



Coming Back to Now: Grounding for Panic and Flashbacks

Simple ways to steady your body and remind it that you're here, and it's now.

When panic hits, or when a memory pulls you somewhere else, it can feel like your body has left the room without you. Grounding is how you invite yourself back. These are small, simple things: nothing to master, nothing to get right. Read this when you're calm, pick one or two that sound doable, and let them be yours.

What grounding does

Panic and trauma responses are your body trying to protect you. A flashback, or that foggy far-away feeling, means your body is reacting to something from then as if it were happening now. Grounding gives your body proof of the present: real things you can see, touch, and feel in this room, in this moment.

You're not pushing anything away. You're just coming back to now.

Three kind truths before you start

Panic peaks and passes. It rises like a wave, crests (usually within a few minutes), and comes back down on its own. You don't have to make it stop; you only have to ride it out with something steady in your hands.

You can stop any time. If a technique feels wrong or makes things worse, put it down. Stopping isn't failing. It's you listening to yourself, which is the whole point.

There's no wrong way to do this. Half of an exercise, done imperfectly, still counts.

5-4-3-2-1: Come back through your senses

This one works well early, when thoughts start racing or worry begins to spiral. It gives your mind one simple job at a time. Skip any sense that isn't available to you; the noticing matters more than the counting.

1. Look around and name 5 things you can see. Out loud if you can, even "wall, lamp, my own hands."
2. Notice 4 things you can feel: your feet in your shoes, the chair holding you, the air on your skin.
3. Listen for 3 things you can hear: traffic, a fan, your own breathing.
4. Find 2 things you can smell. If the room is quiet on smells, name 2 smells you love.
5. Name 1 thing you can taste. A sip of water counts.

Temperature: cool water or an ice cube

Strong, sudden coolness can cut through a wave of panic (or that numb, unreal feeling) faster than words can. Reach for this one when panic is loud, or when you feel foggy and far away.

Keep it cool, not painful. And if you have a heart condition, check with your doctor before using very cold water on your face.

1. Run cool water over your wrists and hands, and let yourself really feel it.
2. Or splash cool water on your face, or hold a cool damp cloth against your cheeks.
3. Or hold an ice cube and notice it slowly melt. Wrap it in a thin cloth if it's too sharp.
4. Or take a slow sip of a cold drink and follow the coolness down.

Feet on the floor

This one is invisible. You can do it in a meeting, in a waiting room, in the middle of a conversation. It's a quiet way of telling your body: I'm supported. I'm here.

1. Put both feet flat on the ground. Shoes on or off, your choice.
2. Press them down, slowly and firmly, like you're leaving footprints.
3. Notice the floor pressing back. It's holding you, and it isn't going anywhere.
4. Let your weight sink into whatever is under you: the chair, the ground.

Remind yourself: you are here, and it is now

A flashback can make your mind feel like it has gone back in time. This exercise gently tells your brain what is real today. Reach for it first when a memory starts to pull you back. Say each step out loud if you can; hearing your own voice helps.

1. Say your name, and say how old you are today.
2. Say where you are: the city, the building, the room.
3. Say today's date, or just the year and the season.
4. Name three things in the room that didn't exist back then: your phone, a photo, the coat you bought last year.
5. Then, if it's true, say: "That was then. This is now. Right now, in this room, I'm safe."

Paced exhale: breathe out longer than you breathe in

When your heart is pounding and your breathing is fast and shallow, a longer exhale is the clearest signal your body has for "the emergency is over." Don't force big deep gulps; those can make dizziness worse. Slow and gentle wins.

1. Breathe in through your nose for about 4 counts. Keep it easy, not huge.
2. Breathe out slowly for about 6 counts, like you're blowing through a straw.
3. Repeat for 5 to 10 breaths. Let the exhale be the star.

A pocket anchor: carry something with you

Choose one small object to keep with you: a smooth stone, a ring, a hair tie, a worn coin. When you feel yourself starting to drift or spin, hold it. Notice its weight, its temperature, its texture.

Anchors work best when you practice with them in calm moments, so your hands already know the way back. That's true of every skill on this page: practicing when you're okay is what makes it reachable when you're not.

Which one, when?

Racing thoughts or rising worry: 5-4-3-2-1, then paced exhale.

Pounding heart, fast breathing: paced exhale, feet on the floor.

Flashback, or feeling pulled into a memory: remind yourself you're here, then temperature.

Numb, foggy, unreal, far away: temperature, then remind yourself you're here.

Out in public and need something invisible: feet on the floor, pocket anchor.

Not sure where to start: feet on the floor. It's always available.

Afterwards

Once the wave has passed, be gentle with yourself. Grounding is real work, even when it looks like standing still.

And one important thing: if a memory keeps returning, you don't have to explore it on your own. In fact, I'd rather you didn't. Bring it to session; that's what our work together is for. Between sessions, grounding's only job is to steady you.

1. What did I try, and did anything shift, even a little? Small shifts are how your body learns that waves end.
2. Which skill felt most natural in my hands? Knowing your go-to makes it faster to find next time.
3. What would help me be ready (a pocket anchor, cold water nearby, this sheet where I can see it)? Preparing while calm is a kindness to your future self.

These moments are hard, and reaching for a skill in the middle of one is quiet, brave work. However it goes, you're not doing it wrong — and you're not doing it alone.

This handout is a companion to therapy, not a replacement for it. Bring what you notice here into session, and we'll work with the deeper layers together. If you're in crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), any time, day or night.