



The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

Bringing Yourself Back to the Present Moment

WHAT IS THIS TECHNIQUE?

The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique is a simple mindfulness exercise that uses your five senses to help you stay present and calm. It works by interrupting anxious thoughts or OCD fixation and redirecting your attention to what's actually happening around you RIGHT NOW.

This is especially helpful when:

- You're fixated on visual checking (floaters, squiggly lines)
- You're trying to delay an OCD compulsion
- You're feeling overwhelmed or panicky
- Your thoughts are racing about the future
- You need to stop catastrophising

HOW IT WORKS

By engaging all five senses, you're giving your brain something specific to do that **requires attention and prevents rumination**. It gently pulls you out of your head and back into the present moment. This activates your parasympathetic nervous system (the "calm down" system) and interrupts the anxiety spiral.

Think of it as a **mental circuit breaker** - it interrupts the pattern and gives your nervous system a chance to reset.

THE 5-4-3-2-1 TECHNIQUE - STEP BY STEP

5 - THINGS YOU CAN SEE

Look around and name **5 things you can see** right now. Say them out loud or in your head. Be specific and descriptive. Don't just say "wall" - say "cream-colored wall with a small mark near the corner."

Examples:

- "I can see a blue coffee mug on the table"
- "I can see a tree branch moving outside the window"
- "I can see the pattern on the carpet"
- "I can see my hands resting on my lap"
- "I can see the door handle is silver and slightly scratched"

Important for you: When you're fixated on floaters, deliberately choose 5 things that are NOT related to your vision checking. Look at objects, not at the quality of your vision.

4 - THINGS YOU CAN TOUCH/FEEL

Notice **4 things you can physically feel** right now. Actually touch them if possible.

Examples:

- "I can feel my feet flat on the floor"
- "I can feel the chair supporting my back"
- "I can feel the fabric of my jeans on my legs"
- "I can feel the cool surface of this table"

Pro tip: Touch something with texture - run your hand along it, notice if it's rough or smooth, warm or cool. This brings strong sensory awareness.

3 - THINGS YOU CAN HEAR

Tune into **3 sounds** around you. Listen carefully - include background sounds you normally tune out.

Examples:

- "I can hear the refrigerator humming"
- "I can hear traffic outside"
- "I can hear my own breathing"
- "I can hear a bird chirping"
- "I can hear the clock ticking"

If it's very quiet: Listen to your own breath, the sound of your clothing moving, distant sounds from outside.

2 - THINGS YOU CAN SMELL

Identify **2 things you can smell**. If you can't smell anything where you are, think of 2 smells you like.

Examples:

- "I can smell coffee"
- "I can smell fresh air"
- "I can smell my soap/shampoo"
- "I can smell the fabric of my clothes"

If nothing available: Think of and describe smells you enjoy: "I like the smell of fresh bread" or "I like the smell of rain."

1 - THING YOU CAN TASTE

Notice **1 thing you can taste** right now, or think of a taste you enjoy.

Examples:

- "I can still taste my morning coffee"
- "I can taste mint from toothpaste"
- "My mouth tastes neutral"
- "I like the taste of cinnamon" (hello, cinnamon donuts!)

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Go slowly - Don't rush through it. Take your time with each sense.

2. Be specific - "Blue mug" is better than "mug." Details matter.

3. Say it out loud if possible - This engages more of your brain and makes it more effective.

4. It's okay if it feels silly - It might feel awkward at first. That's normal. It still works.

5. Practice when NOT anxious - Try it when you're calm so it's easier to use when you're stressed.

6. Use it BEFORE compulsions - When you feel the urge to check, do 5-4-3-2-1 first. You're training yourself to delay and redirect.

7. Repeat if needed - If you still feel anxious after one round, do another round. You can do as many as you need.

FOR YOUR SPECIFIC SITUATION

When fixated on floaters/visual checking:

- Deliberately choose objects to look at (not checking your vision quality)
- Touch something with strong texture to shift sensory focus
- This interrupts the checking pattern and redirects your attention

When trying to delay compulsions:

- Use this as your 15-minute delay tool
- Do 5-4-3-2-1, then reassess if you still need to do the compulsion
- Each time you successfully delay, you're building your nervous system's capacity

When overwhelmed or panicking:

- This brings you back from "future catastrophizing" to "what's actually happening now"
- Right now, in this moment, you're physically safe
- The threat is in your thoughts about the future, not in the present

When feeling disconnected or in "brain fog":

- This reconnects you to your physical body and environment
- Grounds you back into the present moment
- Clears the fog by engaging your senses

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Try it right now, even if you're not anxious:

Take a deep breath and go through each step slowly. Notice how you feel before and after.

5 things I see: _____

4 things I feel: _____

3 things I hear: _____

2 things I smell: _____

1 thing I taste: _____

How do you feel now? _____

REMEMBER

This is not about making anxiety disappear instantly. It's about:

- Interrupting the pattern
- Bringing yourself back to the present
- Giving your nervous system a chance to calm down
- Building the skill of redirecting your attention
- Proving to yourself you can delay compulsions

With practice, this becomes automatic. Eventually, you'll start doing it without even thinking about it when you notice yourself getting stuck in anxious thoughts or checking behaviours.

You're training your brain to come back to the present moment - and with that practice, the present moment becomes safer and safer. 🌱

Questions? Write them down and bring them to your next session!