



## UPPER ISLAND ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE SERVICE

# 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1

## A Helpful Grounding Tool for Anxiety and Panic Attacks

### Introduction

Panic attacks can be terrifying! Our heart races, our palms are sweating and we are convinced that something terrible is going to happen, and/or that we are incapable of managing. All of our systems are working together to maintain this status quo – our body, our mind and our emotions. Many people use antianxiolytic medication like Ativan or Clonazopan to help. We can also use our mind to help us calm down. The 5-4-3-2-1 exercise is an excellent grounding and calming exercise.

### The Anatomy of a Panic Attack

When we are anxious, worried or stressed, we tend to breathe shallowly, or even hyperventilate a little. Our lungs (diaphragm) and our heart no longer have contact with each other the way they do when we are breathing deeply. Our nervous system is getting a signal that we are in danger and releases adrenalin to prepare us for the “fight or flight” response. Our brain receives this adrenalin and has to explain to our system why we are in danger. Then we start to catastrophize and tell ourselves about what sorts of terrible things might happen. We can imagine that these terrible things can be outside of us, like “my daughter won’t make it home safely from her date”, “my husband is having an affair”, “someone is going to break into my home”; or inside of us, like “I can’t cope with this”, “I’m all alone and no one will help me” or some other way of feeling incapable, helpless or hopeless. The combination of adrenalin and these negative thoughts increases our panic and anxiety and we now have a complete system (body, mind, emotions) that is self-perpetuating. Like the energizer bunny, it just keeps going and going!



Our nervous system desperately needs help to settle down.

### What to Do

1. Recognize that you are having a panic attack and that your mind is fooling you into believing things that aren’t true. You are not going to die of a heart attack, terrible things will not happen to you or your family.
2. Let your breathing deepen to restore contact between your heart and your lungs. Slow your breathing down. Breathe in to the count of 4 and out to the count of 8.
3. Use your senses to help stop the cycle that is underway. You are moving from thought, which is fueling your anxiety, to senses that help ground you and move you out of your head and into your body. Use your eyes to look around you. What are five things you see? Spend a moment actually looking at the thing you identify. What are 5 things you hear? Spend a moment paying attention to what you hear. What are 5 things you sense in your body? Sensation is simpler than emotion. For example rather than “I feel anxious”, which is the combination of several body sensations and thoughts, identify one sensation.

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This might be “I feel a knot in my belly”, or “my heart is beating fast”, etc.

Repeat this exercise with 4 things you see, hear and feel in your body. They can be the same or different. The important thing is to actually let your senses stop for a minute and do their job of seeing, hearing and sensing.

Repeat this exercise with 3, 2, and 1 thing you see hear and feel in your body.

4. You should by now be feeling more grounded and calm. Put your hand on your belly about two inches up from your belly button and slowly move your hand in a circle. We have receptor sites in our gut that can help calm us down.
5. If you can go for a short walk and continue focusing on your senses, this can be helpful. Notice what you see, hear, and sense in your body.
6. Finally, know that the other side of every fear is a hope. Instead of focusing on your fear, think about what your hope is. Rather than “I am going to have a heart attack”, - your fear, think about your hope – “I am calming myself down and helping my heart feel more peaceful”.



-Azima Buell, MA, RCC  
UIARS Counsellor