

Activity: Nature Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Calming Exercises in the Garden

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Photo by Park Igls



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will learn and practice calming exercises in a serene setting like a garden.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Practice mindfulness techniques

Physical: Reduce cortisol levels; reduce stress responses; lower blood pressure; increase awareness of body's responses to stress

Psychological/Emotional: Discuss trauma, triggers, coping strategies & practice accepting support (trauma-informed care)

Sensory: Engage senses in plant rich setting as technique for calming, relaxing, distracting from negative thoughts

Social: Interact with others in a calm state; reduce number of contentious interpersonal interactions

Materials

Yoga mats, comfortable seating

Plant-rich setting

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Identify a green garden space where the TH session will be held. Schedule session during time when green space is likely to not have other disruptions, e.g distracting sounds, lunchtime or other events. If hosting session in a shared space, post signage alerting passersby of “closed session in progress.”
2. Facilitator begins session by welcoming participants in a calm gentle tone and introducing theme of session – learning calming exercises.
3. A discussion begins by asking participants when they have felt the need to calm themselves. These might include situations with anger, trauma, medical diagnoses, grief & loss, or other. Invite participants to note symptoms they experience within the body when in these conversations, such as clenched fists, tense muscles, stomach pain, racing heart, shallow breathing, etc. This does not have to be long, depending on group & other goals but sets the context for the need for strategies for coping with these. A simple statement: Accepting support, trauma-informed care etc. can reassure participants that there can be additional paths to feeling better. Adjust discussion for appropriateness as needed.
4. The exercises can begin when participants are in a seated (or standing) position where they are comfortable. Being in a green space like a garden, greenhouse, plant-filled room sets the tone and suggests to group places that begin as serene. Below are several calming exercises.
5. Conclude session by thanking them for their participation & openness. Invite participants to notice body responses to calming exercise, including noting how they felt before & after the exercise. Encourage them to try calming exercises regularly to retain the practice & try different exercises to find the right personal fit.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Most populations can benefit from learning and practicing calming exercises. For populations/individuals who have experienced severe emotional disturbances, trauma, or trafficking, the discussion on triggers and trauma may be best included in sessions with experts in these fields co-leading the session. Conducting the TH activities in a green space (green is serene) provides physiological,

psychological and sensory inputs appealing to most people and it demonstrates by example the type of physical spaces that contribute to feeling calm.

Calming exercises are used by many therapeutic practitioners, particularly evident in mental health counselling. They are also used by teachers. They are not specific to TH, but the settings typically used for TH provide a serene setting mentioned previously. The following are a few calming exercises. Adapt them to a green setting.

Breathing Exercise – Facilitator verbally guides group in taking long breaths from the belly, focusing on the process, the sensations and then the exhalation. Repeat this for a few minutes. Variations throughout can include breathing in for 4, exhaling for 6. Breathe in through nose, exhaling from mouth (Harvard Medical School, 2022).

Progressive Relaxation – The exercise involves tensing then relaxing different muscles in the body, releasing the tension build-up. Begin verbal cues for toes, progressing up the body, with gentle comments about sensations between tensing and relaxing. Participants should begin to feel and focus on these differences (Anxiety Canada, 2024).

5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Exercise – Using guided questions and senses, begin by asking “What things catch your eye in the garden – 5 items.” Then take time to ask “4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste”. Refer to [Susan Morgan’s article](#) for more detail specific to garden and TH settings (2024).

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts.

People who have experienced trauma can experience re-triggering; it may be optimal to include trauma specialists or intertreatment team members to support these responses should they occur. Breathing exercises may be difficult for people with respiratory conditions; alternative exercises can be suggested. Outdoor activities may be difficult for people with plant and environmental allergies.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Calming and relaxation exercises are effective in working towards relaxing the body’s responses. Calming exercises can reduce the body’s stress hormones, adrenalin and cortisol, while producing endorphins, the brain’s chemicals that release natural painkillers and mood enhancers. They can involve autogenic and progressive muscle relaxation (Mayo Clinic, 2024). The mental health benefits of calming exercises include positive thinking, improved problem-solving, productive distraction for reducing stress symptoms and redirecting negative thoughts, and less ruminating. Guided calming exercises may be helpful for participants in increasing awareness of stress symptoms within the body as they are occurring, and with practice and increased awareness, participants may improve self-monitoring of body responses to stress and taking action steps to respond in more productive ways, e.g. calming exercises.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Anxiety Canada. (2024). [How to do progressive muscle relaxation for anxiety.](#)
- Harvard Medical School. (2022). [Six relaxation techniques to reduce stress.](#) Harvard Health Publishing.
- Mayo Clinic Staff. (2024). [Relaxation techniques: Try these steps to lower stress.](#)
- Morgan, S. (2024). [Using the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory exercise in therapeutic horticulture activities.](#) *Cultivate*, 4(1).

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2024.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.