

Racism and White Discomfort: The Problem and the Solution – Grounding Practices

Compiled by Amanda Udis-Kessler, December 7, 2021

When dealing with discomfort, there are a number of grounding practices that can help you come back into your body and into awareness of your surroundings. If any of these activities are making you more rather than less uncomfortable, stop doing them.

1. Deep Breathing

Take three slow, deep breaths, making the exhalation as slow as is comfortable for you. Pause for two seconds between each breath. Repeat as needed.

2. Lists of Five Sight and Sound Perceptions

First, identify five things that you can see from where you are. Name each item in your mind as you identify it: I see a...

Second, identify five sounds that you can hear. Name each sound in your mind as you identify it: I hear the sound of... This may take longer to complete.

Repeat as needed.

3. Sensory Grounding in Non-Urgent Situations

This set of practices assumes that you have time, space, energy, and the capability to assemble some items or go to a location with running water.

Options for grounding that involve taste:

- Suck on your favorite hard candy
- Eat a small amount of two foods with different taste profiles (sour then sweet, or sweet then salty, for example)
- Eat a small piece of dark chocolate slowly, letting it melt on your tongue and moving it around your mouth as it dissolves
- Drink your favorite beverage slowly, noticing its flavors and any other relevant aspects such as carbonation

Options for grounding that involve touch:

- Run your hands through hot or cold water
- Let an ice cube melt in your hands (near a sink so you can drop the ice cube in if necessary)
- Pop some bubble wrap
- Assemble two pieces of clothing with different textures; handle first one and then the other
- Touch two pieces of furniture, one that is soft and one that is hard (in either order)
- Gently pet or stroke a cat, dog, or other companion animal that is friendly and comfortable with your touching it (only do this if your energy is not likely to upset the animal)
- Touch or stroke each of your hands with the other hand

- Touch or stroke a piece of clothing that you are wearing

Options for grounding that involve sound:

- Listen to your breathing for several seconds (this works best if you are in a quiet place and can breathe somewhat loudly)
- Focus on a ticking clock in the room you are in; listen to it tick for 20 seconds or longer
- Play a recording of a song that comforts you
- Play an instrument (or play hand drums on a piece of furniture)
- Read a few pages of a favorite book aloud
- Listen to a comforting natural sound (rain, ocean waves landing on a beach, a running river) either in real life or via YouTube or an app

Options for grounding that involve smell:

- Light a scented candle
- Smell fresh flowers
- Sniff an unused bag of your favorite flavor of tea
- Go to a bakery that will have the scent of fresh bread or pastries in the air
- Open a candy bar and take a deep whiff
- Open a bottle of essential oil (peppermint, lavender, citrus) and inhale

Options for grounding that involve sight:

- Read a book
- Watch TV
- Go to an art museum or exhibit
- Examine your hands carefully
- Identify the lightest and darkest parts of the room you're in
- Identify the tallest surface below the ceiling in the room you're in, then follow that piece of furniture down to the floor

4. Practices Suggested by Trauma Therapist Resmaa Menakem

The below practices are excerpted from the book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017). I strongly recommend that everyone who wants to work more effectively against racism read and struggle with this book. It is a difficult read, and well worth it. Partly to encourage you to read the book, I've listed the practices briefly; Menakem's book provides more detailed instructions.

Calming body and breath practices, ideally carried out for several minutes (pp. 141-147):

- Humming
- Belly breathing (deep breathing with a focus on one's belly)
- Making a buzzing sound
- Slow rocking (can be while standing or sitting, rocking forward and backward or side to side; can be with the upper body or just the head and neck)
- Gently, slowly rubbing the belly just above the navel

- Rotating the ankles, wrists, knees, elbows, and/or shoulders (20 times in either direction with a pause of a few seconds between directions)
- Uttering the word “om” (or “aum”) while exhaling during deep, slow breathing
- Singing to oneself, especially a soothing song
- Chanting a meaningful or comforting word over and over
- Visualizing a person, animal, or place that makes one feel safe and secure; imagining that person or animal as being beside you or imagining that you are in the safe place
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Five anchors to address uncomfortable situations (pp. 168-171)

- Anchor 1: Soothe yourself to quiet your mind, calm your heart, and settle your body
- Anchor 2: Simply notice the sensations, vibrations, and emotions in your body instead of reacting to them
- Anchor 3: Accept the discomfort – and notice when it changes – instead of trying to flee from it
- Anchor 4: Stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience, with all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and respond from the best parts of yourself
- Anchor 5: Safely discharge any energy that remains

Ways to practice Anchor 1:

- Resist the temptation to say anything and stay quiet, focusing on your breathing.
- If you’re holding something, let it go or put it down.
- Sit down, putting your hands on your knees or in your lap.
- Mentally tell yourself to stay calm, using whatever words have the most resonance for you
- Quickly think of a person, place or animal that you find safe, soothing, or pleasurable and visualize it or otherwise make a mental connection to them/it
- Say you need to use a bathroom (whether you do or not), go to the nearest bathroom, and take a minute or two to breathe and engage in other self-soothing exercises
- Take any action that might slow the situation down without potentially offending someone (taking an outer jacket off, taking a drink from a mug or bottom, petting a cat or dog)

Ways to practice Anchor 2 in order to stay in the here and now:

- Pay attention to how it feels to be in your clothes, noticing especially where your skin touches any item of clothing
- Notice other bodily sensations (heat or cold, tension or relaxation, tightness or weakness)
- Use any of the sensory grounding exercises presented earlier in this handout (my suggestion)

Anchors 3 and 4 depend substantially on Anchors 1 and 2; practicing the first two will help you become better at accepting and sitting with discomfort rather than running from it, attacking it, distracting yourself from it, or otherwise avoiding it, and will help you stay present in your body during an uncomfortable experience.

Anchor 5 should only be used after the uncomfortable situation is over, meaning that you have extricated yourself or agreed to stop focusing on it. Consider how animals discharge tension after they have built up a lot of energy – by shaking themselves off or stretching, for example. Find a similar, harmless way to discharge the energy you built up during the discomfort.