

Grounding Fire Drill

1. Identify bodily sensations that occur before you start to spiral or stall.
2. Identify one grounding technique.
3. Ask the question, is the event in front of me the cause of the anxiety or is it everything else?
4. Use a mantra that is positive or aggressive to redirect energies into action.

Important note: This only works if the person using it writes as if they are speaking to themselves.

Example

When I feel my heart start to race, I will use a sensory strip to redirect my body. After that, I will ask myself, am I in the present, or am I thinking about the future or past events? If I am thinking of the past or future, I am thinking of the wrong things. I have overcome a lot, and this is just one more small thing I will overcome.

Steps to fill in

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Explanation for educational purposes.

The theories matter, but how the person understands you is more important. Reflect on your own life and find your analogies.

Overarching idea.

When we are panicked, we have limited bandwidth and struggle with making complex choices. This is in part due to how our brain works on a functional level and a psychological level. On a functioning level one could look at **top down and bottom up processing** when panic is present. In very simple terms top down is a slower more deliberate way of processing information and bottom up is more reflexive (1). When panic is present the amygdala will signal for a quicker and thus less thought out response. When there is minimal panic the prefrontal cortex can take its time. On a psychological level we are **cognitive misers** (2) and thus want to spend the least energy thinking as possible and so we develop prototypes to quickly evaluate stimuli. Lastly there is the **James-Lange Theory of Emotion** that states we process emotion physically before **cognitively** (3). That moves us on to appraisal theory, which is that past events flavor the evaluation of events (4). All that together means that we typically have an expectation of events based on prior events that we process emotionally before cognition comes to the forefront of our thoughts.

That could be like the following on a practical level: We are presented with a stimulus that we have experienced before, the prototype, that leads us to have an emotional reaction, from there a degree of cognition kicks in and that impacts how we take our next steps.

Let's use testing anxiety for an example. At one point someone was told that their grades determine their value. A not so uncommon example could be "What will you do with your life if you cannot get a college degree? You will be a loser." Now when the person goes to take an exam that they are told is worth 30% of their grade, they sit down and panic. If given the material in any other format, they could do it with ease. It's clear that it's not the test. It's that voice that says "this one failure means I won't pass the class. If I don't pass the class, then I won't get a degree and then I will be doomed". The problem then is not the test, it's an emotion being triggered, that emotion leading to a bad expectation of outcome and then a spiral. Thus, one way to address this is to address the emotion before the cognition can produce a full thought.

Mixing these together allows us to look for analogies in how stressful events can be overcome. The best one is a fire drill. It expects panic, overwhelming environmental stimuli, and unknown locations of fear.

To address learned panic responses, one can use **operant conditioning** to train oneself to respond adaptively to fear-inducing events(5). This framework does not aim to override past experiences; rather, it redirects cognition **before** the full panic response is triggered. That is why Step One focuses on recognizing early pre-panic cues. It is far more difficult to calm oneself once full-blown panic occurs, so the goal is prevention: stopping escalation before the conditioned response dominates.

In terms of limitations, this approach is much like a **fire drill**. It does not extinguish the fire, but it allows one to evacuate safely. Like a fire drill, it requires **training** to condition oneself to respond effectively. The amount of training needed varies depending on the individual and their cognition around the perceived threat. A well-defined threat with a clear perceived risk usually requires less training.

Training consists of practicing the drill **before** it is needed—during moments of mild panic or early stress. It does not have to be practiced all at once; it can be done in parts if someone is struggling with a specific aspect. Mindfulness exercises can also be incorporated to increase awareness of early physiological or cognitive cues that indicate overstimulation.

The **mantra** at the end of the drill may change over time as a person redefines themselves. Experimentation is encouraged until a phrase feels right and energizing. Importantly, while this is **not counseling**, it draws from counseling principles—particularly the value of having individuals put strategies into their own words. This is not something that can be prescribed; the practitioner’s role is to guide them in creating language that works for them personally.

Once the drill is laid out, it can be useful to ask: *“Why might this drill not work?”* Often, individuals have already considered reasons for potential failure or success in their internal dialogue. Exploring these beliefs helps refine the drill and strengthens self-efficacy.

Step explanations broken down.

Step 1. Looking at evolutionary psychology and the processes of cognition, we have already identified that things and events from the past can cause anxiety. These things or events will trigger a bodily sensation before cognition can fully explain it. If you would like the theory, that is the James-Lange Theory of Emotion(4). Some people struggle to put those bodily sensations into words, so offering examples instead of asking for reflection on an event might help. I caution against reflecting too much on one event because it might not trickle over to other anxiety-provoking stimuli. Much like many of the things I say, there is a but included in this. If the anxiety is coming from one exact point, reflecting on it may not be bad. I strongly encourage one to avoid accepting “I don’t know”. That is often used as a way to redirect from a panicked moment. Addressing that executive functioning issue may come from panic and that you are exploring it like a fire drill or whatever analogy you wish may help reframe it.

Step 2. Stick to grounding techniques that require bodily sensations. They are not needed, but the idea is that you are using the same system that is being triggered. If the body is activated, then it must be calmed.

Step 3. The person needs to use **their own words** to ask themselves if they are looking at the problem correctly. I often joke that we are not time travelers, so we cannot live in multiple places and times at once. A little humor does not hurt, and again, a proper analogy helps rationalize the step.

Step 4. Again, it has to be their own words. Passive or neutral statements do not redirect, so they **CANNOT** be used. The choice of words does not have to be made right away, but is needed at some point. Do not shy away from aggression in this case. If you want a practical example of aggression being used to overcome odds, look at sports psychology. Primarily, how a team can use a desire to defeat the opponent on the field but not view their team as the enemy after the game. You could also look at body builders and how they will amp themselves up. Another model one could look at is the Yerkes-Dodson law (6). This states that there is an optimum level of stress related to the task at hand. Too much or too little leads to worse performance. Knowing that the goal should not be to eliminate stress but make it proportional. Lastly, the importance of direction is that it is used to predict an outcome. Think of the difference between I can do something and I will do something. I will is a commitment to an outcome where I can do something is a commitment to trying. Not all attempts to try are equal and thus the notion of trying can be met without success. To be clear, the bar to surpass for *trying* is lower than the bar for *succeeding*. The bar should be set higher with the expectation of success.

Step 5. (FOR EDUCATOR, NOT PART OF THE DRILL ITSELF) Challenge them on this plan a little. The goal is to see if they have already defeated it. Walk them through, ask them if it seems right and check in on them later. As a reminder, the goal of this is not to address the underlying problem, but merely teaching a skill to calm oneself and change directions. In this way, the current issue can be addressed, and the underlying issue can be addressed later.

Citations

1. Arnsten, A. F. T. (2009). "Stress Signalling Pathways that Impair Prefrontal Cortex Structure and Function." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 10, 410–422.
2. <https://dictionary.apa.org/cognitive-miser>
3. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3431612/>
4. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1999-04021-030>
5. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1473025/>
6. <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/dujs/2021/02/07/retiling-stress-a-look-at-the-yerkes-dodson-law/>

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A Note from the Creator

This tool exists because of what I see every day when I coach and support people. Movement is often the key to success, and real movement starts with the belief that it can be done.

This technique comes from the simple idea that each person's hard-earned lessons can help someone else. That's why this Grounding Fire Drill is completely free. The insights I've gained from students, clients, and friends are not mine to hold onto; they're meant to be shared. That is why you are welcomed to use it, adapt it, and change it in any way that helps you. I hope someone will take this and make it even better. As I said in the beginning the words and analogy don't matter, it's about how you tell your stories.

This way of thinking that tools that can be adapted and improved comes from my grandpa David Clute. He once said, "A teacher should expect his students to do better than him, because a teacher did not have himself when he was learning." I carry that belief with me in everything I do. My deepest hope is that this tool helps people get moving again and that, in some small way, my grandfather's words make the world slightly better through the hands of others.