Five senses, one moment

A grounding practice for when your thinking has run ahead of you.

When something stings, the older part of your brain reacts before the thinking part has a say. Heart speeds up, jaw tightens, shoulders climb. This is the **limbic system**; the part that kept your ancestors alive by moving first and asking questions later. It is doing its job. The trouble is, you are not being chased by a bear. You are reading an email or sitting in a waiting room, and the alarm is still ringing.

What changes the alarm is the **prefrontal cortex**, the part of your brain just behind your forehead. It is slower but more deliberate. You use it when you name what is in front of you, count colours in a tree, list textures under your hand. When the prefrontal cortex is online, the limbic alarm quiets. Not instantly, but steadily.

The five-sense practice is a deliberate way to put the prefrontal cortex back at the wheel. The aim is not to record anything, just to notice; a student of the moment, not a passenger to the feeling.

Educational content; not a substitute for therapy. If you are working through something significant, consider connecting with a counsellor or your family doctor.

The five-sense practice

Five things you can see. Four you can feel. Three you can hear. Two you can smell. One you can taste. The point is to notice them, not write them down.

See (5). Look up. Pick five things you can see right now; a chip in the paint, a curve in a branch, the colour of the carpet. Naming each one is what slows everything down. Count them, then look again.

Feel (4). Notice four things touching you. The chair against your back. Cotton on your collarbone. Air on your wrists. Floor under your feet. Each one is happening right now whether you noticed it before or not.

Hear (3). Three sounds. The hum of the fridge. A car going by. Birdsong if you are outside. Sounds you usually filter out are the easiest to find when you start listening for them.

Smell (2). Two things you can smell. Coffee. Rain on cedar. The shampoo still in your hair. This is the one we forget. Stop and smell the roses; literally, if there is one in reach.

Taste (1). One thing you can taste. A sip of water. The aftertaste of toothpaste. Tea cooled on the desk. Notice what is on your tongue right now.

When to reach for it

You do not have to be in distress to practice this. In fact, the practice is easier to find when you do not need it; standing in line, walking to your car, waiting for a kettle to boil. The point of practicing on a calm day is so the move is available on a hard day.

When you feel the alarm rising; the racing thoughts, the tightness in your chest, the worry that has run ahead of you; the five senses are the way back. Not the only way, but a reliable one.

A note on smell

The rose-smelling line is a line because it is true. The olfactory system runs straight into the older parts of the brain, the same parts that fire the alarm. Pausing to breathe in something present, anything, has a direct route back to the system you are trying to settle. So smell the roses. Or the cedar. Or the coffee.

What did you notice the first time you tried this?

There is no test. The noticing was the practice.

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