



Embodiment Practices

UCSF Office of Restorative Justice Practices

Embodying Restorative Justice

Our bodies are essential to understanding how we interpret and react to the world around us, so it is important for us to look inward to truly *embody* restorative practices.

“Interoception” is the ability we have to understand what is happening in our own body, and it is an ability we have to cultivate through practice (Johnson 2023). Interoceptive awareness helps us to be aware of what is occurring below the surface that might be fueling our feelings, thoughts, and actions. It is especially helpful when we feel ourselves getting stressed, sad, scared, or tense, so we can identify what we might need in that moment. In the case of restorative justice this is especially important, since the subjects of harm, justice, and conflict can bring up associations of punishment that cause distress responses in people. Understanding how these feelings and stress manifest in your body—whether through a clenched gut or in the way you hold your posture, etc—gives more clarity about how to attend to your needs to return to a state of calm. It is from that state of calm that we can respond restoratively: flexibly, empathetically, values-aligned, and non-punitively.

A practice for developing interoception is [mindfulness](#): maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens. This gentle awareness is the type of awareness we can bring to our embodiment practices so that they’re supportive of us and our wellbeing.

How to use this document

In this document, we’ve compiled a list of practices from external resources that can help you find or return to a state of calm and presence in your body, especially in times of (dis)stress.

- We picked ones that are especially handy to do during meetings or when you only have a moment, but the full invitation is to do 1+ practices in times of calm to build your capacity.
- There is a range of practices that you can do, so pick whichever comes most easily and naturally first.
- Start with a small and doable amount of time – like 1-2 minutes a day—and gradually increase.
- The goal is to support you, not to add more stress. Feeling positively and a sense of accomplishment from doing only as much as you can will support you to continue the practice.

Embodiment Practices

Physical Practices

1. Holding

Notice where in your body you are feeling your emotions, and gently place your hand(s) over the area and hold. Breathe into your hand(s), feeling the reassuring pressure.

2. Holding + movement

Notice where in your body you are feeling your emotions, and place your hand(s) on that area, starting to bring a little movement to the area with your hand(s). Notice as you start to move your hand(s) whether that area wants a massage, a light caress of reassurance, a wipe down as if you were bathing, or gentle tapping.

3. Tightening

This practice can be especially useful if you are feeling anger or fear. Tighten your fists and/or the muscles in your body for 5 seconds, and then release them slowly for 5 or 10 seconds. You can repeat 10 times, or however many you need to feel the energy shift.

4. Butterfly Hug

Cross your arms over your chest, placing your hands on your collarbones with fingertips pointing toward your shoulders. Alternately, tap each hand like the fluttering wings of a butterfly while taking deep breaths.

5. Finding a safe space in your body

Locate a space in your body that feels as good or comfortable as it can, and identify that space as a safe space within yourself. It can be as small as the tip of your nose – no amount of space is too small – or it can be as large as your entire body. It is good to do this exercise when you are not in distress, so you can find the most expansive version of that safety and goodness within yourself. That will make it easier to come back to in a time of distress. However, our body always changes, so what is most important is to find the safe space that is still there in a stressful moment.

6. Shaking

Shake part or all of your body to bring movement to the emotions in your body. This exercise is especially good if you're feeling fear or anxiety, because it can match the intensity of the feeling and mirror a natural shivering response your body can do during those emotions.

Environment Practices

1. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 method

The 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 technique uses the five senses to ground you in the present moment, redirecting your attention away from distress by helping you concentrate on your environment around you. Widening your awareness interrupts the hyperfixation of high nervous system activation.

5 - See: List five things you can see around you. They could be pieces of furniture or photos on the wall.

4 - Feel: Next, touch four things, like the soft fabric of your sweater or the cool surface of a table.

3 - Hear: Identify three distinct sounds—maybe the distant hum of traffic or a ticking clock.

2 - Smell: Recognize two things you can smell. They could be the smell of your own perfume or fresh bread. Even unpleasant odors count.

1 - Taste: Notice one thing you can taste. Take a sip of water, munch on a snack, or simply remember your last meal.

2. 3-3-3 method

Similar to the above method, but you identify 3 things you can see, 3 things you can touch, and then take 3 deep breaths.

3. Connecting to the ground

Notice how you feel gravity, whether through your feet or your seat, and how it connects you to the Earth beneath. Focus on this connection, and how it can give an immediate connection to the present moment, the space you're in. If visualization comes naturally to you, you can imagine roots growing from your feet or seat into the Earth. The goal is to feel rooted to your surroundings and supported by our connection to Earth.

Breathing Practices

1. Take a deep breath (or 10)

"Take a deep breath" is a common phrase because it brings the age-old wisdom that deep breath triggers the body's relaxation response. When we feel stress, our body's threat response causes rapid, shallow breaths—so doing the opposite brings our calm state back online. If you are new to paying attention to your breath, just the simple act of taking one (or more) deep breaths to create a space of pause can be helpful. Start with an inhale, and try to make the exhale double the length of your inhale.

2. Diaphragmatic breathing

Also known as belly breathing, this technique involves taking slow, deep breaths through the nose, expanding the diaphragm rather than the chest. To practice, sit comfortably and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Take a deep breath through your nose, allowing your diaphragm to expand. Exhale slowly through the mouth. Repeat several times.

3. Humming

One of the benefits of being on a zoom call is going on mute, where you can make space for sound-based practices. One effective practice for balancing the nervous system is humming, which brings self-soothing vibration into the body. You can hum any sound that brings a calming resonance to your body.

4. Pursed lip breathing

Keeping your mouth closed, inhale slowly through your nose for 2 counts. Pucker or purse your lips as though you were going to whistle. Exhale slowly by blowing air through your pursed lips for a count of four.

5. Square/box breathing

Box breathing is proven to regulate the nervous system. Start by inhaling, holding the breath, exhaling, and pausing for an equal number of counts (usually four).

6. Sighing

Another simple breath tool that many of us do naturally is to sigh. Simply breathe in, and let out a sigh with your exhale. You can do 4-5 sighs in a row, or just integrate a sigh or two throughout your day to let out energy.

Mental practices

1. Visualize a safe, calming space

Visualize somewhere you feel calm, happy, and secure. It could be a childhood home, a peaceful beach, or even a fictional place. It helps to imagine your safe space before you're in the midst of a moment of tension or anxiety. It helps to locate this place during a time when you are relaxed and calm, so you can recall it easily when you're not feeling as serene. If you're having trouble visualizing, you can put on soothing music or look at a picture that can help generate places in your mind.

2. Use affirmations

Gentle reminders like “I am safe” or “This too shall pass” can help shift out of threat response. When you are not in a high-activation state, try different words or statements to see what resonates.

3. Shift your thinking

How we define a situation influences how we act, so re-defining the situation into “an opportunity” can help us see what we can learn from it. Examples:

- seeing conflict as an opportunity to make things better with someone else, and to collaborate together to deepen the relationship
- seeing conflict as a space to find alignment between our moral values and how we act
- seeing the physical-emotional discomfort we may feel as an opportunity to tell us about what needs or desires of ours are not getting met, and a chance to take care of ourselves well

4. Titrate your emotions

“Titrating” is used to describe how much emotional “flow” we let into our system’s internal reservoir. This is especially helpful with trauma triggers. When we titrate our experience, we keep ourselves in an intentional place of choice and safety by opening and closing the tap on our emotions. It is a process by which we slow down our internal response so that we can more effectively process incoming information. You can visualize this imagery when you are feeling flooded with emotion.

Further resources for embodiment practices:

Mindfulness:

- UF Introduction to Mindfulness: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FY1381> ([pdf](#))
- UCSF Osher Center: 8 Week course on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction: <https://osher.ucsf.edu/public-classes/MBSR>
 - o You can also check out whether your campus or department at UCSF has an MBSR course

Breathwork:

- <https://www.healthline.com/health/breathing-exercise> ([pdf](#))

Physical grounding:

- <https://www.calm.com/blog/grounding-techniques> ([pdf](#))

Meditation – UCSF resources:

- Meditation Apps: <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/apps>
 - Online resources: <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/wellbeing#d>
 - Meditation videos: <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/videos>
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References

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- johnson, rae. 2023. *Embodied Activism: Engaging the Body to Cultivate Liberation, Justice, and Authentic Connection*. North Atlantic Books.