

## Four Tools for Self-Regulation After Experiencing Trauma

A traumatic experience can be defined as one that pushes our nervous system past its ability to self-regulate, causing us to move involuntarily into one of three states of which most of us are familiar: fight, flight, or freeze. The fight or flight responses create symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, rapid, shallow breathing, muscle tension, a sense of panic, and difficulty thinking clearly, whereas a freeze response is reflected in symptoms such as decreased heart rate, reduced physical movement, emotional numbness, brain fog, disengagement from self and others, and feeling “spacey.” If the trauma is not adequately resolved, our nervous system will read subsequent situations that remind it of the trauma as unsafe and resort to entering a fight, flight, or freeze state as a means of survival, even if the situation is perfectly safe. When our nervous system is consistently triggered in these ways, it is not only mentally, emotionally, and physically, it takes a significant toll on our physical health.

When we understand trauma from this perspective, it becomes clear that finding ways to regulate our nervous system when it is in one of these states is critical for recovery. Below I offer four of the techniques I teach my clients to help them when they recognize their nervous system has become dysregulated and they are experiencing any of the symptoms mentioned above.

### 1) 5-4-3-2-1 Exercise

This exercise is to ground you to the present moment by way of your current sensory experience. Simply identify and describe 5 things you see, 4 things you feel (tactilely, not emotionally), 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell (or smells you enjoy if you aren't experiencing any smells), 1 thing you taste (or a taste you enjoy if you aren't experiencing any tastes).

**2) Breathing:** There are many breathing exercises you can explore but one of my favorites is box breathing, which is performed by breathing in 4 counts, holding 4 counts, breathing out 4 counts, and holding 4 counts. Repeat this pattern until breathing is returned to a normal, regulated rhythm.

**3) Bilateral stimulation:** Bilateral stimulation is stimuli which occur in a rhythmic left-right pattern to both sides of your body. You might be familiar with it as an aspect of EMDR therapy. Because it produces a calming effect, it can be a powerful tool to help self-regulate. To perform, you can simply use your hands to tap back and forth on your thighs or cross your arms to tap back and forth on your shoulders (also known as a butterfly hug). Alternatively, you can pick two points (such as two opposing corners on a wall) and move your eyes rhythmically back and forth between those two points.

**4) Pelvic floor release:** Bring awareness to any constriction in the pelvic floor muscles and focus on releasing the constriction, which creates a relaxation effect in the other muscle groups in the body. To locate the pelvic floor muscles, a good starting point is to lie down, resting comfortably, or to sit in a supported position. Then, imagine squeezing your muscles to stop the flow of urine and the passing of wind. Focus on drawing these muscles inwardly tightly.

Because our brains go “offline” when experiencing a fight, flight, or freeze response, making it difficult to remember tools we may have previously learned, it is useful to practice these techniques initially when you are not in one of these states, or are only experiencing minimal symptoms, so that their use becomes habitual and therefore more easily accessible when they are truly needed.

Happy practicing and I hope you find these tools useful on your trauma recovery journey!