A large teal circle with a hand-painted, brushstroke-like edge is centered on the page. The background is white with a pattern of small black dots of varying sizes scattered throughout.

HEALING TRAUMA TOOLKIT

By Nicole Perry
Registered Psychologist

MY MENTALITY ON HEALING

First, I believe it's important to share my mentality that healing trauma is possible. I'm a big believer in our natural resilience, and I created this toolkit in order to support that resilience - not replace it.

In my work as a Registered Psychologist, I use an approach called Somatic Experiencing (SE), which is a body-based therapy for healing trauma. In the SE worldview, the understanding is that since trauma is stored in the body, the way to heal it is also through the body. As a therapist, my approach to body-based work is mostly to use mindfulness, compassion, and a bit of imagination.

I've learned a number of tools over the years that I believe are essential in healing trauma, and I share them with my clients often. It's been a long time coming that I've been wanting to put them together in a cohesive way, and I hope you'll find the result valuable. I draw mostly on the work of Peter Levine and Diane Poole Heller - though they are not the only therapists that have influenced the content of this toolkit.

As always, trauma healing is best done with support. I absolutely encourage everyone to reach out to a therapist, or if that really doesn't work for you at the moment, there may be a local support group, trauma-informed yoga, workbook, or other practice you can incorporate for the time being.

Remember, one of the most important things about any practice is to see how it is for you. Keep in mind that on some days, certain practices may feel soothing, while on other days, they may feel overwhelming. Allow yourself to go slow, and take these suggestions as invitations - not demands.

Nicole Perry is a Registered Psychologist who works from a collaborative and feminist perspective. She specializes in shame resilience, setting boundaries, and healing trauma. She offers groups and workshops in addition to her 1-1 work. She can be found at embodiedpsychology.ca



SAFETY

One big thing I work with in healing past trauma is starting to help our bodies feel safe again. Sometimes we can get stuck in the past, almost like we're still waiting for the worst to happen. We need to remind our nervous systems that we're safe(r) now. So, what are some of the ways to help ourselves feel safe?

We can start by looking around and noticing the things that make us feel a little bit safer in our existing lives. It might be a friend we know has our back. It could be a particular place we feel at home inside. It could be that we feel safe with a cat curled up on our lap, or when we're connected with the earth, or when we're wrapped up in a blanket. Find those objects, places, and people in your life that you feel a little bit more at ease around. Surround yourself with them. Turn your attention there, as often as you can. You can do this both in real life and in your imagination. The goal is this: orient yourself toward safety. We're teaching your body that you've survived.

CONTAINMENT

Another big tool I teach in the initial phases of healing trauma is containment. What I mean by this is the ability to start putting limits around difficult memories and feelings. Often, people walk into my office and the trauma has taken over their entire lives. They might feel unable to stop thinking about it, reliving or re-experiencing past pain. Or, they might get overwhelmed by emotion.

One technique I use for containment is having clients imagine a physical container where they can store the difficult memories. It's not a place to store them forever - just a place we can keep them in between sessions so that we can regain a bit more control over just how and when we work with them.

The container can be any shape, size, or color. Generally, it just needs to be big enough to hold the traumatic memories, and it needs to have some way to close or secure. For clients who can't imagine something that's big enough, just imagine that it's bigger on the inside. (Yes, that's a TARDIS reference).

I always like to remind people that they're the ones in control of when they open their container, and just how much we take out to work on at a time.




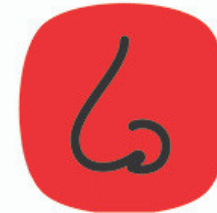



Photo by Timothy Choy on Unsplash.

GROUNDING IN SPACE

When people experience a trigger, their bodies respond as if they're actually in the difficult situation they're imagining, and their stress response is activated. One way you can help yourself when you're activated is to return to the present moment. You can help ground your body back into the here and now by using your five senses.

In this exercise, take the time to notice (outloud) what you're aware of through your senses. Go through them one by one, as pictured below. You can name anything that you notice, or you can focus on the things that are most comforting. Between each of your senses, take a breath and a moment to remind yourself where you are. I invite you to try this exercise now and see what your experience of it is.

- 5 Things you can see 
- 4 Things you can touch 
- 3 Things you can hear 
- 2 Things you can smell 
- 1 Thing you can taste 

GROUNDING IN TIME

When working through trauma, people often feel as though the worst is yet to happen. They'll describe feeling on edge, hypervigilant, and fearful. You can remind your body that you have actually survived by grounding into the present time.

Just how can you do this? You might try looking at a clock, or listening to the sound of the clock tick. By doing so, it lets you see and hear that time is consistently moving - not stuck. Sometimes it's helpful to think about the year, or how old you are. (eg., "I'm 30 now... I was 17 when it happened... it's been 13 years since then"). It's important these phrases are said with compassion and with the intention of bringing you back to the present moment. You can also look around and notice what's different in order to help ground you in time (eg., "it's winter now", "I'm an adult - I can see I no longer have a child's body", "I'm in my new house now, with my partner who loves me".)

GROUNDING (CONT.)

Cats (and dogs) are also really helpful allies for grounding. If you're working on getting grounded and have a pet, try this: lie down on the floor with your animal. Play, cuddle, or even just watch them. Other animals are so connected to their bodies and so grounded. As humans we just need reminders and a little guidance. Riding horses is another great example of drawing on the support of animals.

One last idea for grounding would be to involve anything that helps you feel connected to the earth. Literally, I'm encouraging you to think about the ground, and bring the focus of your attention toward it. Your hands on the mat, your feet touching earth, your body kneeling down in the garden... anything that brings you down and earthbound can be helpful.

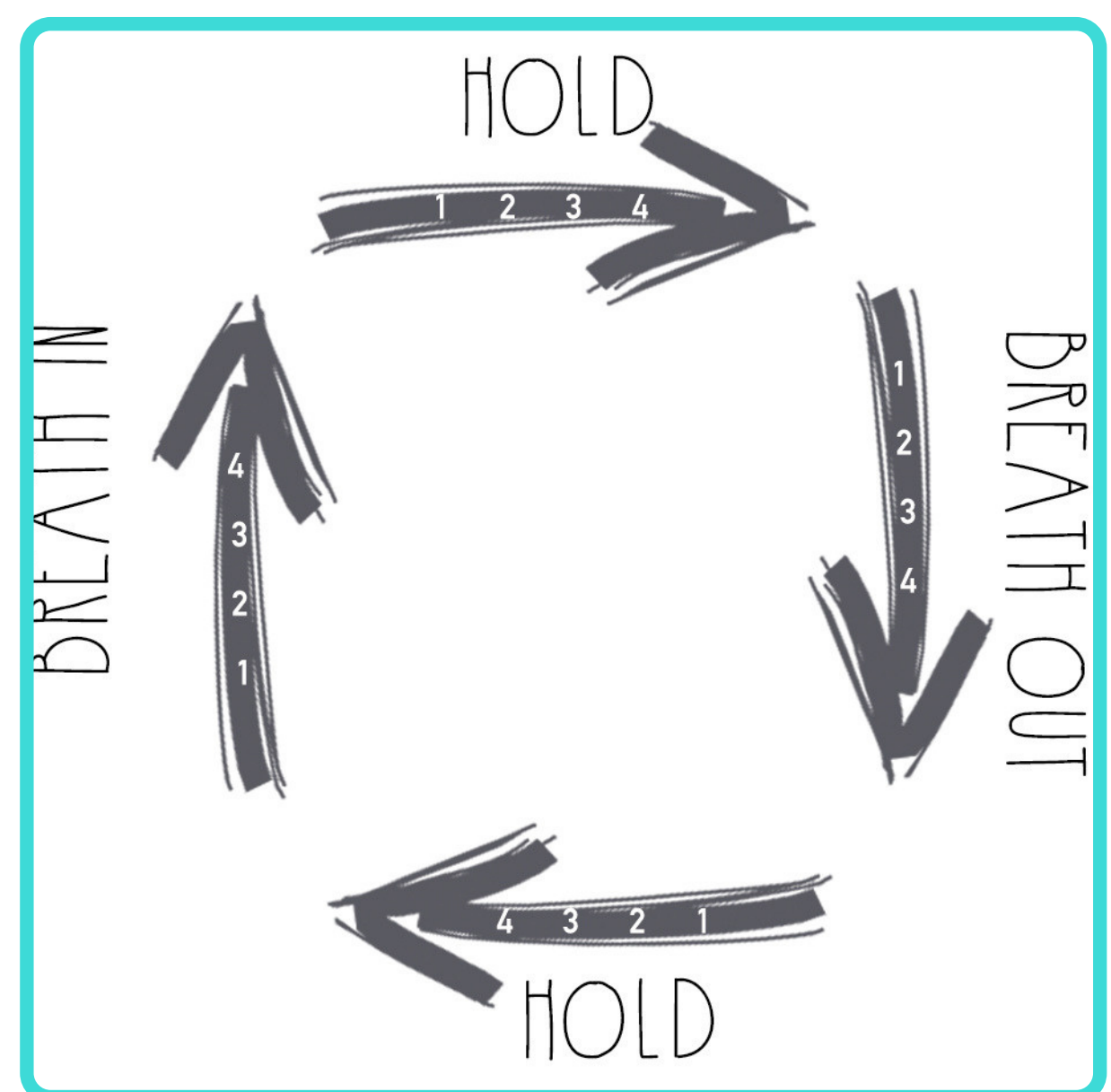
SELF REGULATION

Self-regulation describes our ability to bring our body back into balance after a difficult event. It's the part of us that helps to bring down our heart rate, slow our breathing, and calm our nervous systems after stress. If you've experienced trauma, this natural process may have been interrupted, leading to feelings of dysregulation. Or, like a lot of people I work with, if you've had an absence of calming, protective figures in your early life, you may never have had the experience of feeling regulated. Fortunately, there are ways we can learn to self-regulate. Some people do it by having a regular routine and moving their bodies. Here, I've provided some examples of ways you can support self-regulation through breath and self-touch.

*BREATH

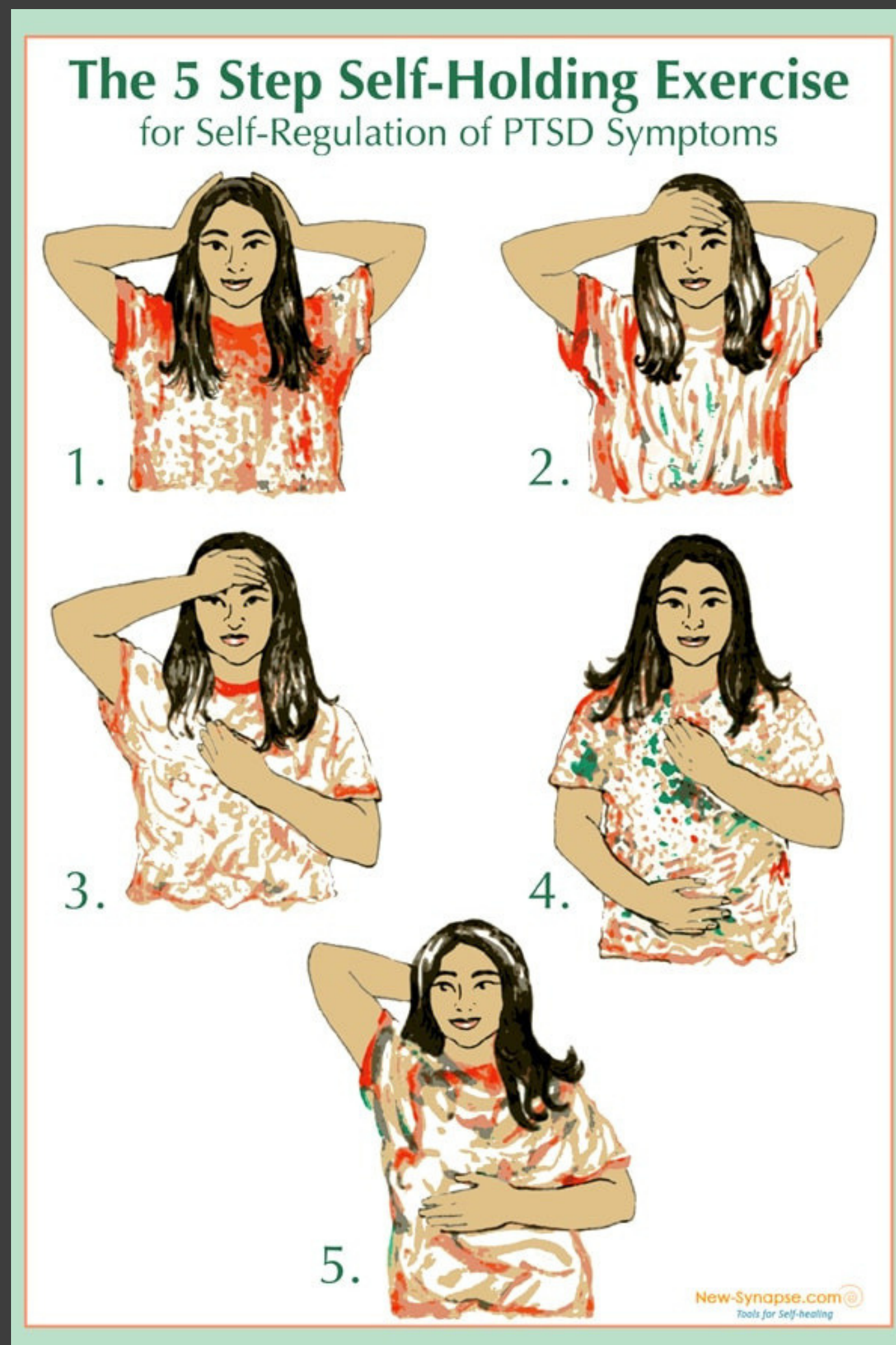
One way to regulate your nervous system is to return to your breath. That might mean allowing yourself to breathe. For some people, it can help to count the breath, so that the inhale and exhale are in balance. Square breathing is a simple, focused way to start to regulate our nervous systems. Here's how it works: Breathe in for a count of four, hold for a count of four, breathe out for a count of four, and hold for a count of four. Repeat for five more cycles, or as many work best for you.

Give this a try now if you can. And see if you can notice what happens in your body when you do. Do you feel any more relaxed, grounded, or present? Is there a sense of ease or slowness? Pay attention to the experience of it. If focusing on your breath increases anxiety (as it does for some people), you might choose instead to focus on taking one breath.



*SELF TOUCH

I love how [Shivani Wells](#) encourages us to try self-touch. She reminds us that there's no right or wrong way – it's really about what feels regulating for you. Some people find that placing one hand on their belly and one hand on their chest is helpful. Others find it helpful to place one hand on their forehead and another supporting the back of their neck. I have had other clients share that gently pressing their palms together is a helpful form of self-touch. If you feel supported enough to try out any of these options, the illustration on the right shows some examples you can follow along with. More detailed instructions can be found on new-synapse.com



SUMMARY

There's a lot I wanted to include here, and I'm also aware that a lot can feel overwhelming. So, let's bring it back to the essentials. At any point during your trauma healing, you may choose to focus on one of the following:

- Safety
- Containment
- Grounding in the here and now
- Self Regulation

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