



MELODY J. ANDERSON, LCSW

www.counselingbymelody.com

“RETURN TO CALM SKILLS (RTCS)” c.

“Return To Calm Skills (RTCS)” c. are a series of research-informed techniques that return our stressed-out bodies, minds and spirits back to their normal states. RTCS are easy to learn and offer almost immediate relief. They are a form of Mindfulness, as they move our focus away from a past disturbing event or thought into the present moment, where we *are* safe.

When we experience a conscious, unconscious, *or* imagined threat, our brain’s emotional, or Limbic System (which sits in the middle of the right brain, between our right eye and right ear), tells our bodies to secrete the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones then activate our survival behaviors of Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn, Collapse and/or Attach. But as this happens, the problem-solving areas in the front left part of our brain- the Pre-Frontal Cortex-shut down and we operate solely on impulse, not intellect. Our bodies then automatically speed up our breathing and tighten our muscles, so we can run as fast as possible. Our blood vessels constrict to limit bleeding if attacked. These hormones usually return to normal once the threat is gone. But sometimes, these hormones remain at high levels when we live in an on-going, stressful environment or are triggered by unresolved trauma. This then lessens the effectiveness of our immune systems, the stability of our emotional states and damages our interactions with others. We are left chronically anxious, tired and prone to stress-related illnesses. Also, when triggered we often hyperventilate, creating too much CO₂ in our bodies and not enough O₂. This can lead to dizziness and panic attacks.

Within 15-30 seconds, RTCS help us to cool down the activated brain and body. We will then be able to re-engage our PFC and find those solutions that will help us survive the threat.

Let's begin with a quick body check, identifying where tension sits in the different areas of our bodies. Rate that sensation from 0-10, with 0 being no sensation and 10 being the most intense. Scan again after completing the skill. My clients experience lowered numbers and less distress with RTCS.

1. **THE HEART SANDWICH (Trauma Resource Institute-TRI)**: I invite you to place one or both hands on your mid-chest, near your heart. Keeping your hands on your chest, notice their weight on your chest and any warmth in this area. Identify any sensation shifts in your body, such as releasing, opening, or relaxing. 15 seconds. (traumaresourceinstitute.com)

2. **7/4/5 BREATH**: I invite you to 1) Gently blow out through your mouth for a count of 7, removing all the CO₂ from of your lungs to make space for the incoming O₂. 2) Now, *gently* breathe in through your nose, keeping your shoulders down for a count of 4. 3) Stop and hold for a full 5 seconds to re-oxygenate your body. 4) Again, gently blow-out through your mouth for a count of 7, pushing your diaphragm against the bottom of your lungs. Perform this routine 3-5 times until you notice the body calming. 30 secs.

3. **THE ME-HUG (TRI)**: I invite you to place your right hand under your left arm pit and your left hand midway on your upper right arm. Drop your elbows. Hold for 10 seconds and breathe out through your mouth.

4. **GROUNDING (TRI)**: I invite you to lean back on a pillow or the back of your chair, placing your feet on the floor. Think of a recent stressful experience. Notice where there is tightness in your body. Now put a heavy pillow, a bag of books, or a weighted blanket on top of your feet.

Notice the sensation of the weight on your feet. You can start by placing the weighted blanket just on your feet, or pulling it up to your thighs, belly or chest. Identify which position is the most calming for you. 20 seconds.

5. **WARMING PILLOWS**: These are microwaveable pillows that you can wrap around your neck and shoulders, or place on your chest or belly. I like the ones from c. Nurture To Heal, from Neuro-Affective Touch, that are filled with hemp seeds. They can be warmed by zapping for 2-3 minutes. 20 seconds. (nurturetoheal.com and neuroaffectivetouch.com)

6. **5 SENSES EXERCISE (TRI)**: Close your eyes and place your palms upwards on your lap. Notice where your body feels tight or tense.

Identify the 4 senses of smell, taste, hearing and touch in this present moment.

Notice the temperature in the room. Notice the surface on which you are sitting or standing. Now, open your eyes and name 5 things that you see around you. Again, connect to your body, identifying any shifts. 30 seconds.

7. **RESOURCE WORD (TRI)**: I invite you to close your eyes and think of a time, place, event, person, animal, or object from ANY time in your life that brought you a sense of calm, contentment and energy. Identify how old you are at this time, the time of year and time of day of that event. Are you alone or with others? Are you standing or sitting? Now, keeping your eyes closed, connect to the 4 Senses of smell, taste, hearing and touch that you experienced back then. What was the temperature at that time? What were you wearing?

Finally, visualize 5 things you saw during this event and then slowly open your eyes. Notice the sensation shifts in your body. Come up with 1-3 words that best describe this experience for you. This will be your Resource Word(s). When distressed, repeat the Resource Word 3 times while connecting them to your 5 senses. 30 seconds.

8. **RESOURCE SPOT (Brainspotting-BSP):** I invite you to look at the wall in front of you. Keeping your head still, slowly start moving your eyes from the far right of the room to the far left. Stop every few inches for 1-2 seconds. Notice which spot gives you that, “Ahh,” feeling of calm in your body. This is your Resource Spot. You may have to try it a few times to find one. Hold for at least 10 seconds. When stressed, again direct your gaze to that same spot. You can use it in any room or location. (brainspotting.com)

9. **RESOURCE EYE (BSP):** We have one eye that makes us feel calmer, while the other eye can be activating. Find any spot on the wall and place your hand over one eye for 10 seconds. Now switch to the other eye for 10 seconds. Notice which one makes you feel calm or activated. Let your *body* tell you.

10. **LOCATION EXERCISE (TRI):** I invite you to look at the spot right in front of you that is the **furthest** away from where you sit. Identify (out loud, or silently) what you see, i.e., “I see the doorknob, the painting, etc.” Then, very slowly, move your gaze closer and closer towards your body as

you identify each object. Come up to your feet, slowly moving up your legs, body and to your hands. Finally, turn your fingernails towards your eyes and look at them for 5 seconds. Notice the release in your body. 20 seconds.

11. **THE TONGUE TAMER (TRI)**: The tongue is a muscle that tightens when we speak or feel tense emotions. From the back of your throat where the tongue is attached, I invite you to imagine that your tongue is like a wave of warm water, flowing out onto your lower, dropped jaw. Place your tongue tip on your lower teeth. Notice where there is releasing or relaxing in your face, tongue, head and jaw. 15 seconds.

12. **THE BUTTERFLY (Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing-EMDR)**:

Give yourself a big hug, alternately patting each upper arm gently, one arm at a time; left arm, right arm, left arm, right arm, etc. The faster the better. Go back-and-forth 40-50 times, until you start to feel your body relax. Stop, breathe out, take a gentle breath in and continue this sequence 2 more times, noticing the sensations shifts in your body. (emdria.com)

13. **RET (Rational Emotive Therapy)**—It is not the *event* that causes us distress, but the Meaning we *give* the event. Often, our Meanings are about fears of loss, being shamed, abandoned, or believing in a future that can *only* have a disastrous outcome, even when we lack evidence to prove that belief true. Examine the Meanings you give your event and ask yourself, “Is my Meaning absolutely true? What is my evidence? My feeling is a fact because I can feel it, but is it based on facts? What would I be doing right doing now if I

did not have this Meaning?” (albertellis.org)

14. **JOURNALING**: Make two columns on the page. In Column One, write down your current concerns, doubts and fears. In Column Two, write down what you would be doing now if you did not have these thoughts. If possible, try to share it with someone who will listen, avoids giving solutions and will not interrupt. They can be your “Accountability Buddy.” Then go to Column Two, tell you Buddy what it is and just do it!

15. **PAIN RELIEF** (Neuro-Affective Touch): Chronic physical pain can be exhausting, overwhelming and immobilizing. This skill helps us disconnect from painful sensations by shifting our focus the pain to another part of our body that is not in pain. This gives us momentary relief. We do this by connecting to any of these 3 areas on your body: earlobes; tip of your nose or the skin on the back of your hands. You can also try to find an area of your body that is not in pain. Find which area works best for you. The relief is not permanent, but lets your brain & body have a respite from the ongoing pain.

16. **BI-LATERAL SOUND APPS**: These are recordings of sounds and music that are specifically designed to alternate the sounds between the left and right ear. The process is similar to EMDR, as the back-and-forth sounds balance and regulate the brain and body when distressed, much like what happens when you use “The Butterfly.” Sites offering these APPS include Brainspotting, Bi-Lateral Music, Sounds True and The Bodhi Tree.

17. WATERING (TRI): Take a glass of room temperature or warmed water.

Drink it very slowly, noticing the temperature, texture and taste. Notice the water travel down your tongue, to the back of your throat, down your chest and into your belly. Scan your body for change. 30 seconds.

18. THE WAIT ACRONYM: *(I also like the “Why Am I Talking? version!”)*

W is for Wisdom—Can I Wisely discern if this threat is real?

A is for Acceptance--Of the way things are in *THIS* moment.

I is for Implementing--Your favorite “Return To Calm Skill.”

T is for Training--Practice at least 2 skills, 2X/day for a week.

19. ICHILL APP (TRI): This free APP includes many of the “Return To Calm Skills” mentioned above, as well as guided meditations. By downloading it, you will have solutions right at your fingertips, instead of trying to remember them when anxious.

20. LAUGHING: It is known as “The best medicine!” because it releases feel-good hormones in our brains, like dopamine and oxytocin, the love drug that connects us to our babies at birth and to each other. They also lower the inflammation in our bodies, increasing the effectiveness of our immune systems. Check out Norman Cousins’s, “Anatomy of an Illness,” where he writes about him laughing himself from cancer to cure, by watching the Marx Brothers films!

IN CONCLUSION

Everyone has their favorite “Return To Calm Skills.” It is not necessary to remember all of them to soothe yourself. Pick 1 or 2 RTCS that work the best for you. If one Skill is no longer effective, try another.

To be proficient in your “Return To Calm Skills,” treat this process as you would if you were learning a new language. Both require practice, patience, perseverance and repetition to become fluent. I recommend clients write on Post-Its the Skills that work best for them. Place them around the house, on the bathroom mirror, at the workplace and in the car, so you do not have to remember them. I have also added 2 questionnaires at the end of this article that will help guide you towards a deeper awareness of the thinking patterns and behaviors that cause you to be stressed.

You now have the tools to gain control back over your body, mind and Spirit when overwhelmed! The “Return To Calm Skills” take our focus away from our anxious or fearful thoughts of the past or future and refocuses them into the safety of the present moment.

Good Luck and God Bless.

c. Melody J. Anderson LCSW, 2025

Attention, Awareness, Listening & Orientation:

What Do I Notice Around Me?

1. What percentage of your body and mind feels comfortable right now? _____

2. What do you notice inside of your body? (Tightness, Tension)

3. What do you notice now when you connect to your 5 senses?

4. Where is your attention and focus now?

5. What emotions do you want to avoid right now?

6. Which RTCS actions could you take now to feel safe?

8. What thoughts or things delight and calm you right now?

c. Melody J. Anderson, LCSW 2025

IMPULSE CONTROL TECHNIQUES

By Melody Anderson, LCSW

Impulsive behaviors come from the belief that we must take immediate action to feel safe and in control. Remember, feelings are facts, but we must make sure they are based on facts! We can create a Pause by using the acronym “WAIT”-W-Wisdom; A-Acceptance; I-Intelligence’ & T-Tolerance- so we can respond, rather than react. My favorite acronym of “WAIT” is “WHY AM I TALKING?!!

1. Identify a situation where you acted impulsively that resulted in a negative outcome? _____

2. If you could control that impulsivity and create a Pause by using your “Return To Calm Skills,” how could you have responded differently?

3. What emotional impulse is the hardest for you to control? _____

3. What behavioral impulse is hardest for you to control? _____

4. Which RTCS can you use right now for something that is troubling you?

Copyright: Melody J. Anderson, LCSW 2025