



How to Deal with Hard Stuff

A Few Coping Skills for Your Emotional Toolbox

4x4 Breathing

4x4 Breathing is my favorite coping skill! It is easy, you can do it anywhere, and it will calm down both your mind and your body.

Instructions:

Count to 4 in your mind as you inhale.

Count to 4 in your mind as you hold that breath in.

Count to 4 in your mind as you exhale that breath.

Count to 4 in your mind as you hold that breath out.

Repeat those four steps a minimum of five times.

Grounding Techniques

While everyone dissociates sometimes (think about getting to a destination and then not remembering the drive, or watching a movie and forgetting where you are), it is a common response to trauma. People describe it as checking out or mentally going to a happier place. The problem is that dissociation might be a decent tool for surviving trauma in the moment, it's not good for life after the trauma, (example: a rape survivor who is a mom, mentally checking out and not noticing her small child putting a choking hazard in his mouth). In order to move forward with a better life, we need to be able to be mentally present. Grounding techniques help with that. Try them all, see what you like. You will likely have to use them many times until you retrain your brain to live in the moment you're in.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Sensory

Working backward from 5, use your senses to list things you notice around you. I find it easiest to list five things I can see, then four things I can touch, then three things I can hear, two things I can smell, and one thing I can taste. You can change up the order as you please, just make sure to include all five senses and make it relative to where you are at that exact moment. (Tip: notice things you might not always pay attention to, like the color of the flecks in the carpet or the hum of your computer.)

Counting Teeth (Did you know that the sense of smell is strongly linked to memory?)

I have used this one a lot because it's easy and can be done anywhere. For this, you simply use your tongue to count your teeth, one by one. It requires you to concentrate on the counting. (It's hard to worry or be anxious and focus on the counting at the same time.)

Savor A Scent

Is there a smell that you find calming? This could be a cup of tea, an herb or spice, a favorite soap, lotion, or a scented candle. (I bought a scented lotion

specifically for this exercise.) Inhale the fragrance slowly and deeply. Every time you perform this exercise, repeat an affirmation as you inhale. You can use one that I have used before (I inhale peace and exhale stress) or come up with one you like better.

Put Your Hands In Water

Physical touch is important too and water is soothing. Focus on the water's temperature and how it feels on your fingertips, palms, and the backs of your hands. Does it feel the same on each part of your hand? Use warm water first, then cold. Next, try cold water first, then warm. Does it feel different to switch from cold to warm water versus warm to cold?

Cognitive Reframing

Reframing is a cognitive behavioral technique that helps you to change the meaning of something which changes the way you feel about it, which in turn changes your experience. In its most basic form it is coming up with a different interpretation of an event or experience.

Reframing is broken down into these six simple steps (along with colored example responses):

1. Write down the situation or problem.

Counseling is hard. I don't like having to talk about my life so much.

2. Write down your thoughts about the situation.

I don't like someone peering into my life like that.

What if she uses the information against me?

What if I open up to her and she thinks I'm a freak?

3. Write down how those thoughts make you feel.

I feel triggered. I feel really vulnerable! I feel like an idiot. What am I doing? I'm never going to get better.

4. Now create four alternative thoughts. (This is where we change our way of looking at the situation and think of thoughts more representative with the situation.)

I am investing in myself. Counseling is getting me closer to my end goal of life without PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). The counselor does not think I'm a freak or a burden. She became a counselor to help people like me, who have been hurt, live a better life.

5. List evidence to support these alternative thoughts. (Here, simply find evidence that supports your new alternative thoughts you just created.)

I am investing in myself. - The National Domestic Violence Hotline says that domestic violence survivors are at a high risk of developing PTSD, substance abuse and stress-related mental health conditions. They say that seeking counseling and support can help survivors move forward with their lives.

Counseling is getting me closer to my end goal of life without PTSD. - Learning to cope with residual emotional pain and fears is essential to healing. Counseling provides a safe, confidential environment for me to express my thoughts and feelings, as I process the trauma I have endured. Processing the trauma is the only way to get free of the hold it has on me right now.

The counselor does not think I'm a freak or a burden. She became a counselor to help people like me, who have been hurt, live a better life. - My research shows that one of the most common reasons people decide to become a counselor is that they have a strong desire to help others. In fact, by connecting to others and helping them through the tough times, many feel a sense of reward and meaning.

6. Write down what feelings and emotions you feel post-reframing. (While you could stop at step #5, this step will further cement the change. It's worth doing some reflecting. So, take a deep breath and evaluate how you are feeling after reframing and changing your view on the situation.)

I feel relieved and confident. I am beginning to believe in myself again. I actually feel like I have hope for my future. I'm even feeling excited about starting counseling.

**It's important to remember that thoughts and feelings are not facts. Yes, intuition is important. Unfortunately, many of us have stopped listening to our good judgement and our minds are instead full of false, negative things that we have come to believe. Reframing allows us to look at things through a clear, objective lens. It is a very POWERFUL tool!

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is not only used to treat stress, tension, and anxiety. It can also help with insomnia, arthritis, and some chronic pain. It is a worthwhile technique to learn!

Here's how it works:

- While inhaling, contract one muscle group for 5 seconds to 10 seconds, then exhale and release the tension in that muscle group.

- Give yourself 10 seconds to 20 seconds to relax, and then move on to the next muscle group.
- While releasing the tension, try to focus on the changes you feel when the muscle group is relaxed. You can also imagine that stressful feelings are flowing out of your body as you relax each muscle group. Some people even find it helpful to mentally assign body parts with colors to visualize the progress (for example: red before you contract and release the body part and then it becomes blue).
- Gradually work your way up the body contracting and relaxing muscle groups. Begin with your toes and finish with your face. (I think contracting and releasing my facial muscles feels really soothing!)