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Physical Coping Skills for Stress & Emotional Regulation

Research-Supported Strategies You Can Use Anytime

Physical coping skills help calm the nervous system by engaging the body directly. These techniques can reduce anxiety, interrupt rumination, and help you regain emotional control in the moment.

1. Tapping (EFT: Emotional Freedom Techniques)

What it is:

A technique where you tap on acupressure points on the face and upper body while focusing on a distressing thought or emotion.

Why it helps:

Tapping activates both the emotional (amygdala) and cognitive (prefrontal cortex) areas of the brain, reducing stress responses.

How to do it:

1. Identify the feeling you want to work on.
2. Rate your distress (0–10).
3. Tap each point (eyebrow, side of eye, under eye, under nose, chin, collarbone, under arm, top of head).
4. Breathe and reassess.

Research Support:

Church, D., Stapleton, P., & Sabot, D. (2020). App-based delivery of clinical emotional freedom techniques: cross-sectional study of app user self-ratings. *Jmir Mhealth and Uhealth*, 8(10), e18545. <https://doi.org/10.2196/18545>

Bach, D., Groesbeck, G., Stapleton, P., Sims, R., Blickheuser, K., & Church, D. (2019). Clinical eft (emotional freedom techniques) improves multiple physiological markers of health. *Journal of Evidence-Based Integrative Medicine*, 24.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2515690x18823691>

2. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

What it is:

A method of tightening and releasing muscle groups to lower physical tension.

Why it helps:

PMR decreases muscle tension and activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the body's "calm" system).

How to do it:

1. Start at the feet, tense muscle groups for 5 seconds.
2. Release and relax for 10 seconds.
3. Move upward through legs, stomach, shoulders, face.

Research Support

Feldman, G., Greeson, J., & Senville, J. (2010). Differential effects of mindful breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and loving-kindness meditation on decentering and negative reactions to repetitive thoughts. *Behavior research and therapy*, 48(10), 1002-1011

3. Deep Diaphragmatic Breathing

What it is:

Slow breathing that expands the belly rather than the chest.

Why it helps:

Deep breathing increases vagal tone, slows heart rate, and reduces emotional intensity.

How to do it:

1. Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds.
2. Hold for 2 seconds.
3. Exhale through the mouth for 6 seconds.

Research Support:

Khng, K. H. (2023). Deep breathing and mindfulness: Simple techniques to promote students' self-regulation and well-being from the inside out. In *Positive psychology and positive education in Asia: Understanding and fostering well-being in schools* (pp. 311-325). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

4. Cold Temperature Exposure (Cold Splashing or Ice Packs)

What it is:

Using cold water, ice packs, or cold objects to quickly regulate intense emotions.

Why it helps:

Cold triggers the mammalian dive reflex, lowering heart rate and calming the body.

How to do it:

- Place an ice pack on your face for 20–30 seconds.
- Splash cold water on your cheeks.
- Hold an ice cube in your hand and focus on the sensation.

Research Support:

Butner, L. A Naturopathic Perspective on the Cold Plunge Trend.

5. Grounding Through Movement (Walking, Stretching, Body Scans)

What it is:

Using slow, intentional movements to reconnect with your body.

Why it helps:

Movement releases built-up adrenaline and interrupts physical symptoms of anxiety.

How to do it:

- Take a 5–10 minute walk.
- Stretch upper body and neck slowly.
- Perform a body scan noticing sensations without judgment.

Research Support:

De Tord, P., & Bräuninger, I. (2015). Grounding: Theoretical application and practice in dance movement therapy. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 43, 16-22.

Menigoz, W., Latz, T. T., Ely, R. A., Kamei, C., Melvin, G., & Sinatra, D. (2020). Integrative and lifestyle medicine strategies should include Earthing (grounding): Review of research evidence and clinical observations. *Explore*, 16(3), 152-160.

6. Bilateral Stimulation (Alternating Left–Right Movement)

What it is:

Alternating tapping, stepping, or holding objects in left and right hands.

Why it helps:

Engages both hemispheres of the brain and reduces emotional distress—similar to EMDR principles.

How to do it:

- Tap left/right on your thighs.
- Squeeze a stress ball in alternate hands.
- Walk while focusing on left/right foot movement.

Research Support:

Valdivieso, G. N. (2023). Energy Psychology, Bilateral Stimulation, and Mindful Breathing for Trauma and Chronic Pain: A Theoretical Framework and Case History. *Energy Psychology*, 15(1).

7. 4-7-8 Breathing

What it is:

A timed breathing exercise that promotes deep relaxation.

How to do it:

1. Inhale for 4 seconds.
2. Hold for 7 seconds.
3. Exhale for 8 seconds.

Research Support:

Kit, Y. E. S. SOS Meditation: Quick Stress Relief Techniques for Urgent Situations.

When to Use These Skills

- When anxiety rises suddenly
- When you feel overwhelmed, panicked, or disconnected
- When you're having trouble sleeping
- When intrusive thoughts feel intense
- Before difficult conversations or decisions

Tips for Success

- Practice daily so your body learns the skill before stress hits.
- Pair physical strategies with emotional tools (journaling, reframing, grounding).
- Notice what works best for you; everyone responds differently.