

The 5-4-3-2-1 Technique

This is a description of an anti-anxiety technique called “The 5-4-3-2-1 Technique” taught to me by Yvonne Dolan, MA, author of *A Path With a Heart* and *Recovering from Sexual Abuse*. It is also taught by Betty Alice Erickson, daughter of Milton Erickson, MD.

The technique is very simple and direct. It does not involve complicated visual imagery or hypnotic inductions, it does not ask the client to close their eyes, imagine themselves somewhere else, or even to trust the therapist very much. It is a way to relax and release anxiety while orienting yourself comfortably to the physical reality around you.

- (1) Establish a position that you can maintain comfortably for a few minutes. Pick a spot on the wall or nearby and let your eyes remain on that spot, and let your head remain in a comfortable, stable position. Moving your eyes, moving your head, moving around and re-orienting will tend to interrupt the experience, so let yourself settle into a comfortable position and stay there for a few minutes.
- (2) Say out loud in a slow, gentle rhythm five things you see, then five things you hear, then five things you feel in your body. Then say out loud four things you see, four things you hear, four things you feel. Next, say out loud three things you see, three things you hear, three things you feel. Then, two of each, and finally one of each. You’ll find yourself repeating a lot, and that’s fine.
- (3) For most people, somewhere before they get to the one-of-each category, they find themselves relaxing into the pleasant sensations of just noticing what’s around them in all its detail and richness. They slow down a little, they kind of enjoy the process and get distracted by that, and actually lose their place in keeping track of which step they’re on. *That’s the point of the exercise.* When you lose your place, just ask yourself, would you like to continue to get absorbed by the pleasant sensations around you, just kind of drift into daydreaming and relaxing, or would you like to go back to the exercise?
- (4) Let me demonstrate for you. (Adjust your posture, take a deep breath, fix your gaze, and begin.) “I see the print on the wall, I see the trees out the window, I see the chairs in the room, I see the lamp in the corner, I see the print on the wall. I hear the sound of my own voice, I hear the traffic outside, I hear the hum of the building’s air conditioner, I hear the sound of your breathing, I hear the sound of the traffic outside. I feel the chair supporting me, I feel my feet on the floor, I feel my watchband on my wrist, I feel my glasses on my nose – is that four or five? I lost my place already. So at this point I can choose to return to the exercise or just go along into noticing what I’m noticing, and continuing to relax and breathe deeply and evenly without the exercise.”
- (5) Would you like to try it?

I once worked with a client who had been traumatized with countdowns, so she preferred to reverse the order of the exercise and make it the “1-2-3-4-5 technique.” Another client found it unpleasant to notice body sensations so used “I smell . . .” as the third sequence. Remember to be flexible and follow your client’s lead, and may this exercise be useful and valuable to you and your clients!

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