

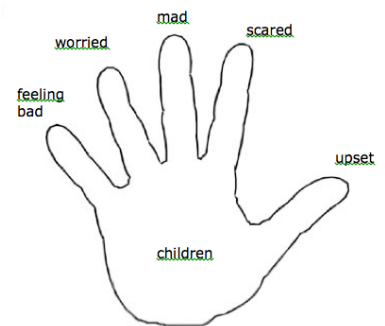
Fingerhold Practice for Managing Emotions & Stress*

This handout is part of a collection of materials on using mind-body, breathing, and movement practices to promote wellness and manage stress. This collection describes a variety of different practices that may be helpful when someone is experiencing overwhelming emotions, sensations, or trauma responses.

what is it?

The fingerhold practice is a simple technique that combines breathing and holding each finger. Practicing fingerholds can help to manage emotions and stress. It is a useful practice for both adults and children, and you can use the technique for yourself and/or with another person.

This handout has been adapted from Capacitar's *Emergency Tool Kit*, available at http://www.capacitar.org/emergency_kits.html in 16 languages. This technique is based in the belief that comes from Eastern Medicine traditions that we have a life energy that flows through channels from our internal organs out to our fingertips and toes. According to these traditions, when we experience emotions that don't get a chance to move through or be integrated into the body, our energy can become sluggish or blocked. Each finger is associated with a set of emotions, and using the fingerholds with a healing intention can help to release the blocked energy and provide some relief.



when can it be helpful?

The fingerhold practice can be helpful in situations where difficult or overwhelming feelings come up, during a challenging situation, or in preparing for one. Using the technique can feel calming, help reduce tension, and help us feel less overwhelmed. It doesn't change the underlying cause or the situation, but it can help ease the stressful feelings. For some, being able to actively do something in a situation in which we do not otherwise have a lot of control may feel grounding or powerful. For example, some survivors of domestic violence have found it helpful in court situations or custody drop-off/pick-ups. Parents and children can use this technique together, or parents can show their children how to use it on their own, especially if the child will be in a new or challenging situation (e.g., taking a test, dental appointments, visits with the other parent). This practice can also be used for relaxation or before going to sleep to help ease both the mind and body. As this can often be done without others noticing, it can be a good on-the-go technique.

* This handout was adapted from Capacitar's *Emergency Tool Kit* by Jen Curley, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health. We welcome your feedback! You can write to Jen at jcurley@ncdvtmh.org.

how do you do it?

Hold each finger, in turn, with the other hand, holding for as long as it feels comfortable. Many adults feel relief after 2-5 minutes per finger, and children often need to hold their fingers for much less time (30 sec. – 1 min.) for it to feel useful. You can work with either hand, and you can also work with just one or two fingers if that feels most helpful (or you don't have a lot of time). Most people find that one side feels more comfortable and that is totally okay! Hold gently, but firmly. You don't want to squeeze tightly, but there should be some pressure. As you hold your finger, breathe in a way that feels comfortable.

Slowing down our breath and bringing our attention to it can often help calm us down. It is important, though, to keep in mind that however we are breathing is okay. If helpful, you can count breaths, think inhale/exhale, or use a saying in your head (such as, "I am breathing in calm, I am breathing out worry"). As you hold each finger, you may feel a pulsing sensation as the energy and feelings move and become more balanced. If you do not feel this pulsing sensation, that is okay too; it doesn't mean that the technique is not working. Feel free to try out what works best for you: holding each finger in turn (starting with thumb all the way to little finger), holding one or two fingers when needed, switching hands, or any variation.

A note about deeper breathing: Deeper breathing (slowing down our breathing and bringing our breath into the lower parts of our lungs, expanding the abdomen) can often by itself be calming. However, it can also have the opposite effect. When the mind is quiet and our body is relaxed, we can sometimes find ourselves having body sensations, images, thoughts, or memories that are unwanted and may even be frightening. This can make us feel *more* anxious, or without even noticing, we may protect ourselves by leaving the present moment or disconnecting from our bodies. If you notice that this technique is making you feel more anxious or uncomfortable, you can stop it or try something else that makes you feel more relaxed. Children may show us that they are uncomfortable with deeper breathing by getting up, moving away from us, changing the subject, or by not seeming to be with us in the room (in the same way that adults might).

how do you share it with someone else?

You can share the entire practice at once or share the fingerhold that corresponds to what is happening in that moment. *You can say:* "Many/some people have found it helpful to...would you like to try?" or "I just learned this technique that might be helpful...would you like to try?" or "Some people have found it useful to hold on to their thumbs and breathe when they are feeling overwhelmed. Would you like to try it together?" You can show someone how to do it by demonstrating on yourself. You can also use an art activity to learn the practice. Using art materials, each person can trace their hand (or trace someone's hand). You can decorate your traced hand by using stickers, drawings, or words to indicate which finger goes with what emotion. This can be done one-on-one or in a group.

Whether you are learning it or sharing it, taking a curious approach (“I wonder if this might be helpful”) can create space to notice whether it is useful. This practice doesn’t work for everyone and not everyone likes it or finds it helpful. Also, what worked before doesn’t work every time. You may find the fingerholds really helpful multiple times and then find them to not work or help in a particular situation. Additionally, there are lots of reasons why we may hold onto our fingers, and it doesn’t automatically mean that we are sad, angry, overwhelmed, or anxious.

We have included sample language for adults and children. Feel free to adapt it and use the words that make most sense to you and whoever you are sharing the practice with, including words that are not shown here.

Key:

Thumb – tears, grief, emotional pain, feeling upset

Pointer/Index finger – fear, panic, feeling scared

Middle finger – anger, rage, resentment, feeling mad

Ring finger – worry, anxiety

Little finger – having self-doubts, not feeling good about ourselves or feeling bad

