing from trauma is possible.

Grounding Exercises for Regulation

Grounding exercises are simple, effective ways to help calm your body and mind when emotions or stress responses feel overwhelming. They are small but effective tools for protecting your own well-being while continuing to support the people you care about. These quick strategies can help you feel more in control by bringing your focus to what's happening right now, rather than focusing on what happened in the past or what might happen next. Grounding works by helping the "thinking" part of your brain take charge, which quiets the part that reacts quickly to stress or fear. This shift sends a message to your body that you're safe, which helps your nervous system begin to relax and return to a more balanced state.^{12, 13} Research shows that grounding can help reduce anxiety, ease the impact of distressing memories, and support better emotional regulation.^{14, 15, 16}

Grounding Exercises for Regulation



Mental Grounding

Focuses your mind with tasks like counting or naming objects

Best for racing thoughts or worry



Physical Grounding

Uses your senses to connect to what's around you

Best for feeling numb or disconnected



Soothing Grounding

Involves calming words or imagery

Best for when you need comfort

When to Use Grounding



When strong emotions feel overwhelming



When you feel disconnected or checked out



After intense conversations or emotional interactions



During anxiety or panic



When stuck in negative memories, thought spirals, or intrusive thoughts



When struggling with urges to use unhealthy coping strategies

When to Use Grounding Exercises

Grounding exercises can be used anywhere, any time. Their simplicity makes them an excellent tool for youth-supporting professionals and the young people they work with, offering accessible support in moments of need. They are especially helpful in moments such as:

- **When you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed:** Intense feelings of anger, sadness, or frustration can be managed by using grounding to bring focus back to the present. Grounding can help create space between the feeling and your response. This kind of exercise can make it easier to think clearly and choose how to move forward.
- **When you're feeling disconnected or numb:** Disconnection or numbness might feel like being “checked out,” detached from your body, or as if the world around you isn’t real. Grounding can help when you feel detached from your surroundings or body by creating awareness and a sense of control.
- **After you've had intense conversations:** This situation might feel like emotional heaviness, tension in your body, or being stuck in someone else’s pain or story. Grounding can help your body regulate after an overwhelming conversation. This kind of exercise can be especially helpful after conversations where others share distress or trauma with you. Grounding can help you reengage with the present moment and process what you’ve heard.
- **When you're experiencing high anxiety or panic attacks:** Signs include rapid breathing, a racing heart, sweating, trembling, or feeling out of control. Grounding can help slow the nervous system, interrupt spiraling thoughts, and restore a sense of calm and safety.
- **When experiencing flashbacks or intrusive thoughts:** Signs include vivid mental images, strong emotional reactions, or a sense of reliving a past event. Grounding can redirect attention to the present. This redirection can prevent the brain from being pulled back into the past and reminds you that you are safe in the present moment.
- **When caught in negative thought spirals or intrusive thoughts:** This situation might look like repetitive, racing, or stuck thoughts that feel hard to control. Grounding can interrupt the cycle and shift your attention to something neutral or calming. This shift can help your mind take a break from distressing thoughts.
- **When struggling with urges to use unhealthy coping strategies:** You might notice intense cravings, restlessness, or feeling overwhelmed by emotions, leading to thoughts of self-harm, substance use, or other harmful behaviors. Grounding can help create a pause. This pause can give you space to reconnect with your body and choose safer, healthier ways to cope.

Note: If you frequently experience these moments, grounding may be helpful, but other forms of support, such as counseling, are important.

Grounding exercises aren’t a one-size-fits-all solution. That’s why the Thrivology Grounding Exercises deck offers a variety of exercises across three categories: mental, physical, and soothing grounding. You can pick the exercises that work best for you. Keep in mind that grounding exercises are not the answer to every kind of emotional response your body might have. It’s essential to recognize what a need for a grounding exercise feels like in your body, then to choose the best next step for your own healing.

How to Use Grounding Exercises

The following steps will guide you in using the Thrivology Grounding Exercises to manage intense emotions and build resilience.

Step One: Notice Signs of Stress or Strong Emotions

The first step is to notice when your body and mind are reacting to stress or strong emotions.

Here's how:

1. **Check Your Body:** Look for physical signs, such as a racing heart, shaking hands, tapping feet, shallow breathing, tense muscles, or feeling restless.
2. **Notice Your Emotions:** Pay attention to feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness, overexcitement, irritability, or feeling energized in a way that's hard to contain. Don't add judgment or value to the emotions—just take stock of what is there.
3. **Observe Your Thoughts:** Watch for racing thoughts, trouble focusing, or feeling stuck in negative thinking patterns.
4. **Assess Your Energy:** Are you feeling drained, overly alert, or disconnected from your surroundings?

When you recognize these signs, it's a signal that grounding may help bring you back to a place of calm and control. The sooner you notice these signals, the easier it is to manage them effectively.

Step Two: Assess If Grounding Can Help

Once you recognize the signs of stress, the next step is to check in with yourself and assess whether grounding can help. Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Do I feel disconnected from my surroundings or body?** You may feel detached, as if you're watching things happen from a distance or struggling to stay present.
- **Are my thoughts racing, or am I stuck in a loop of worry?** You may feel caught in repetitive, anxious thoughts or find yourself dwelling on something that feels overwhelming.
- **Do I feel strong emotions I cannot contain?** You may feel emotions that are too intense to manage, or you're feeling out of control with your emotional reactions.

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, grounding is a good next step. It helps shift your attention away from distressing thoughts and emotions, bringing your focus back to the present. Grounding gives your brain and body the signal that you are safe, making it easier to regulate emotions and regain a sense of control.

Step Three: Choose an Exercise

Choice matters. Different situations call for different types of grounding exercises. If you feel able to work through a decision-making process, choose an exercise that best meets your needs at that moment. However, if what you are experiencing is too intense for decision-making, it is okay to start anywhere and experiment. There is no “right” grounding exercise, and you cannot choose the wrong one—there are some exercises that may be more effective in certain situations than others. Practicing the different exercises before you are in a stressful moment may make it easier to select one during an intense moment.

There are three main types of grounding exercises:

1. **Mental Grounding:** Redirects thoughts by focusing on neutral or positive tasks, like counting backward or naming objects in a room. These exercises engage the brain's logical processes, which helps break the cycle of negative thinking and reduce feelings of panic.
2. **Physical Grounding:** Engages the senses—touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste—to bring awareness back to the present. This type of grounding anchors attention to physical sensations, which helps regulate the nervous system and prevent dissociation.
3. **Soothing Grounding:** Uses positive affirmation and calming imagery to provide comfort and reassurance. This type of grounding activates the brain's emotional centers, promoting a sense of safety and calm.

Take a moment to assess what you need and choose the type of grounding that feels most supportive for you. Each type serves a different purpose, so having options allows you to respond in a way that best meets your emotional and physical needs. If you don't know which is the right fit, choose one that looks interesting to you and experiment with it.

Most grounding exercises can be subtle, done anywhere, and done without tools. However, some Thrivology Grounding Exercises are more noticeable (such as tapping), require equipment (such as sticky notes or a pen), or require the ability to sit or lie down. If you do not have access to the privacy, equipment, or space needed for these exercises, choose one that has fewer restrictions.

Additionally, it is okay to acknowledge that a grounding exercise is not how you want to recover; you get to choose whether to engage in it. If you choose not to engage, proceed to Step Five.

Step Four: Complete Exercise

Once you've selected a grounding exercise, follow the steps outlined on the grounding exercise card. Each card provides a structured exercise designed to engage your mind or body (or both) in the present moment. Take your time with the exercise and allow yourself to experience it fully. Over time, you will learn which exercises are best for your body in certain situations.

Step Five: Check In with Yourself

After completing the grounding exercise (or choosing not to), it's essential to pause and check in with yourself. Taking a moment to notice how your body and mind feel helps you understand how grounding is working and builds confidence in using these techniques in the future.

Ask yourself:

- **Do I feel calmer or more present?** Are you more aware of your surroundings and feeling more connected to the moment?
- **Has my heart rate changed?** Has your breathing become steadier, and do you feel less physically tense?
- **Are my thoughts less overwhelming?** Are intrusive thoughts quieter, and does your mind feel more at ease?

Even if the change is small, that's okay. Not every grounding exercise will bring instant relief, but noticing any shift, no matter how subtle, reinforces the benefits of grounding. You might not always feel an immediate shift when you try a grounding exercise—and that's totally okay. For some, it can take a little time for the body and mind to respond. And sometimes, the first exercise you choose might not have the effect you were hoping for. That response is also completely valid. Repetition can help—the body may need time to learn that these practices are safe and supportive. Over time, grounding can become more effective as you build that connection and trust with yourself. With regular practice, these small changes add up, helping your brain and body learn that grounding is a reliable tool for managing stress and overwhelming emotions.

Step Six: Reflect on Routine

The final step is to think about how grounding exercises can become part of your routine to help prevent emotional overwhelm and build long-term resilience. Grounding isn't just for moments of crisis—it can also be used proactively to maintain emotional balance.

Consider these questions:

- **When:** Are there certain times of day or situations where grounding might be helpful? For example, before a stressful meeting, after a difficult conversation, or as part of a morning or bedtime routine.
- **How:** Can you use grounding proactively, not just reactively? Practicing grounding daily, even when you're feeling calm, can strengthen your ability to manage stress before it becomes overwhelming.

Incorporating grounding into your daily life makes it easier to access these tools when you need them most. Over time, regular practice helps create a sense of stability and control, allowing you to respond to challenges with greater confidence and calm.

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