



Four Elements Exercise for Stress Management

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Four Elements Script Notes

The rationale behind the creation of “The Four Elements Exercise for Stress Management” is to address the cumulative effect of external and internal triggers that occur over the course of the day. Since we know that people cope better with stress when they stay within their arousal “window of tolerance” (Ogden & Minton, 2000), ways to lower stress—especially when under stress—are essential. An antidote to stress triggers is the frequent random monitoring of stress levels with simple stress reduction actions.

The heart of the exercise consists of four, brief, self-calming and self-control activities. The sequence of the four elements—Earth-Air-Water-Fire—is designed to follow the body up from the feet to the stomach and chest, to the throat and mouth, and up through the head. It begins with the ground to signify safety in the present reality and moves up to the imagination of recalled safety.

While learning to do the Four Elements Exercise for Stress Management, it is suggested that clients wear a four elements “bracelet” as a reminder to do the exercise. This can be a colored rubber band, string, or bracelet, something novel that clients will notice or already wear on a regular basis on their wrists. The idea is to take a quick reading of the current stress level using the simple 0 to 10 SUD scale (subjective units of disturbance scale) where 10 = the most stress and 0 = no stress at all. This can occur every time clients observe their bracelets. Then, clients do the exercises and the therapist takes another SUD reading to see the results of doing the Four Elements Exercises.

Sometimes, clients find it helpful to gently stretch the rubber band and release it each time to signal the beginning of the Four Elements Exercise, to stop negative thoughts and to ground quickly in the present.

An alternative to the rubber band is to place a small sticker or label on a frequently seen object that the client carries such as a watch, a mobile phone, for example.

By checking in with stress levels at random times throughout the day and also when stressful events are occurring, the exercise can aid in preventing the accumulation of stress and enables clients to stay within their window of tolerance. The modest goal is to reduce the stress level by 1 or 2 units each time the exercise is performed.

The original conceptualization of the Four Elements Exercise was that the first three elements could be a preparation for the Safe Place (or other resource exercise such as the Resource Connection), especially when there is an ongoing emergency situation or when it is difficult to find a Safe Place. Often, the fourth element is introduced at the following meeting, as the first three elements are enough to remember and practice in the beginning for clients.

Working on the Safe Place separately during the following session gives it more space and impact. It is then practiced with the bracelet reminder frequently, together with the other elements. It is also possible, depending on time and the needs of the client, to incorporate the creating of the Safe Place after the third element.

It is advisable to follow up on how the client practiced the four elements at the beginning of the next session and to ask them to show you how they do it. If necessary, demonstrate it again at the beginning of the first few sessions. This is a way of checking for compliance and readiness for EMDR as well as present level of stress and sense of safety with you in the room.

Four Elements Exercise for Stress Management Script

Introduction

Say, "Okay. Let's begin the 'Four Elements Exercise for Stress Management.' The purpose of this exercise is to help you manage your stress throughout the day and stay within what we call your 'window of tolerance' for stress. If you can keep your stress level from accumulating throughout the day by this very brief exercise, you will notice the difference in your quality of life. Would you be interested in learning this skill for managing stress?"

Say, "First, let's start by finding a reminder that you might use. I have a _____ (state whether you have a rubber band, bracelet, etc. It is important for the therapist to give this transitional object that will also remind the client of the safety of the therapist and the therapist's office). Or, I have some stickers here that you could put on your mobile phone if you prefer to do that. What would you like to choose?"

Say, "Let's take a current reading of your stress level where 0 is no stress or neutral and 10 is the highest stress you can imagine. How stressful does it feel now?"

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
(no stress)										(highest stress)

Say, "The exercise consists of four, brief, self-calming and self-control activities. The sequence of the four elements—Earth-Air-Water-Fire—is designed to follow the body up from the feet to the stomach and chest, to the throat and mouth and up through the head. Let's begin."

The Four Elements for Stress Management

1. Earth: Grounding, Safety in the Present

Say, "The first element is EARTH. The Earth represents the idea of grounding ourselves in the present and noticing that we are safe in the present. Take a minute or two to land—to be here now.

Place both feet on the ground, feel the chair supporting you. Direct your attention outward. Look around and notice three new things that you see."

Say, "Tell me what you hear."

Say, "Tell me what you smell."

Note: Don't ask this if it draws attention to ongoing dangers, for example, if you are in a war zone and there are explosions still going on.

2. Air: Breathing for Strength, Balance, and Centering

Say, "The element of AIR represents a feeling of strength, balance, and centering. If anxiety is excitement without oxygen and results in your stopping breathing, when you start noticing your breath and breathing deeply, your anxiety decreases. So, as you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND, take three or four deeper, slower breaths from your stomach to your chest, making sure to breathe all the way out to make room for fresh energizing air. As you breathe out, imagine that you are letting go of some of the stress and breathing it out, direct your attention inward to your center."

3. Water: Calm and Controlled—Switch on the Relaxation Response

Say, "Through the element of WATER, we can switch on the relaxation response and become calm and controlled. Notice if you have saliva in your mouth. Have you noticed that when you are anxious, or stressed, your mouth often 'dries' because part of the stress emergency response is to shut off the digestive system? This has to do with the Sympathetic Nervous System. When you start making saliva, you switch on the digestive system again or the parasympathetic nervous system and the relaxation response. This is the reason why people are offered water or tea or chew gum after a difficult experience.

Sometimes, people find it helpful to imagine the taste of a lemon or something that makes their mouth 'water' in anticipation. When you make saliva, you can optimally control your thoughts and your body.

So, as you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND and feel CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out, direct your attention to making saliva."

Before moving on to the fourth element, it is important to decide whether the client would benefit from practicing the first three elements at the beginning or moving on to create the Safe Place after the third element is established.

If you decide to end with the third element, it is helpful to do the following:

Say, "As you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND; and feel CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out; and feel CALM and in CONTROL as you produce more and more SALIVA";
"Where do you feel it in your body?"

Say, "Does it feel good?"

Say, "As you think of that safe (or calm) place, notice what you see, hear, and feel right now." (Pause)

Say, "What do you notice?"

Say, "Focus on your safe (or calm) place, its sights, sounds, smells, and body sensations. Tell me more about what you are noticing."

Say, "Bring up the image of that place. Concentrate on where you feel the pleasant sensations in your body and allow yourself to enjoy them. Now concentrate on those sensations and follow my fingers (or whatever BLS you use)."

Use four to six sets.

Say, "How do you feel now?"

Repeat several times if the process has enhanced the client's positive feelings and sensations.

If positive, say the following:

Say, "Focus on that."

Repeat BLS.

Say, "What do you notice now?"

Repeat several times. Enhance positive feelings with BLS several times. After installing the safe place, move on to the fourth element.

Say, "Now that you have your safe place, we can continue with the Four Elements Exercise. So, as you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND of the Earth Element and feel CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out with the Air Element and feel CALM and in CONTROL as you produce more and more SALIVA for the Water Element, fire up your IMAGINATION for the Fire Element and bring up the image of your SAFE PLACE (or some other positive RESOURCE). Where do you feel it in your body?"

Say, "Does it feel good?"

Say, "Then, direct your attention to feeling good in your body and go with _____ (whatever BLS you are using)."

Install with brief slow BLS or Butterfly Hugs.

Say, "As you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND; and feel CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out; and feel CALM and in CONTROL as you produce more and more SALIVA; you can let the FIRE LIGHT the path to your IMAGINATION to bring up an IMAGE of a place where you feel SAFE or a memory in which you felt good about yourself. Do you have it?"

Say, "Go with that _____ (using whatever BLS)."

Say, "Now touch your bracelet (or sticker, etc.), and start by thinking first about earth, then air, then water, and then fire." (Pause)

Say, "Have you done that?"

Say, "Great. Go with that as a way to install or connect your bracelet to the elements of earth, air, water, and fire."

Do BLS.

Say, "Let's take a current reading of your stress level where 0 is no stress or neutral and 10 is the highest stress you can imagine. How stressful does it feel now?"

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
(no stress)										(highest stress)

Say, "The modest goal that we have is that you are able to reduce your stress level by one or two points. If you think it would be helpful, you can repeat the exercise."

"It is recommended that you practice the exercise at least 10 times a day for the first 2 weeks and when you notice that your stress is high. Also, it is helpful to use the Four Elements Exercise when your stress levels are not so high in order to create the positive connection that will help you to use it more effectively. Do you have any questions?"
