Grounding Exercises



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Neurodivergent insights

INTRODUCTION

Grounding Exercises

When it comes to grounding exercises, there are four main types to choose from. You might find that one category works better for you than the others. So, don't be afraid to give them all a try. If one doesn't quite click, no worries, just move on to another until you find the grounding exercise that works for you!



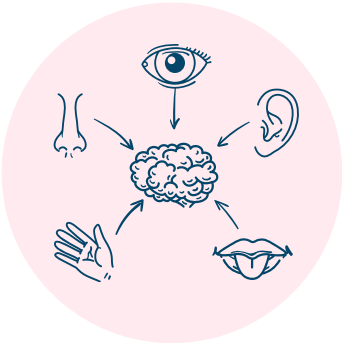
Mental



Visualization & Self-Soothing



Tactile



Sensory

When to Use Grounding

- **During Intense Emotions**: Grounding can be particularly useful when you're experiencing overwhelming or intense emotions, such as anger, anxiety, or panic. Grounding can help you regroup.
- **Anxiety or Panic Attacks**: Grounding exercises can help manage the symptoms of anxiety or panic attacks by shifting your focus away from the distressing thoughts or sensations.
- **Flashbacks or Intrusive Memories**: When you're dealing with distressing memories or flashbacks, grounding can help you reconnect with the present moment and get out of the traumatic memory more quickly.
- **Feeling Disconnected**: If you ever feel detached from reality or your surroundings or are starting to dissociate, grounding techniques can help you regain a sense of presence.

How Not To Use Grounding

- **As Long-term Distraction from Emotions**: Grounding should not be used as a way to avoid or suppress your emotions as a long-term strategy.
- **When Driving or Operating Machinery**: Grounding exercises that require your full attention should be avoided when you need to focus on tasks like driving or operating heavy machinery.
- **When Seeking a Quick Fix To Emotional Pain**: Grounding techniques are not a quick fix or a magic solution to instantly eliminate pain. Their purpose isn't to make emotions disappear but rather to provide a stable anchor during challenging moments. If you're anticipating immediate relief, it's helpful to adjust your expectations, as these practices are more about gradual support and resilience-building than something that makes the emotional pain resolve.

The key is to use grounding as a tool for managing and navigating difficult emotions, not as a means to escape them.

MENTAL GROUNDING EXAMPLES

- **Detailed narration**: Narrate your current activities with exquisite attention to detail. Whether you're eating, walking, or driving, describe each action in a thorough and methodical manner.

- **Mental categorization**: Challenge your mind by categorizing objects, such as books, sports teams, cars, or music. For example, try to name as many items as possible in each category, like listing all the states that start with "M" or recalling TV shows from the 90s.

- **Alphabet focus**: Slowly recite the alphabet, letter by letter or pick an object in the room and spell its name backward, concentrating on each letter.

- **Number play**: Engage your brain with numbers. Solve math problems or count down from 100 by sevens to divert your thoughts and regain control.

- **Describe your surroundings in detail**: Describe your surroundings in intricate detail, using all of your senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This technique is sometimes referred to as the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique (see the next exercise).



MENTAL GROUNDING EXAMPLES

The 5.4.3.2.1 Grounding Technique

This technique combines both mental and sensory elements and can be particularly effective when initiated early during moments of panic, flashback, or sensory overload.

Focus on:

- **5** Things you can see
- **4** Things you can hear
- **3** Things you can feel
- **2** Things you can smell
- **1** Thing you can taste



Grounding through the senses can help bring attention back to the present, offering a bit more steadiness and connection to the here and now.

VISUALIZATION & SELF-SOOTHING GROUNDING

- **Draw on the power of visualization**: Picture a place where you feel calm and peaceful. Slowly immerse yourself in this mental image, using all your senses to imagine the smells, sounds, colors, and physical sensations of that place.

- **Retreat to a safe mental sanctuary you've created**: Pay attention to every detail of this imaginary place, from the environment and air temperature to any people, animals, or shelter that provide comfort.

- **Summon pleasant memories, scents, or thoughts of loved ones**. Carry a photo or a keepsake that reminds you of someone who brings you comfort.

- **During each exhale, repeat calming words** such as "relax" or "calm" to anchor your mind in a tranquil state as you breathe.

- **Reassure yourself with self-soothing statements** like "I can handle this," "I am resilient," or "I will get through this moment."

- **Plan a treat for yourself**, whether it's a relaxing bath or a delicious meal, as a way to show self-care.

- **Focus on positive events happening in the upcoming week** or near future to shift your perspective toward hopeful anticipation.



TACTILE GROUNDING EXAMPLES

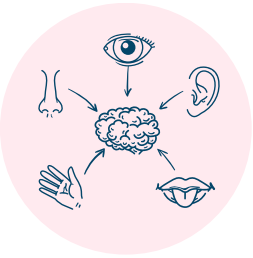
- **Rub your hands together** vigorously, directing your attention to the physical sensation of friction.
- **Press your heels firmly into the floor** and pay close attention to how it feels beneath your feet.
- **Engage with objects around you** by touching them while verbally naming them. Explore these objects using all your senses.
- **Stamp your feet purposefully** to create a physical connection with the ground.
- **Adjust your posture to a more upright position**, focusing on the change in your body's alignment.
- **Run your hands under running water** and concentrate on the sensation as it flows over your skin.
- **Keep a small grounding item with you**, such as a rock, piece of fabric, or a favorite fidget toy, to provide comfort and stability.
- **Hold an ice cube in your hand** for 60 seconds to redirect your focus to the physical sensations and ground yourself in the present moment.



SENSORY GROUNDING EXAMPLES

Sensory grounding techniques offer a powerful form of grounding. These can range from engaging in vigorous movement to activate the proprioceptive system, to more calming methods like aromatherapy for sensory soothing. Below are some activities that serve as sensory grounding:

- Jumping jacks
- Yoga
- Using a TENS unit
- Sitting on a balance ball
- Moving furniture
- Cleaning
- Yard work
- Rocking in a glider or rocker
- Get under a weighted blanket
- Holding/chewing ice
- Eating lemon/spicy food
- Aromatherapy
- Kinetic sand/clay/pottery
- Listening to music
- Clapping your hands
- Creating tension (push hands together)
- Lifting weights
- Mindful stretching
- Tossing medicine ball
- Cuddling a dog/cat/pet
- Push-ups/wall push-ups
- Clenching fists/jaw
- Cold/warm cloth to face/neck
- Hot/cold shower
- Playing an instrument
- Bean bag tapping
- Walking/running
- Drinking something cold or hot
- Chewing gum or crunchy snacks
- Humming or singing
- Massaging hands with lotion
- Wrapping up tightly in a blanket



SUGGESTIONS FOR MAKING GROUNDING WORK WELL



- **Regular Practice**: Consistently practice grounding techniques to build your skill and make them more effective over time.



- **Create a Handy List**: Keep a list of your preferred grounding strategies readily accessible. You can jot them down in a diary, leave a note in your car, or attach it to the fridge. Having this reminder makes it easier to incorporate grounding into your daily routine.



- **Early Intervention**: Start using grounding exercises as early as possible when you sense distress or anxiety creeping in. This proactive approach can help prevent the escalation of negative emotions.



- **Before-and-After Assessment**: Monitor your stress or pain levels by rating them before and after practicing grounding. This self-assessment enables you to identify which grounding techniques work best for you and can guide your future choices.

GROUNDING HELPERS



Beaded Fidget Ring

(an adjustable anti-anxiety ring with beads)



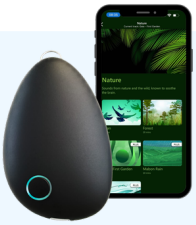
Gump Loop

(a squishy loop fidget to help reduce stress)



Grounding Bed Cover

(helps with sleep, mood, inflammation/healing, etc.)



Sensate

(vibrating relaxation device for vagus nerve stimulation. Use code **NeuroInsights** for 10% off)



Sensory Activity Dice

(turns essential sensory activities into a game!)

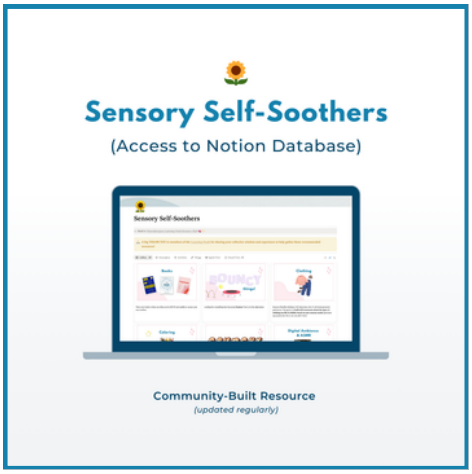


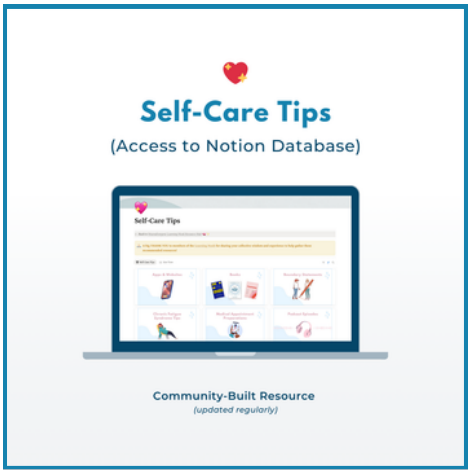
Fluora Plant Lamp

(a "plant" with leaves containing calming LED lights)

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FURTHER LEARNING & SUPPORT





SENSORY SOOTHERS

SELF-CARE TIPS



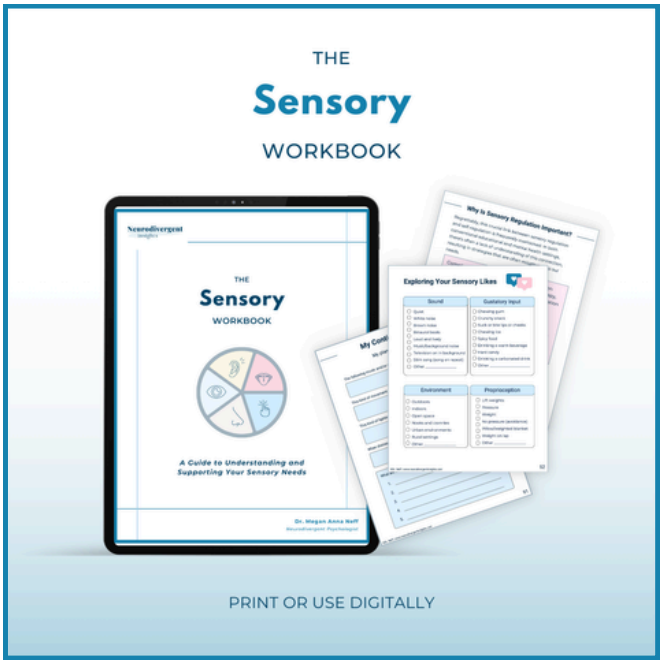
Newsletter & Vault

Dr. Neff shares weekly reflections on neurodivergence, mental health and wellness

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RELATED RESOURCES

Check out these workbooks for more!





Sensory Workbook

[FREE] Safety Plan Workbook

For $5 off any product in our shop, use the code **NDADVENTURE**

One use per customer

Please note that these workbooks are not specifically written for children. However, many of the concepts and visuals can be helpful for parents, and some exercises — such as sensory checklists or creating lists for feeding OEs — can be shared with children in a collaborative way.

Neurodivergent insights

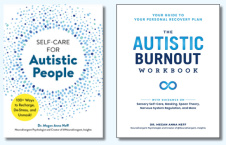
ABOUT US



Dr. Neff – Info & Resources

Website: neurodivergentinsights.com

A growing library of resources on neurodivergence, mental health, wellness, and neurodivergent identity.



Available at all major book outlets

Community: neurodivergentinsights.com/membership

Instagram: @neurodivergent_insights

Dr. Megan Anna Neff is a neurodivergent psychologist, author, and educator who founded Neurodivergent Insights after discovering she is Autistic and ADHD. She now creates visual-forward resources that blend research, clinical insight, and lived experience.

Neurodivergent Insights

Born from lived experience and gaps in clinical frameworks, Neurodivergent Insights offers reflection, learning, and care for neurodivergent people and those who support them. We create resources, education, and tools grounded in research and real life to help you make sense of your mind, story, and nervous system.

Whether you're exploring your own neurodivergence, supporting a child, or showing up as a more affirming clinician, we offer resources to help you feel more human, informed, and less alone.