

Fast-Acting Techniques To Disrupt Overwhelming Emotions: For Immediate Relief

Created by Dr. Lynn Margolies ([Visit Website](#))

These tools are designed to **disrupt overwhelming emotional states**, numbness, dissociation, anxiety and fear by engaging the body and nervous system directly.

SENSORY STIMULATION

Use to: manage unbearably painful or overwhelming states, resist the urge to do something destructive, and/or get grounded if numb or dissociated.”

This strategy is a fast-acting tool to calm yourself for urgent situations. However, increasing your capacity to be with and tolerate your feelings is necessary for sustained self-control, self-regulation and psychological growth.

**Dissociation is an altered state of awareness that often precedes or accompanies escape, addictive, or other destructive behaviors. Dissociation can involve disconnection, and lack of awareness, in any or all of the following domains: Sensation, Memory, Cognition, Emotion, and Perception*

The dissociative response is learned instinctively as a survival strategy in childhood. Then, later, dissociation kicks in when painful feelings and/or memories are triggered that once were unbearable. Even when such extreme measures are no longer needed or protective.

1. Cold Stimulation*

- **Hold ice:** Grip an ice cube in your hand, focusing intently on the cold sensation and the melting of the ice.
- **Cold pack to neck/face:** Apply a cold pack to the back of your neck, under your eyes, or across your forehead.

- **Cold water face splash or dunk:**
Briefly splash or dunk your face into very cold water for **15–30 seconds**, Then, **hold your breath for 30 seconds** and **slowly exhale all the air out of your lungs**.
[Breathing Tools for Calm & Sleep](#)
- **Gel mask:** Use an icy cold gel mask over or around the eye area.
- **Suck on ice:** Place an ice cube in your mouth and focus on the extreme cold as a powerful sensory distraction.
- **If angry, anxious, or agitated:** Chew small pieces of ice.

Why this helps

- Cold stimulation to the face—especially around the eye area—**activates the vagus nerve**, jolting the parasympathetic (calming) nervous system into action and quickly slowing heart rate.
- Strong sensory input such as ice **competes with overwhelming internal states**, demanding attention to the present moment and interrupting pain, dissociation, numbness, and/or flashbacks

**Warning: Avoid cold stimulation if you have seizures, cardiac conditions, fainting history, Raynaud's phenomenon, cold sensitivity, or medical advice to avoid cold exposure.*

2. Activate the Senses: Sound, Scent, Touch, Taste

Examples:

- Wash your hands and work soap into a lather, pausing to notice the feel and texture (use scented soap).
- Smell a spice or anything with a scent you like.
- Hold or touch an object with a soothing texture (e.g., a smooth rock or an animal).
- Listen to music or a podcast.
- Focus attention on nearby sounds around you.
- Savor something in your mouth.

PHYSICAL MOVEMENTS TO DE-STRESS & GROUND YOURSELF

Use when: you feel disconnected, dissociated, revved up, agitated, overwhelmed, restless, or “not in your body.”

Options:

- Run in place
- Do 10 jumping jacks
- Sit down and stand up quickly 10 times
- Stomp your feet (seated or standing); notice the sensation in your feet and the sound
- Rhythmic movements: rolling a ball, drumming, finger tapping, dancing
- Forward movement such as walking (without looking at your phone)

Why this helps

- Physical movement signals **safety and presence** to the brain, reconnecting you to your body.
- Rhythmic, repetitive movement is naturally soothing and calms the nervous system.
- Movement triggers the release of **dopamine and endorphins**, improves mood, reduces stress hormones (cortisol), strengthens brain-body connection, and supports emotional regulation and focus.
- Forward movement (without phone use) naturally creates **lateral eye movement**, which helps deactivate the amygdala—the brain’s threat-detection system.

COGNITIVE ANCHORING TO DISRUPT RUMINATION & GROUND YOURSELF

Use to: disrupt rumination and painful thoughts and/or feelings.

- Look around the room. Name and describe objects (color, shape, texture, purpose).
- Do math: Count backward from 100 by 2s, 3s, or 7s.

Why this works

- Cognitive anchoring engages and activates the **prefrontal cortex**, shifting resources away from emotional threat circuits and interrupting mental loops.

Adapted from Johns Hopkins University of Medicine (2025)

Reference:

Johns Hopkins University of Medicine. (2025). *Grounding techniques to help control anxiety*. <https://hr.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/JHEAP-Grounding-Techniques-to-Help-Control-Anxiety.pdf>

Safety Note

Do not use these tools if any discomfort arises or if otherwise contraindicated.

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