



COUNTDOWN TO CALM: *Using 5-4-3-2-1 to Recenter and Reground*

Esther Yu, M.A.
Research Assistant, Headington Institute

What is 5-4-3-2-1?

For humanitarian aid workers and first responders, stress is an inherent part of the job. If you are experiencing anxiety, panic attacks, trauma responses, or feeling overwhelmed, one helpful tool is the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. It's a short and helpful way to reduce feelings of anxiety, trauma triggers, and other unwanted emotions or thoughts.

Anxiety or overwhelming feelings tend to bring us out of the present moment - our mind starts jumping around to the worst possible scenarios, panic sets in and our bodies get ready in a fight-or-flight response, or we can feel lost in the midst of negative emotions. The 5-4-3-2-1 technique works to help us bring both our minds and our bodies back to the present moment, calming us down. It uses our 5 basic senses to ground us and help us re-regulate our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. It's incredibly efficient. You can do it quickly, at any time, without anyone even noticing.

How to Use 5-4-3-2-1

Before starting this exercise, pay attention to your breathing. Take a couple of breaths and just notice the pace and quality of your breaths. Then, go through the following steps:

- 5: Acknowledge FIVE things you SEE around you. Maybe it's a bird, something on your desk, or the color of a particular piece of furniture. However big or small, state 5 things you see.
- 4: Acknowledge FOUR things you can TOUCH around you. This could be your hair, hands, the ground, grass, chair. Whatever it may be, list out 4 things you can touch.
- 3: Acknowledge THREE things you can HEAR. These should be external, do not focus on your thoughts. Maybe you can hear a car, the air conditioning, or a nature sound. Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.
- 2: Acknowledge TWO things you can SMELL. This one might be harder if you are not in a stimulating environment, if you cannot automatically sniff something out, walk nearby to find a scent. Maybe it's the smell of paper, or a pillow, or something from nature outside.
- 1: Acknowledge ONE thing you can TASTE. What does the inside of your mouth taste like, gum, coffee, tea, whatever you had for lunch? If this one is difficult, name something you could taste around you, such as food that you see on the counter.

Taking these steps will not erase your anxiety or stress overnight, but it can be a very handy way of coping and significantly reducing the intensity of these experiences.

This article uses a technique adapted from <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/behavioral-health-partners/bhp-blog/april-2018/5-4-3-2-1-coping-technique-for-anxiety.aspx>