

Emotional Regulation

We all go into our Panic Zones. It is a perfectly normal human reaction to facing difficulties. But when we are there, we are not able to grow. If we enter our Panic Zones in places that may not be safe – such as the front lines of direct action – it can be dangerous. Here are a few tools that we can begin to practice, so that when we find ourselves in Panic, or even in the upper limits of our Stretch Zone, we can begin to regulate ourselves and bring ourselves back.

Practices to Support Ourselves

Take a deep breath. Deep, slow breathing is regulated by the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS), the same system that slows your heart rate, relaxes your muscles and helps to conserve your energy. Intentional deep breathing can help kick the PNS into gear. *Focus particularly on long, deep exhales* - perhaps with a sound like a deep sigh. When we are in panic, we forget to breath, and it is in the exhales that our bodies truly begin to relax.

Naming what's present: We often times go into panic because past traumas are triggered. When we are present with past trauma, our brain doesn't know that the memory of that trauma is from the past. Your brain thinks that the pain you suffered that caused that trauma is happening *now*. Bring yourself back to the *present* moment by naming things that are actually present around you. You can name out loud or in your mind objects that you see around you. "I see a street light." "I see a fire hydrant." You can also count them. "I see 2 teacups." "I see 4 cars." Or colors and shapes. "The fire hydrant is blue." "There is a square window." Or notice the people around you. "I see Alex over there."

Hug yourself: Human touch not only supports the regulation of our emotions, but becoming aware of body sensations can also bring us back to the present moment. Place your right hand under your left arm, and wrap your left around your right arm, and squeeze gently. Notice how that feels in your body.

Nourish your body: The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) is what kicks in when you are in panic. It is what sends adrenalin and cortisol throughout your body and makes your muscles tense up, speeds up your breathing and shuts down your digestive system. One way to combat this is to kick your digestive system into gear by taking small bites of food or drinking sips of water.

Move your body: In the Panic Zone, you get disconnected from your body. The more you can do to *feel* your body again, the more supported you will be in regulation. Try stretching your arms or back, going for a short walk or run, doing some jumping jacks, or even sitting down and seeing if you can notice where your body comes into contact with the chair.

Tapping: Gently tapping yourself throughout your body, from head to face to toe, can be very relaxing and calming to the nerves. Tapping particularly around your meridian points have been proven to be effective methods of trauma healing. Check out www.tappingsolutionfoundation.org/HowDoesItWork for more information.

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Supporting Others When They Are In Panic

In addition to helping teammates practice the tools listed above (“Take a deep breath with me. Can you let out a deep exhale? Can you try taking a sip of water?”), try some of these practices:

Make eye contact: When someone is in panic, they lose connection with others. Forcing eye contact is one way to reestablish that connection. You may notice their eyes wondering from object to object. Try to slow them down and have them look at you.

Touch: Physical touch is another way to reestablish connection. Some people may have trauma around physical touch, so it is important to know this about your teammates, or to ask for consent at each step. If they are comfortable with it, try placing your hand on their back, and rubbing *up* their back. Moving from their lower back to their upper back helps them release, and helps them exhale out. Or try putting your hands on their shoulders and gently squeezing them.

Remind them who they are: If someone is in real panic, they will dissociate. Call them by their name, over and over again while maintaining eye contact. Remind them who they are, and remind them that you know who they are so they don’t feel alone.

Invite inputs: In Panic, people lose the ability to take in information. They are only focused on their traumas and the source of their traumas. Ask them simple questions. The more panicked they are, the simpler it should be, all the way to questions like “do you know what day it is?” As they start to regulate, you can ask them if they see other teammates around them. Ask them to look around and name the people they see. If there are others trying to support them, ask them if they feel comfortable making eye contact with everyone that is there supporting them. You can also ask them to name objects, shapes, etc.

Like any practice, the more you engage with these tools, the more effective they will become. It is important that we begin to practice and train ourselves in these tools *before* you go into panic zones, and *before* you put yourself in situations where triggers are likely – such as Direct Action spaces.

Consider practicing these tools at home in a comfortable place at first. Once you get the hang of it, consider turning on the TV or radio, perhaps something with a lot of noise or even sounds of arguing and violence. Try to use these tools in that setting, to learn to regulate your emotions even with distractions around.

Once you’re comfortable with that, try going outside and using these tools when you are surrounded by noise. Or perhaps try role-playing scenarios with your teammates, and have them try to throw you off your center while you continue to engage in these practices.

All of this will help you stay centered in the midst of action spaces.