



thriv·ol·o·gy

# **Grounding Exercises:** *How to Create Grounding Recipes with Young People*



*A guide for youth-supporting  
professionals and young people  
to practice grounding skills together*

## About This Guide

This guide is designed to be used with the [Thrivology Grounding Exercises](#)—a set of 30 grounding exercise cards that help calm the body and mind while emotions feel overwhelming. Print or view these exercises online while using this guide.

Using a recipe analogy, this guide helps you support young people in choosing and combining those exercises into simple grounding “recipes” for stressful and overwhelming moments.

This guide is for:

-  Professionals who work with young people in health care, education, and social or community settings, such as social workers, therapists, school counselors, teachers, peer educators, and more.
-  Parents and caregivers who support young people through stress, big emotions, or challenging moments.



***Supportive adults can help young people build “recipes” to manage stress. Like any good recipe, grounding works best when it fits the person and the moment. Use this guide as a starting point to explore and try ideas together.***

## About This Guide

---

Use this guide to:

- ✿ Support young people when they feel dysregulated or stressed
- ✿ Practice coping skills with young people through co-regulation
- ✿ Provide visual examples of grounding exercises
- ✿ Incorporate grounding into daily routines

*This guide was developed by Thrivology, which turns research into practice to help you provide the best sexual and reproductive health education and care, so young people may thrive. Learn more at [thrivology.com](https://www.thrivology.com)*



## What are Grounding Exercises?

When strong emotions take over, it might feel like you're losing control. Grounding exercises can help you stay connected to the present moment, reduce anxiety, and support emotional regulation.<sup>1,2,3</sup> They turn on the part of your brain that helps you think clearly, calms your stress response, and signals to your body that it's safe again.<sup>4,5</sup> While grounding exercises won't solve everything, they can help you manage your feelings and provide a moment of relief.

### ***Grounding Exercises for Regulation***

#### **Mental Grounding**

Focuses your mind  
and attention  
on the present

Best for racing  
thoughts or worry

#### **Physical Grounding**

Uses your senses  
to connect you to  
what's around

Best for feeling numb  
or disconnected

#### **Soothing Grounding**

Creates calm with kind  
or positive thoughts

Best for when you  
need comfort

## When to Use Grounding Exercises



When strong emotions feel overwhelming



When feeling 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

## Why Grounding & Co-Regulation?

Grounding exercises have many benefits for both young people and the professionals who support them.

### ***Benefits of Grounding for Young People***

- ✿ Helps young people notice their emotions, manage them, and feel more in control<sup>6,7,8</sup>
- ✿ Improves attention, focus, and executive functioning (e.g., planning, remembering, and decision-making)<sup>8,9</sup>
- ✿ Builds confidence, social skills, and resilience<sup>6,10</sup>
- ✿ Reduces signs of physical stress like aches, pains, and trouble sleeping<sup>8,11</sup>

By grounding together, professionals can support young people in regulating their emotions through a supportive process called **co-regulation**.<sup>12</sup> Co-regulation happens when one calm nervous system helps settle another, and it can look different depending on the person and the situation.<sup>13</sup>

## Benefits of Co-Regulation for Young People

- ✿ Helps young people manage thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in real time with supportive adults<sup>14</sup>
- ✿ Creates warmer and more secure relationships and safe spaces between professionals and young people<sup>14</sup>
- ✿ Supports social-emotional learning and development, especially for young people with trauma<sup>15</sup>
- ✿ Improves health outcomes, including sexual and reproductive health outcomes, by building the skills and confidence young people need to make choices about relationships and sex<sup>16</sup>



*To practice effective co-regulation, adults must also develop their own self-regulation capacity and model self-regulation skills in their interactions with young people.<sup>16, 17</sup>*

*For a separate, professionals-only guide to practice grounding skills, check out [Grounding Exercises: A How-To Guide](#)*

## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help youth-supporting professionals lead grounding exercises with young people—and practice alongside them. Some pages are written for youth-supporting professionals, while others (specifically pages 10, 15, 17, 19, 21, and 26) include prompts to print, share, or use directly with young people.

*Note: Grounding is a tool for navigating stressful or intense moments. It supports regulation, but doesn't replace mental health care, crisis support, or trauma treatment. More extensive support might be needed when dealing with persistent anxiety, depression, trauma, or distress.*

### Step by Step: Using This Guide

- 1 Practice first** before using this with a young person.
  - Check in with yourself (pages 9–10).
  - Browse the grounding recipe pages, like flipping through a recipe book (pages 13–21). Try to find one that fits a situation or feeling coming up for you. Use or modify the grounding cards for that recipe to create your own.
  - Try the exercises and notice what comes up (pages 23–24).
  - Reflect on the experience (pages 25–26).
- 2 Practice together** with a young person.
  - Guide them through the check-in on pages 9–10.
  - Browse the grounding recipe pages, like flipping through a recipe book (pages 13–21). Support them in finding one that fits a situation or feeling coming up for them. Use or modify the grounding cards for that recipe to create their own.
  - Try the exercises together and notice what comes up (pages 23–24).
  - Reflect on the experience (pages 25–26).

## Step One: Prep

*Like a chef who checks their ingredients and workspace before cooking, tune in to how the body feels and get ready to practice.*

Ask yourself, and then support the young person in answering:

- ✿ What's happening in my body?
- ✿ What emotions are present?
- ✿ How intense does everything feel?

This baseline helps you and the young person notice what shifts after practicing grounding.



***Before suggesting grounding, always check for consent and safety. If there's a possibility of physical danger, a need to leave a space, or a concern for mental well-being, assess risk first or seek help from someone who can.***

## Check In

Take a moment to notice how you're both feeling.



### Body Sensations

Where do I notice tension or discomfort? (*Heavy chest, tense muscles, etc.*)

---



### Emotions

What emotions am I experiencing? (*Anxiety, frustration, overexcitement, etc.*)

---



### Thoughts

What's happening in my mind? (*To-do lists, responsibilities, racing thoughts, etc.*)

---



### Energy Level

How would I describe my energy right now?



*Drained*



*Low*



*Neutral*



*High*



*Energized*

## Step Two: Mix Ingredients & Craft Your Grounding Recipe

*The best recipes are made together, with everyone contributing and learning from each other.*

The following pages offer example “recipes” for different situations where grounding might be helpful, such as if a young person needs a quick reset, or if they are having sensory overload or dealing with tense conversations with friends or family.

Each recipe includes a small set of grounding exercises from the [Thrivology Grounding Exercises](#) deck. (Available to print or view online!) Think of the exercises as ingredients. You and a young person can mix and match them together, just like a recipe. These examples show what a recipe can look like, not what it *has* to be.

There is no “right” way to use them. You might use one, two, three, or more exercises for each situation. Start with one situation and come back to others later.

***Consider practicing one grounding exercise each day to build a routine. When stress or big emotions come up, the body remembers what to do.***



## How to Create a Grounding Recipe

- Start with the example recipes:** Browse the recipe pages to see which exercises fit different situations.
- Pick a handful of options:** Support young people in choosing cards from the [Thrivology Grounding Exercises](#). Offer only a few grounding exercises at a time so young people aren't overwhelmed.
- Mix and match:** Swap out exercises that don't resonate. Try combining elements from different recipes.
- Practice together, step by step:** Read the cards together, walking through each step. For example, if an exercise involves touching the ground, they could press their hands into sand, feel grass with bare feet, or touch a soft surface indoors. Young people can ask questions and practice alongside you.
- Test and adjust:** Try the recipe, notice what works, and refine it. Recipes can evolve!



### *Ask young people:*

- *Which exercises help your body feel calmer?*
- *Which ones are easiest to try anywhere?*
- *Which ones would you put on your “go-to” list?*

The following pages share example grounding recipes for different moments you or young people may experience. They are organized by how much time and support may be needed. Some recipes are short and can be used quickly, while others take more time and may help in harder or heavier moments.

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Best For...</i>	<i>Estimated Time</i>
<b>Quick Reset</b>	When you're between activities, have a busy schedule, or need a short pause	3–5 minutes
<b>Sensory Overload</b>	When sounds, lights, movement, or touch feel like too much, especially in public spaces	3–5 minutes
<b>Feeling Disconnected</b>	When you feel numb, shut down, or “checked out”	6–8 minutes
<b>Hard Conversations</b>	When preparing for or decompressing from disagreements or tense conversations	8–10 minutes

These are just examples! Depending on a young person's needs, work together to create new recipes for other situations they may face, such as preparing for exams or sports games, dealing with loss or grief, and many others. Naming possible stressful situations and different emotional states can help young people better understand what they're feeling and choose a grounding practice that fits the moment.

*Note: Big feelings are a normal part of being human. Grounding exercises aren't meant to “control” or get rid of feelings quickly—they're meant to help you notice and move through them safely. It's especially important to acknowledge that some young people, particularly Black or African American young people, are often treated more harshly for showing big emotions, like anger or frustration, so remember that grounding is about support, not punishment.<sup>18, 19</sup>*

## Quick Reset Recipe

*When needing a short pause to refocus*

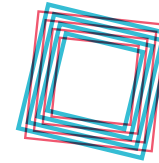
Short, effective exercises for times when you feel busy, rushed, or anxious and need a brief pause before continuing.



### Feel It

Hold a comforting object.  
Pay attention to how it feels. Is it soft or hard? Bumpy or smooth? Warm or cold?

thrivol-o-gy



### Box Breathing

Try "box breathing": Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds, then hold your breath for 4 seconds. Repeat.

thrivol-o-gy

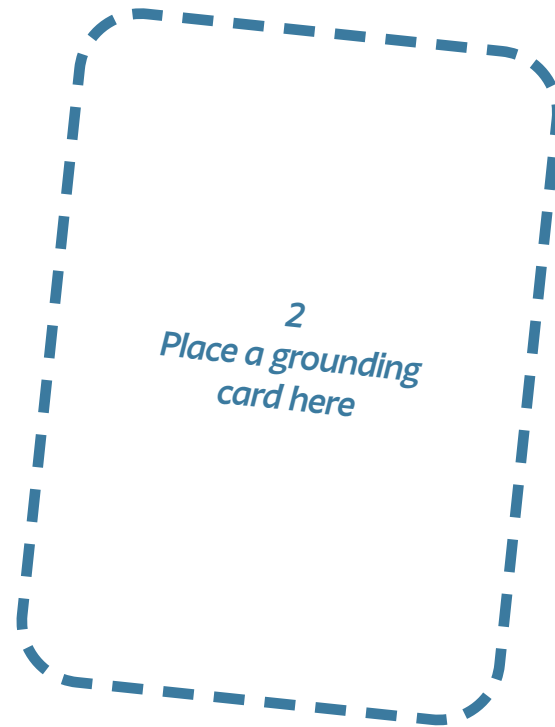
# Quick Reset Recipe

## Custom version

This page can be printed and used on its own to support co-regulation between professionals and young people. Place the physical Thrivology Grounding Exercise cards below to curate a personalized recipe.

Which short grounding exercises might help create a sense of calm when it's time to refocus?

STEP TWO



**TIP:** What grounds one person might not work for another. Explore options and choose what feels best.

# Sensory Overload Recipe

*If there's too much happening at once*

For times when sights, sounds, movement, or touch feel like too much, especially in public spaces. Focusing on breathing or a specific sense can help redirect attention from overwhelming sensations.

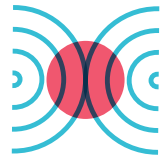
## STEP TWO



### Counting

Count slowly, either forward or backwards.  
Try counting by twos, threes, fours, and fives for a change.

thriv-ol-ogy



### Press & Hold

Press your palms together, hard, and hold for 15 seconds. Notice the feeling of tension in your hands and arms.

thriv-ol-ogy



### Recite, Recite, Recite

Think of a favorite song, prayer, poem, or book passage.  
Recite it from memory, and repeat as needed.

thriv-ol-ogy

# Sensory Overload Recipe

## Custom version

This page can be printed and used on its own to support co-regulation between professionals and young people. Place the physical Thrivology Grounding Exercise cards below to curate a personalized recipe.

Which grounding exercises might help ease feelings of sensory overload?

### STEP TWO



1  
Place a grounding card here

2  
Place a grounding card here

3  
Place a grounding card here

**TIP:** Building comfort with these practices takes time.  
Be patient with yourself.

## Feeling Disconnected Recipe

*When feeling numb, shut down, or “checked out”*

Use exercises to bring gentle awareness back to the body and surroundings to feel more present and in control.



### Senses in 5-4-3-2-1

Name...

- 5 things you see around you.
- 4 things you can touch.
- 3 things you can hear.
- 2 things you can smell.
- 1 thing you can taste.

thrivol-ogy



### Savor

Eat or drink something you love.

Take your time and focus only on enjoying it.

Don't do anything else while you savor the taste.

thrivol-ogy



### Touching Ground

Press your heels into the ground and feel how your feet connect.

Spread your toes and press evenly from the big toe to the little toe, and from the front of your foot to the heel. Notice how your feet connect with the ground.

thrivol-ogy

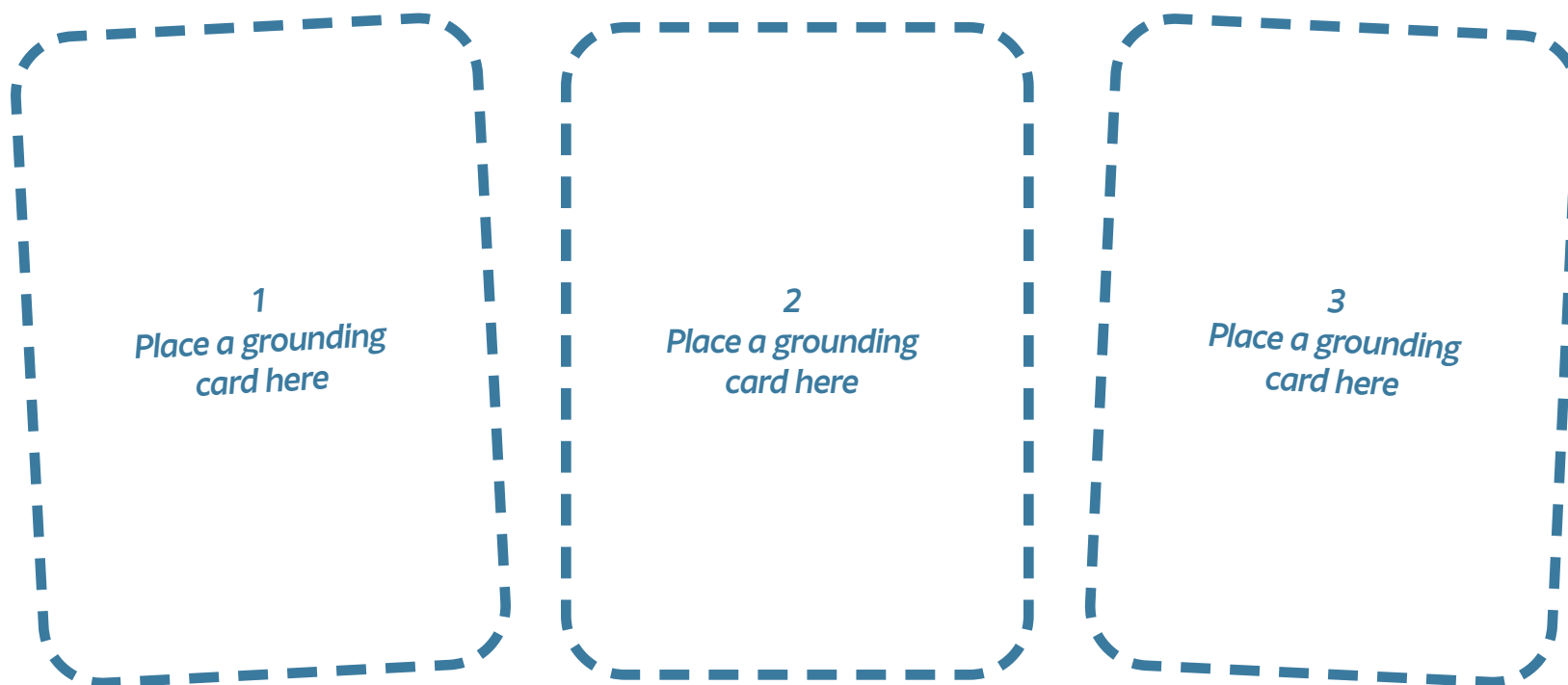
## Feeling Disconnected Recipe

### Custom version

This page can be printed and used on its own to support co-regulation between professionals and young people. Place the physical Thrivology Grounding Exercise cards below to curate a personalized recipe.

Which grounding exercises might help most when feeling disconnected from the current situation?

### STEP TWO



1  
Place a grounding  
card here

2  
Place a grounding  
card here

3  
Place a grounding  
card here

**TIP:** What works today might not work tomorrow.  
Staying flexible and adaptable is part of the process.

# Hard Conversations Recipe

## When navigating disagreements

Before or after navigating intense disagreements or heavy conversations, use these exercises to help calm down, process what happened, and return to the present moment.

### STEP TWO

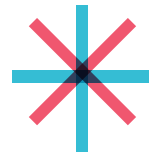


#### Tense & Release

Sit comfortably or lie down.

Clench your entire body—your jaw, fists, and limbs. Hold for 20 seconds, then relax.

thrivol-o-gy

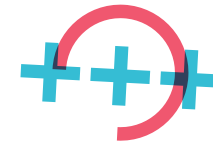


#### Sensory Awareness

Pick an activity that engages your senses.

For example, splash your face with cold water, light a scented candle, or sit outside and listen to nature.

thrivol-o-gy



#### Positive Mantras

Repeat positive phrases to yourself, such as:

- "I am capable,"
- "I am strong," or
- "I can handle this."

thrivol-o-gy

# Hard Conversations Recipe

## Custom version

This page can be printed and used on its own to support co-regulation between professionals and young people. Place the physical Thrivology Grounding Exercise cards below to curate a personalized recipe.

Which grounding exercises might help when preparing for or decompressing from a tough conversation?

### STEP TWO

1  
Place a grounding card here

2  
Place grounding card(s) here

3  
Place a grounding card here

**TIP:** Add as many grounding exercises as needed and do them in any order.

# Create a recipe from scratch for any other situations or feelings.

## Recipe

(Situation)

For when I feel...

(Moments that grounding can help)

### STEP TWO

1  
Place a grounding  
card here

2  
Place grounding  
card(s) here

3  
Place a grounding  
card here

## Step Three: Give It a Taste

*After making custom recipe(s) together, it's time to try it out.*

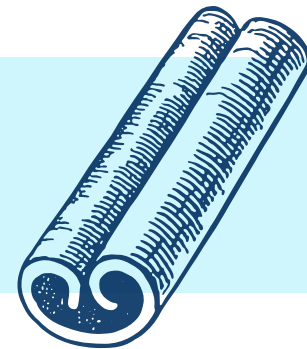
Just like cooking side-by-side in the kitchen, practicing grounding exercises together creates connection and shared learning.

Professionals can support young people's development of self-regulation skills through **co-regulation**. While regulating their own emotions, professionals can help young people practice understanding, expressing, and managing their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions.<sup>14</sup>

Co-regulation involves three key types of support from professionals:<sup>14</sup>

- ✿ Building warm, responsive relationships with young people
- ✿ Creating a safe, supportive environment where young people feel comfortable practicing
- ✿ Coaching and providing opportunities for young people to develop self-regulation skills

***Co-regulation is about being with someone in their experience, not fixing it.***



# Co-Regulation in Action

*Stay present while practicing together.*

## What is Co-Regulation?

Co-regulation happens when one person’s nervous system helps calm another’s. A professional’s steady, grounded presence provides safety and models regulation for young people.

## How to Practice with Young People

- ✿ **Start with yourself:** Ground in your own body before supporting others. Find your own peace and stability—young people can sense it.
- ✿ **Do it alongside them:** Practice the exercises together instead of only giving instructions. Model self-regulation and talk through what you’re doing.
- ✿ **Match their pace:** Let young people move at their own speed. Pressuring them may cause stress or anxiety.
- ✿ **Stay curious, not evaluative:** Notice together without judgment. Instead of asking, “Did it work?” ask open questions like, “What did you notice during that exercise?”
- ✿ **Affirm their efforts:** “I noticed you really committed to trying that.”
- ✿ **Reflect what you hear:** “It sounds like taking those breaths helped you feel a bit calmer.”
- ✿ **Support their autonomy:** “What would work best for you?”
- ✿ **Reassess and adjust:** Check in with young people after trying a recipe. Swap out cards or exercises that aren’t helpful and try different combinations.

## Step Four: Savor & Clean Up

*After practicing together, pause to savor the experience and clean up mindfully.*

### Savor

Take time to notice what shifted in the body, mind, and emotions.

### Clean Up

Reflect on what worked well and what to adjust, then gently transition back into the day. This reflection deepens learning and helps the body ease back into the real world with awareness.



***Remember: There are no “wrong” answers. Grounding doesn’t always bring instant relief, so even a small shift is a good sign. Even if something didn’t feel helpful, noticing that is valuable learning.***

# Reflection

Check in with the body and reflect together.



## Notice the Shifts

How does my body feel now compared to before?

---

---

What might be different with my thoughts or emotions?

---

---



## Learning & Adjusting

What worked well?

---

---

What might I adjust next time?

---

---



*These recipes are meant to be used again and again. Practicing together trains the brain and body to make grounding easier and more automatic.*

*Come back to these custom recipes at any time:*

- *During challenging moments*
- *As part of a regular routine*
- *To explore new exercises together*
- *To keep practicing what's working*

***TIP: Encourage young people to take photos of their recipes so they can use them later. Feel free to take screenshots or print the cards they selected from the [Thrivology website](#).***

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Piper, M. & Sufrinko, N. (2025). *Grounding exercises* [Cards]. Healthy Teen Network. [www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org/Thrivology/Resources/Grounding-Exercises](http://www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org/Thrivology/Resources/Grounding-Exercises)
- <sup>2</sup> Connor, E.S., Piper, M., Garrido, M., Dean, R., & Sufrinko, N. (2025). *Grounding exercises: A how-to guide* [Guide]. Healthy Teen Network. [www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org/Thrivology/Resources/Grounding-Exercises/#howto](http://www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org/Thrivology/Resources/Grounding-Exercises/#howto)
- <sup>3</sup> Resilience Lab. (2024, March 26). *Grounding Techniques for Effective Anxiety and Stress Relief*. <https://www.resiliencelab.us/thought-lab/grounding-techniques>
- <sup>4</sup> Shukla, A. (2020, March 27). *A 5-Step Mindfulness Grounding Technique to Ease Anxiety & Why Mindfulness Works*. Cognition Today. <https://cognitiontoday.com/5-step-mindfulness-grounding-technique-to-ease-anxiety-why-it-works/>
- <sup>5</sup> Hutton, K.P. (2024, December 4). *The Science of Grounding: How it Helps Regulate Emotions*. Peace of Mind Therapy and Consultation. <https://www.peaceofmindemdr.ca/blog/the-science-of-grounding>
- <sup>6</sup> Beauchemin, J., Hutchins, T. L., & Patterson, F. (2008). Mindfulness meditation may lessen anxiety, promote social skills, and improve academic performance among adolescents with learning disabilities. *Complementary Health Practice Review*, 13(1), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1533210107311624>
- <sup>7</sup> Cho, H., Ryu, S., Noh, J., & Lee, J. (2016). The effectiveness of daily mindful breathing practices on test anxiety of students. *PLOS One*, 11(10), e0164822. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0164822>
- <sup>8</sup> Biegel, G. M., Brown, K. W., Shapiro, S. L., & Schubert, C. M. (2009). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for the treatment of adolescent psychiatric outpatients: A randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77(5), 855–866. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016241>
- <sup>9</sup> McFall, A., & Jolivet, K. (2022). Mindful breathing: A low-intensity behavior strategy for students with behavioral challenges. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 68(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2022.2132196>

- <sup>10</sup> Rivera, Y. (2025). *Empowering resilience: A mindfulness workshop for youth facing life's challenges*. [Master's thesis]. California State University, Stanislaus. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/060968d8bb94c8e6273445d7988f4acc/1>
- <sup>11</sup> Broderick, P. C., & Metz, S. (2009). Learning to BREATHE: A pilot trial of a mindfulness curriculum for adolescents. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 2(1), 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1754730X.2009.9715696>
- <sup>12</sup> Salamon, M. (2024, April 3). *Co-Regulation: Helping Children and Teens Navigate Big Emotions*. Harvard Health. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/co-regulation-helping-children-and-teens-navigate-big-emotions-202404033030>
- <sup>13</sup> Hagan, M. (2025, February 25). *What is Co-Regulation?* Child Mind Institute. <https://childmind.org/article/what-is-co-regulation/>
- <sup>14</sup> Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Public Strategies, Mathematica, & Murray, M. (2021). *Building staff co-regulation to support healthy relationships in youth: A guide for practitioners* [Guide]. [https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/building\\_staff\\_co-regulation\\_02\\_2\\_2021\\_508.pdf](https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/building_staff_co-regulation_02_2_2021_508.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> Hoffman, K. E. (2022). *K-2 teachers' perceptions of success using co-regulation to improve social emotional learning of students with trauma* [Doctoral dissertation] Cardinal Stritch University.
- <sup>16</sup> Tingey, L., Piatt, R., Hennigar, A., O'Callahan, C., Weaver, S., & Zaveri, H. (2023). The sexual risk avoidance education national evaluation: Using co-regulation in youth programs. *OPRE Report 2023-281*, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/CoRegulation-Youth-Programs.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> Rosanbalm, K.D., & Murray, D.W. (2017). Promoting self-regulation in early childhood: A practice brief. *OPRE Brief #2017-79*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US. Department of Health and Human Services
- <sup>18</sup> Lozada, F. T., Riley, T. N., Catherine, E., & Brown, D. W. (2022). Black emotions matter: Understanding the impact of racial oppression on Black youth's emotional development: Dismantling systems of racism and oppression during adolescence. *Journal of research on adolescence*, 32(1), 13-33.
- <sup>19</sup> Walley-Jean, J. C. (2009). Debunking the myth of the "angry Black woman": An exploration of anger in young African American women. *Black Women, Gender & Families*, 3(2), 68-86.

### ***Suggested citation***

Natalie, P., Thomas, M., Sufrinko, N., Dean, R., Rodriguez-Anello, J.B., & Piper, M. (2026). Grounding exercises: *How to create grounding recipes with young people [Guide]*. Healthy Teen Network. <https://www.healthyteennetwork.org/thrivology/resources/grounding-exercises/#recipes>

### ***Acknowledgments***

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our Thrivology Research Alliance members—Kiria-Leah Johnen, Brandy Brown, Kate Westaby, Nicole Bennett, and Jana Craig—whose insights, thoughtful reviews, and lived experiences were instrumental in shaping this resource from start to finish.

We also thank Healthy Teen Network staff member Charlie Blue Brahm, who served as a sounding board during the initial conceptualization of this resource.

*This project is supported by the Office of Population Affairs (OPA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award (5 PHEPA000006-04) totaling \$1,168,985 with 100 percent funded by OPA/OASH/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by OPA/OASH/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [opa.hhs.gov](http://opa.hhs.gov).*