

**How to stay grounded, centred and anchored**

**in the midst of high emotion and anxiety**

Thanks to evolution, we have highly developed emotional systems in our brains and bodies which enable us to react quickly to any perceived threat. For all animals, our brains are constantly scanning the environment for possible danger, using our 5 senses - and in humans also using our thoughts and cognition. Our threat response system is hardwired to ‘react first, reflect later’ ie from an evolutionary perspective it is better to be safe than sorry - to have lunch tomorrow than to be lunch today.

However in the 21st century our emotional hardwiring often triggers (activates) a physiological threat response (sympathetic nervous system based flight, flight and freeze response) when there is no serious threat to our lives. The threat level which induces this physiological response varies in all of us due to our genes, early life experiences, adult life experiences, the level of pressure we are under, and whether we are hungry, tired, late, etc.

Some of us are triggered more readily than others, it is no one’s fault that this happens, however there is an opportunity to learn techniques to reset the threshold that the alarm sound at, and to move as quickly as possible from a threat response to a soothing, rest and digest (parasympathetic nervous system & ventral vagus nerve) response. From this calmer state of mind we can engage our executive function, our prefrontal cortex, and make skilful responses rather than reacting to the situation based on our threat system.

Here are some techniques for you to experiment with – I suggest you bring an open, curious and enquiring mind to this process. What is there for you to learn here? It is important to practice using these techniques in low risk situations so that you can put them into place rapidly when you need to if your fear response has escalated.

**Step 1: recognise that a threat response has been triggered**

The first step with all of these techniques is to recognise that a threat response has been activated/ triggered. There is often an event in the external world (a difficult phone call, an emergency, a moral dilemma, a family problem, an aggressive co-worker) or in the internal (inside your mind/body) world (a thought of being overwhelmed, the thought that things are happening too fast, a feeling of fear about a loved one brought on by a memory or thought) which triggers a threat response. You might not even be aware of what has triggered the response though, sometimes it can be a subconscious event.

What are the first signs you notice when a threat response has been activated? Try to pay attention to the thoughts which are running through your head; the emotions or feelings which you have; and what you notice in your body. These are like your alarm bells, your ‘threat signature’ and for most people they are able over time to notice patterns in their threat response which help them to notice earlier on in the chain of events so that they can activate these grounding, centring, anchoring practices and hence learn how to nip the chain of events in the bud earlier on in the process.

Once you have recognised that a threat response has been activated, pause to acknowledge yourself for noticing. Noticing is the key to unlocking the chain of physiological responses, so well done.

**Step 2. Add one of these techniques:**

1. **FOFBOC**

FOFBOC- whenever you can and whenever you feel stress levels rising/ anxious thoughts/ heightened emotions - feel your Feet On the Floor and Body On the Chair, close your eyes if you wish, and concentrate on the body sensations in your feet and the parts of your body which are connected to the chair. If you are standing and unable to sit, that is not a problem - concentrate on feeling your feet on the floor, all the toes, and all the parts of the foot which are connected to the floor and the strength in your legs. You may like to imagine your body is like a mountain, the feet planted firmly on the floor like the stable base of the mountain, the head as the top of the mountain, feeling the weight and solidity of your body grounded with and connected to the mass of the earth. If (when) you get distracted by thoughts, in a gentle and kind way, bring your attention to your feet and your body. The FOFBOC can take 5 seconds or you can spread it out to five minutes or more.

1. **Compassionate Hand Practice**

Place one hand over your heart/ or over the other hand or your cheek, arm or thigh, when something around your work life feels difficult (sad/grief/loss/frustration/ disappointment/anxiety etc)- acknowledge the feelings as real ‘this is hard for me’; notice the tone of voice you are using to talk to yourself and experiment with softening your tone a little and being kind and caring to yourself, like 'being your own best friend'? pause, and then get into action ‘what can I do that would be kind to myself, or what do I need to do to help me to move forwards from here?'. This exercise activates the self soothing parts of our brains and releases positive neurochemicals, an antidote to the fight/flight/freeze/ ruminating responses; this practice can enable you to unhook from difficult thoughts and feelings so that you can take skilful action to use your energy and time to move towards what matters most to you. Here is a longer version for you to listen to <https://www.fionadayconsulting.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Compassionate-Hand-10-mins.mp3>

1. **Three step breathing space**

Listen to this recording and learn how to do this brief meditation practice whenever you need a moment of space. <https://www.fionadayconsulting.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Three-Step-Breathing-Space-5-mins.wav>

1. **Soothing Breathing Exercises**

Pause for a few moments to focus on your breathing. If you are also in the middle of a difficult situation, you can keep part of your attention on the external situation and part on your own breathing. Focus on the bodily sensations of the breath moving in and out through your nose. Notice the feeling of the coolness of the air as it moves into your nose and throat, notice the breath moving as if through a glass pipe down into your abdomen and notice how your abdomen moves outwards, expanding on the inbreath. Pause briefly if you wish, then slowly breathe out from your abdomen through to your nose, noticing the contraction of the abdomen, imagining the glass pipe steaming with condensation, feeling the warm moist air as it leaves the nose.

An alternative to this is using counting. Count 1-2-3-4 on the inbreath, and 1-2-3-4 on the outbreath. As your breathing steadies, move to 1-2-3-4-5 in / 1-2-3-4-5 out. Work towards around 6 breaths per minute. If you wish you can slow the outbreath even more eg count of 4 in, count of 6 out.

1. **Find moments of stillness**

Even when things are really frantic it is still possible to find micro moments of stillness which can soothe a frazzled nervous system. There is a small pause between the inbreath and the outbreath, and between the outbreath and the inbreath. There are moments when there are no sounds. There is a moment in the bathroom when there is nothing to be done except to close the door and to take a moment to allow the body to release its waste products. You may have to pay close attention to find these moments but they are present and when consciously attended to, they do activate our soothing system.

1. **Listen to sounds**

If your head is very busy with thoughts, and you are feeling overwhelmed with rising levels of stress and anxiety, practices which distract your attention can allow you to calm down. Listening to sounds is one of my favourite practices, we don’t need beautiful music, birdsong, waves or whales (though of course these are very pleasant to listen to and for many people are very relaxing). In this practice, we just notice the volume, timbre, qualities of the sound, and perhaps the spaces between the sounds (no sound). Even in a busy clinical environment with alarms sounding, we can still notice the qualities of the sounds without judging them as good or bad, rather just accepting them as they are.

1. **Notice items in your environment**

This distraction technique is a helpful tool which allows executive function to re-engage rather than the emotional threat system if other methods have not proven sufficient. Notice 5 objects in your peripheral vision, eg ‘I see a radiator, I see a desk, I see a picture, I see a window, I see a pen’; notice 4 sounds you can hear, eg ‘I hear traffic, I hear a bird, I can hear people’s voices, I can hear a plane’; notice 3 things you can feel in your body, eg ‘I can feel my socks against my feet, I can feel a breeze on my face, I can feel my hands in my lap’. Repeat the process until you have calmed down sufficiently to think clearly again.

Or search out colours in order of the rainbow ‘the picture is red, the lamp is orange…’. Varying the numbers and using the order of the colours helps to maintain focus on the task you are setting your brain.

**Step 3: What can I do now that would be helpful to me?**

Engage your executive function to help you to figure our what you need to do next, both in the moment to take care of yourself, but also to know when to seek professional help.

If you find that despite these strategies things are getting worse or you are not feeling better, then seek help early on from your GP and/ or a qualified therapist, perhaps one specialising in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or trauma, who can teach you more detailed strategies to help you.