South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

# Grounding, calming skills to help us turn down the volume of our fight or flight response

**Would it help you to have tools to use when strong emotions get out of control? Understanding how our nervous system works may help get us started.**

Our brain evolved for survival. We all have a part of the brain, *the* amygdala which is the brain's smoke detector for threat. If the amygdala detects a threat, in an instant it takes over the rest of the brain and turns on a "fight or flight" response. send thinking off line.



What is fight-or-flight? It is a stress response, triggered by a release of hormones prompting us to stay and fight or flee. Our bodily systems are working to keep us safe and mobilize us to act.

While it may help us immensely in dangerous or threating situations, the amygdala often makes mistakes particularly in modern life. It gets information super-fast. where the 'dangers' are not physical threats, yet the fight of flight response still kicks in. If thinking is off line and we are not thinking straight, and we can do or say things that do more harm than good.

**Grounding or if you want to call them calming skills, helps us turn down the volume of a fight or flight response. What we talk about here is by no means a complete list of calming techniques yet, a good start.**

First, using these skills is an active choice, one that can be hard to make when our emotions are high. When you feel emotions taking over, remind yourself that you want to stay calm. You want to control your emotions rather than your emotions controlling you.

To help you make that choice, have a reminder to what is important to you. You can use the 80/ 20 rule. Do you spend 80% of your energy thinking about 20 per cent of issues?

**Making use of these skills**

**Use these skills in calm times**: Practice them in calm times to become more comfortable using them when you need them most.
**Coping skills are not one size fits all**. There is no one skill that works for everyone. Discover ones that work for you and use them with flexibility.
**Have realistic expectations**. Coping skills are not magic bullets. They don't work 100 percent of the time. Stay realistic.
**Combine skills**. You can use more than one. You may want to use a calming sequence, a series of actions that help turn down the fight of flight response: deep breaths, squeeze hands, rub legs.
**Remember there is no quick fix for stress**. It will take time, effort, and repetition to turn using these skills into healthy habits.

**A word of caution: Stop if you these skills make things worse or are difficult to manage and discuss it with a professional.**

## To start with use H.A.L.T. – What does your body need?

Sometimes we need look inside ourselves to know what we need at this moment in time. This short check-in is known as H.A.L.T. What we want to do is check in with our basic needs and emotional states and respond to that need.

H - Am I ***hungry*** right now?

A - Am I ***angry or anxious***, or otherwise dysregulated and activated?

L - Am I feeling ***lonely*** in this moment?

T - Am I ***tired***? We do not think straight exhausted.

## Feeling Overwhelmed. R.A.I.N helps.

R.A.I.N. is an acronym coined about 20 years ago by Michele McDonald. It is an easy-to-remember tool for dealing with strong emotions. R.A.I.N. has four steps:

- **R - Recognize what is going on**
- **A - Allow the experience to be there, just as it is**
- **I - Investigate with curiosity and kindness**
- **N - Non-identify.**



**R- Recognize:** It is impossible to deal with an emotion unless we recognize it is there. Simply notice what you feel. Don't t try to push away or ignore it. Name what you are feeling.

**A – Acknowledge, giving it a pause:** The second step is an extension of the first. You accept the feeling and allow it to be there. Give yourself permission to feel it. Allowing means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations we have simply be there. When we have unpleasant feelings, we react in one of three ways: being self-judgemental, numbing our feelings or focusing attention elsewhere. Rather than seeing feelings as "bad" or "wrong," simply rename them as "painful." Acknowledge them. This is the entry into self-compassion. If you want to find out more about self-compassion see www.ascert.biz/self-compassion/

**I — Investigate with kindness toward yourself:** You begin to ask questions and explore your emotions with curiosity. This may feel quite different from when we want answers or blame. Pausing to ask, what is happening, what is behind these feeling, adds a more active kind of inquiry and helps to move closer to a feeling, rather than away from it. Progress does not mean negative emotions do not happen. It is seeing them with a more open mind.

**N — Non-identify:** In the last step of RAIN, we consciously avoid being defined by a particular feeling. We ***are*** not angry, we ***feel*** anger. Feeling angry about something is quite different from telling yourself, "I am an angry person. It is a state, not a trait. Feelings are temporary. This opens the door to a more compassionate relationship with yourself. N can also remind you to nurture and look after yourself.

## Deep Breathing

When we experience stress of any kind, we tend to breathe shallow and rapid. Breathing like this is part of the fight/flight/freeze response. Slow, belly breathing is effective to counter that.



Deep breathing allows lots of oxygen to quickly enter your body, which can result in a calming sensation. While sitting or standing breath with your diaphragm. (Belly) not your chest. The key to more relaxed breathing is breathing out more than you breath in.

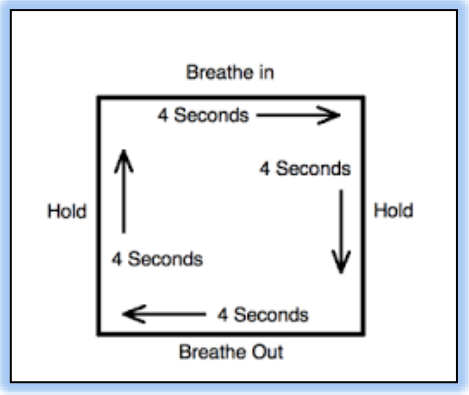
When you breathe in, your stomach should rise or expand, and it will fall or contract as you breathe out. Try placing your one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Is your stomach rising? Then you're doing it right!

Here are some deep breathing techniques:

**Puckered-Lip Breathing (2-4)**

1. Breathe in normally for 2 seconds.
2. Pucker your lips, as if you were about to drink through a straw.
3. Exhale through puckered lips for 4 seconds
4. Repeat

**Box Breathing**



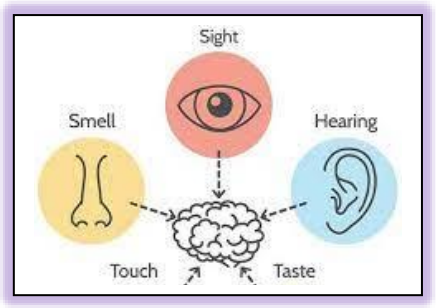

## Rhythmic movement is the body's natural way to self-soothe.

How would you calm a crying baby? You instinctually pick them up and rock them in your arms. Rhythmic movement is an ancient calming intervention: dancing, drumming, moving in circles. Here are some examples of rhythmic movement:



- Dance. It doesn't matter what type of dance it is or whether you dance with others or alone. The point is that you move your body with rhythm.
- Beat a drum. You can also create a beat with your hands on your body or on an object.
- Rock or sway. Allow your body to rock or sway at a pace that feels calming. You can use items to help with these movements, like swings and rocking chairs.

## Sensory Grounding




Grounding techniques uses your five senses, sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste and helps the brain refocus quickly. Here are some examples:

**Sight**

- Focus on a particular object and notice all of the details that you see: colours, shapes, objects that you like or dislike, and so on.
- Pick five objects that you can see and focus on each one for five seconds in turn. Then move on to the next. Change the order each time you begin again.

**Sound**

- Stop and listen to all the sounds that you hear. How many different sounds can you pick out? Be patient, as it may take a few moments for background sounds to become noticeable.
- Listen to music. Try to isolate all the instruments you hear. Listen to them separately and then together.

**Touch**

- Feel the ground below your feet or the chair beneath you. Notice how it feels to be supported. To intensify this effect, press your feet firmly into the floor or grab tightly onto your chair.
- Place something cold on your face or on the back of your neck.
- Touch something and focus on how it feels. You can use your phone, keys, a stone, a pillow. Pay attention to details of the texture and temperature.

**Smell**

- Stop and smell your environment. Try to identify every scent that you can. Be patient—some scents are mild, and it takes focus for them to become noticeable.
- Smell an essential oil, a perfume, aftershave, a candle, or anything that is strongly scented. Breathe it in deeply, focusing intently on the aroma.

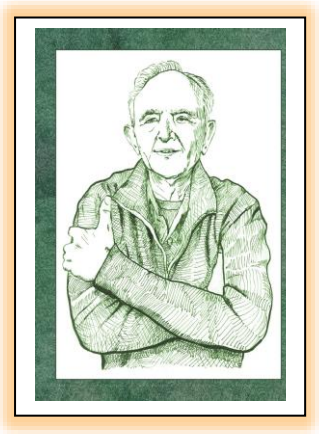
**Taste**

- Taste something that has a powerful flavour, like a lemon, or peppermint. Let the flavour run its course in your taste buds

**54321** is a technique using all 5 senses. Name 5 things you see in the room; 4 things you can feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 good thing about yourself.

**3-3-3** is simpler technique and can be helpful for children.: name three things you see, identify three sounds you can hear, and move three different parts of your body.

## Self-Calming - self-containment.



**Self - Hug:** When stress gets too much, we may feel out of control, chaotic or overwhelmed. Being out of control is unsettling, even if it is unconscious.

Here is an exercise that may help. (From Peter Lavine)

This exercise helps us become aware of our body as the container of all of our sensations and feelings. When we can feel the container, then the emotions and sensations do not feel as overwhelming.

Place one hand under the opposite arm, and then place the other hand over the upper part of the other arm. You are giving yourself a hug.

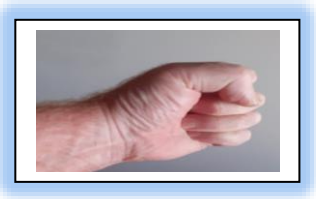
Pay attention to your body. Let yourself settle into the position. Allow yourself to feel supported by it. Allow yourself to feel contained.

See if you can sit with it for a while. Let it shift your perceptions of yourself and the world before coming out of it.

## The Fist Clench exercise

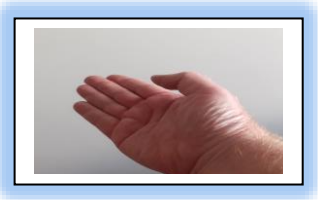
This exercise uses moving our senses ever so slightly into the 'fight or flight' state. This enables us to engage our parasympathetic nervous system (calming part of our nervous system) to help return to the key place of inner calm.

Close your eyes. Take a moment to feel the sensations of your body's current state. Now, clench your fists tightly.



After about 20 seconds in a soft voice, while you are still clenching your fists:

- Focus on the feelings in your hands.
- What sensations does the tightening of your hands evoke for you?
- What emotions does the clenching and tightness of your fists suggest?
- How does your body feel?



Now release your fists. Open your hands, and display your palms facing upward. What shifts as you open your hands and face them upward?

Take deep breaths, cleansing breaths – breathing in hope and happiness.



How does your body feel now? Place one hand on top of the other and put them both gently on the centre of your chest.

Focus on and feel the warmth of your hands on your heart and breathing deeply. What feelings, thoughts or sensations does holding your hand on your heart and breathing deeply.

## Glimmers

Glimmers are the micro-moments of safety and connection that happen every day yet often go unnoticed. Seeing our glimmers help us feel safe.

A fundamental step in calming your nervous system is noticing glimmers: a picture, a certain smell, a soothing sound or something enjoyable. Pause to take it in. These cues of safety bring us back to calmness. Seeing or picturing these things can act as an antidote to the triggers all around us.




## What we say to ourselves does matter

Emotionally resilient people are deliberate in their response to challenging experiences. They allow themselves to grieve, remind themselves of what they are grateful for, and focus on what they can control in the moment. These words we say to ourselves are not ignoring what is going on for us, but reminding us of our strengths and the situation is only temporary.

- I can get through this.
- I am not going to let myself be a victim.
- Life is not always fair.
- This too shall pass, it is short term
- What can I learn from this?
- I need some time to calm me down
- I still have things to be grateful for
- It is what it is
- I am going to let this go. Let me choose my battles.

**As Rick Hanson says in Hardwiring for Happiness – Your mind takes shape from what it repeatedly rests on.**

## Five finger breathing



One hand will be your base you hold still with fingers spread apart. Take your other hand and trace from your thumb and up and down your fingers with your index finger.

As you move your index finger up your thumb and along your fingers, take slow deep breaths in and out, perhaps allowing your eyes to close. As you trace each one, continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Let yourself relax as you breathe gently. Become more and more deeply relaxed each time you exhale.

Reaching your little finger, reverse direction. Focus on your slow breaths and sensation of your index finger tracing your skin. Continue this exercise as long as you need to and when you are ready, open your eyes and bring any relaxation you have found.

**So were any of these10 techniques helpful for you?**

Are there any of these ideas you find helpful? Write them down here.

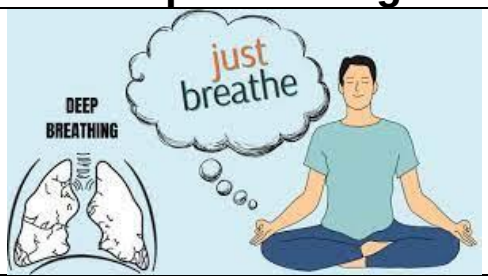
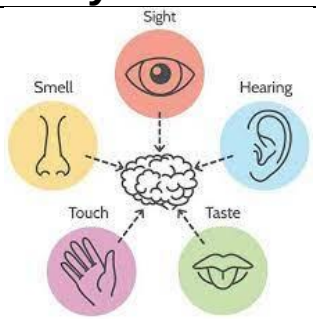
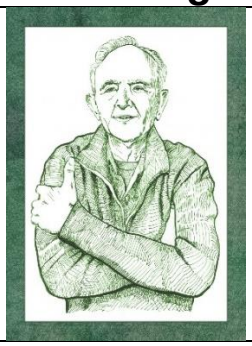
**Tip – When strong emotions hit it's hard to think. Try some of these:**

- **Energy too high?** Try things that feel soothing and calming.
- **Energy too low?** Try things that feel energizing and alerting.
- **Any time -** Use things that feel grounding and comforting.

Are there any things you don't find helpful? Certain scents / voice / songs / images / objects / noises / food / too bright / too dark, loud noise, excess movement / heat, being touched

**TIP- Minimise or avoid unhelpful sensations. Consider ways to reduce their effect on you- wearing headphones, sunglasses, comfy clothes. Limit time on social media / the news.**

# Calming techniques, a reminder

| H.A.L.T | R.A.I.N |
|---|---|
| Hungry<br>Angry<br>Lonely<br>Tired<br> |  |
| **Deep Breathing** | **Movement** |
|  |  |
| **Use you sences** | **Self-hug** |
|  |  |
| **Clenched fist** | **Glimmers** |
|  |  |
| **Resilient self –talk** | **Five finger breathing** |
|  |  |