

# Simple Ways to Navigate Stress and Trauma

We learn to expect and manage a certain amount of stress. Under normal circumstances, it can motivate us or remind us to slow down and take a deep breath. Chronic stress, or stress related to trauma, is different. When exposed to a shattering event or unrelenting anxiety, uncertainty or fear, we can be overtaken by symptoms that manifest in the body, mind and spirit.

As some of us may have discovered during long months of pandemic pressure, some reactions to acute or chronic stress occur immediately; others might come days or weeks after a peak of anxiety. Sometimes they don't appear for months.

Physical symptoms like shortness of breath or rapid heart rate might be unsurprising. Other signs, such as difficulty remembering, planning or problem solving, can be unexpected and confusing. Emotional turmoil – anxiety, panic, depression, irritability or feelings of emptiness – might influence behavioral responses like hyper-alertness, isolation, decreased appetite and insomnia.

There are simple ways to find your way back to a sense of calm, many of them focused on attending to your body. Connecting with the present moment supports emotional regulation, which helps change our troubling behaviors. Of course, if your symptoms are chronic and interfere with daily functioning, it's important to also seek professional support.

## Steps to calm the nervous system

- **Abdominal breaths:** Place a hand on the belly, above your belly button. Inhale slowly and deeply through the nose, feeling the belly expand. Exhale slowly and fully through the nose, allowing your whole body to relax.
- **Grounding:** Stand up and ground yourself through the feet. Feel your rootedness to the earth. If you are sitting, notice where your body is in contact with another surface or body part. Notice the sensations, temperature and textures of your environment.
- **Centering:** Place your hand on your heart, feel the warmth of your hand and direct positive affirmations to your being. Imagine a beautiful, nurturing place. Notice the sights, sounds, smells and body sensations you experience there.

## Ways to brighten your mood

- **Get tall:** While sitting or standing, try lengthening your spine, feeling the vertebrae stacked one on top of the other. Hold your head up, shoulders back and chest open with feet ground to the floor.
- **Move your body:** Take a walk, go on a hike or dance in your living room. Engage in simple, pleasurable activities that help your blood flow, including ones that take you into soothing parts of the natural world.
- **Relax with purpose:** Listen to music you enjoy and sing along. In a quiet moment, focus on what you are grateful for, which can include even the simplest things. Allow for the expression of all your feelings – speak them, write them, draw them.



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