

Grounding Skills to help manage intense thoughts and emotions

Resource developed by the respiratory psychology service April 2026

Living with a respiratory condition and managing the demands of treatments can have a huge impact on people's day-to-day lives and mental wellbeing. It is very normal to feel a range of emotions, for example worry, anxiety, anger and sadness.

Grounding exercises can help to “anchor us” when we are caught up in our thoughts and feelings, feeling overwhelmed or experiencing anxiety that is exacerbating our breathlessness. They help us to come back to the present moment and focus on what is happening right now. When we can focus our attention on the here and now, we can take a broader perspective. We are more able to focus on doing things that are important and helpful to us.

Grounding and mindfulness are all about noticing what is happening here and now. With practice, this will become easier and feel more natural. We have included some exercises below to practice.

Take 10 Breaths

*Note – breathwork is an important tool for managing breathlessness and anxiety. For some people with respiratory conditions, focusing on breathing can trigger significant feelings of anxiety which can make this exercise challenging to begin with. If this is the case for you, you may wish to try some of the other exercises in this handout before returning to this.



1. Take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible until your lungs are completely empty—and then allow them to gently refill.
2. Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying. Notice them refilling. Notice your rib cage rising and falling.
3. See if you can let your thoughts come and go as if they're just passing cars, driving past your house.
4. Expand your awareness: Simultaneously notice your breathing and your body. Then look around the room and notice what you can see, hear, smell, touch, and feel.

Drop Anchor

This is a simple exercise that does not rely on breathwork. It helps us to acknowledge our inner experiences while connecting with our body and environment.

**Note - if it feels too challenging to notice your thoughts and feelings at present, you can skip over step 2.*



1. Plant your feet into the floor. Push them down—notice the floor beneath you, supporting you. Notice all the points where your feet are in contact with the ground.
2. Notice any thoughts and feelings that are showing up. See if you can name them (e.g. “I’m noticing sadness.” “I’m noticing thoughts that I can’t do anything”).
3. Notice the muscle tension in your legs as you push your feet down.
4. Notice your entire body—and the feeling of gravity flowing down through your head, spine, and legs into your feet. Notice how you can move your body. For example, try stretching your arms, wiggling your fingers and toes, or changing your posture.
5. Now look around and notice what you can see and hear around you. Notice where you are and what you’re doing.

Here are some free audio recordings of ‘dropping anchor’ exercises, varying in length.

You can listen to these and use them as a guide to help you develop this skill.

Dropping anchor, step-by step. 10 mins. actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Dropping-Anchor-step-by-step-Russ-Harris.mp3
(Please run through this exercise before listening to the others.)

Dropping anchor - 4 mins. actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Dropping-anchor-4-mins-Russ-Harris-The-Happiness-Trap.mp3

Dropping anchor - 8 mins. actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Dropping-Anchor-8-mins-Russ-Harris-The-Happiness-Trap.mp3

Notice Five Things

If you notice that you are getting caught up in upsetting thoughts and feelings, simply using your senses to explore your environment can be a helpful way to re-focus on the here and now.



1. Pause for a moment
2. Look around and notice five things that you can see. Describe the physical details to yourself.
3. Listen carefully and notice four things that you can hear (e.g. sounds inside the room, out in the corridor, outside the building).
4. Notice three things that you can feel in contact with your body (for example, your watch against your wrist, your trousers against your legs, the air on your face, your feet upon the floor, your back against the chair).
5. Notice 2 things that you can smell.

Mindfulness of things

Things and objects surround us. Now, for example, you might be in a room with a chair, light, computer, window, carpet, and pictures. Typically, we tend to gloss over the details and nuances of things in our lives, primarily to make life simpler.

This exercise involves bringing your attention to focus on a single object. You will describe the object based on what you see visually and what you feel from your sense of touch. Plan to spend about 5 – 10 minutes of uninterrupted time for this exercise.

1. Select a small object that will be the focus of your attention. It should be something that you do not have strong feelings about, perhaps a pen, watch, or an acorn. A photo of your “ex” or a beloved pet or anything else that stirs up emotions (whether “positive” or “negative”) won’t do!
2. Without touching the object, first explore it visually. Describe what you see in ways that refer to the inherent qualities of the object, not judgments of interpretations. For example, “the object is about one inch in diameter”. You might imagine that you are describing the object to someone who cannot see it.
 - What does the surface look like?

- What is its shape?
 - How does the light illuminate its surface?
 - Is it straight, curved, or some combination?
 - Is it shiny or dull?
 - Are there shadows across it? Any reflection on its surface?
 - What colour(s) and shade(s) does it have?
 - Does it look smooth or bumpy?
 - Does it look soft or hard?
 - Does it look wet or dry?
 - What else can you see about it?
3. Now take the object in your hands. You might want to close your eyes to focus better on your sense of touch. How does it feel as you hold it in your hand and run your fingers across it?
- Is it hard or soft?
 - Smooth or rough?
 - Sharp or dull?
 - Rigid or pliable?
 - How much does it weigh?
 - What is its temperature?
 - How does it feel different in different parts?
4. After the exercise, take a moment to reflect on your tendency to hold onto or push away certain emotions. How did this exercise affect your experience of the emotion?

This exercise is adapted from:

<https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiBzfeipJCUAxUQTaQEHdL4MZIQFnoECA4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fstatic1.1.sqspcdn.com%2Fstatic%2F%2F1310504%2F16951447%2F1330916196567%2FUM%2Bmindfulness%2Bof%2Bthings.pdf.&usg=AOvVaw278QFyGs3qLtCd9P0FORZF&cshid=1777370296468451&opi=89978449>

The notice your hand exercise

“Notice your hand” is a brief grounding and mindfulness exercise developed by medical practitioner and psychotherapist Dr Russ Harris. Simply follow the guided instructions to focus your attention on your hand for 5 minutes. This might seem like a long time to be focusing on your hand! We invite you to notice any judgments your mind makes about this idea, and give it a go with a sense of curiosity. Follow this link to listen to the “Notice your hand” exercise on YouTube, or type “Mindfulness of the Hand read by Rebecca Childs” into YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MW00P8qoNGQ>

