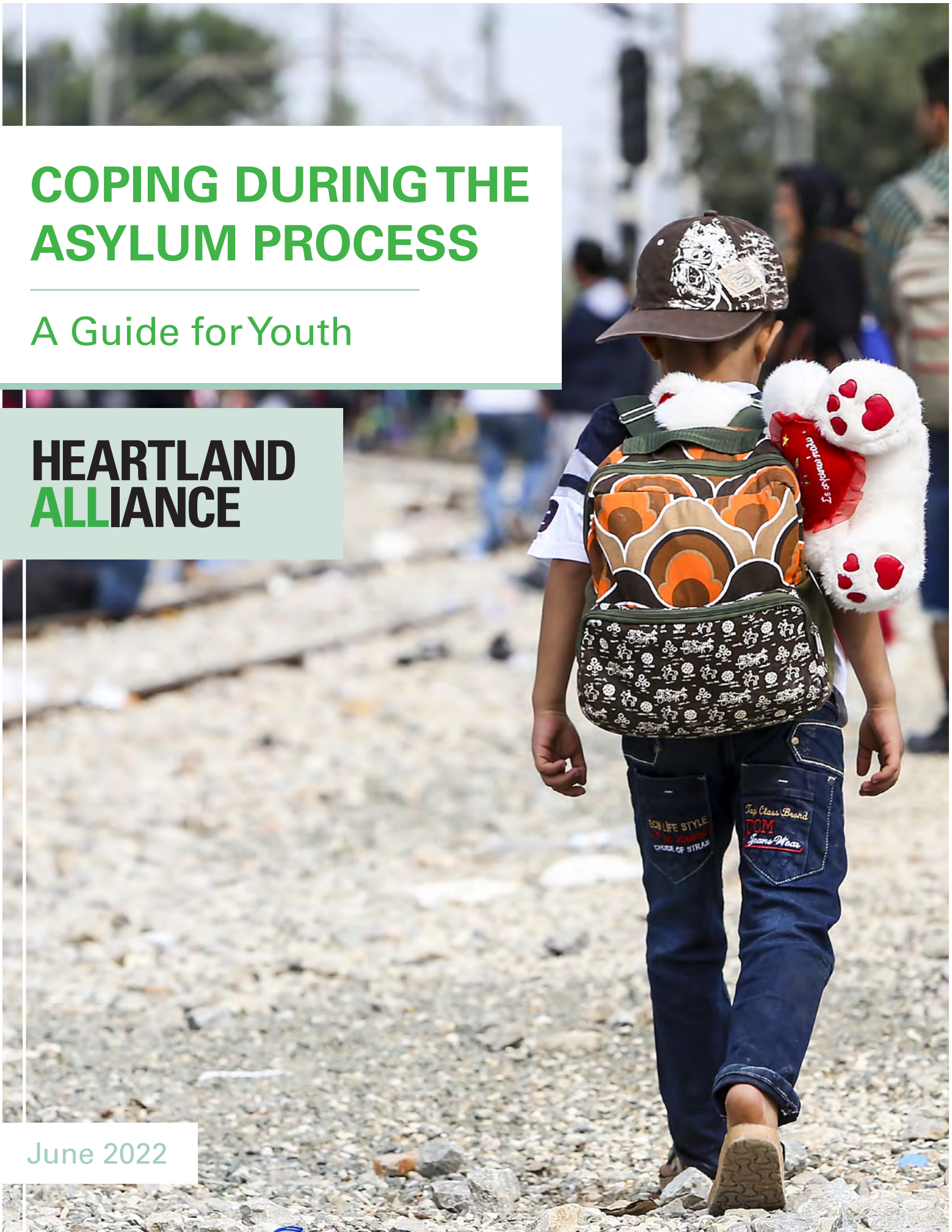


# COPING DURING THE ASYLUM PROCESS

A Guide for Youth

**HEARTLAND**  
**ALLIANCE**

June 2022



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# ■ WHAT IS ASYLUM?

Many people are forced to leave their homes because of violence, conflict, or persecution. When they arrive to a new country in search of safety, such as the United States, people who are afraid to return home have the right to apply for asylum. Asylum is a legal form of protection that allows individuals to stay in the United States and become a lawful permanent resident. **But, applying for asylum can be a long and complicated process!**

In order to successfully be granted asylum, an individual has to prove to the U.S. government that they qualify for protection. If you are currently applying for asylum, there are many different steps that you might have to take to prove your case. You may also be applying for a different immigration status at the same time or instead of applying for asylum, such as the Special Immigrant Juveniles Status (SIJS), the T Nonimmigrant Status (T Visa) for victims of human trafficking, or a U Nonimmigrant Status (U Visa) for victims of criminal activity in the United States.

The application process can be confusing and it is normal for you to experience different emotions along the way. This guide is intended to support you during the possible steps you may take during the application process and provide tools for managing the thoughts and feelings that you might experience. **Always remember – you are brave for being here and navigating this process!**





## ■ COMMON EXPERIENCES YOU MIGHT HAVE DURING THE ASYLUM PROCESS

### Meeting With a Lawyer

Some people who apply for asylum or other protective visa statuses do so with the help of an immigration lawyer. **Not everyone going through the immigration process is represented by a lawyer**, but if you are working with a lawyer, they can support you to file your asylum application with the U.S. government and accompany you throughout the legal process. **Applying for asylum is very complicated and you are not expected to understand every step of the process!** Your lawyer can be helpful in clarifying what is going to happen, when it will happen, and what you will have to do to prepare.

If you choose to work with a lawyer, they will likely arrange one or more meetings with you to discuss the asylum application process. These meetings may take place in person, over the phone, or via video conference. During these meetings, your lawyer will probably ask you questions about why you left your home country and why you want to stay in the U.S. These questions may include asking you for a lot of specific details about some of the difficult or scary things that have happened to you. **It is your lawyer's job to support you, but it is normal to feel uncomfortable sharing personal information!**

## Tips!

### ■ Ask your lawyer questions!

Sometimes it can feel uncomfortable to ask for help or for clarity, but remember that your lawyer is on your team. If there is something you do not understand, let them know - they are the expert!

### ■ If you are feeling upset or uncomfortable when answering questions, it is okay to share that with your lawyer!

You can always ask for a break or tell them that you are not ready to discuss certain parts of your story.

### ■ Lawyers are typically very busy!

It is normal not to be contacted by your lawyer for long periods of time during the application process. If you are worried that you have not heard from your lawyer, you can contact their office and ask for updates on your case.

### ■ Ask someone you trust to join your meetings!

If there is someone in your life who you trust and provides you emotional support – perhaps a therapist, a spiritual leader, a family member, etc. – ask your lawyer if they can join you during the beginning or end of your meetings together. While some of the information you discuss with your lawyer may need to stay private, having someone you trust join you for part of your discussion might give you an opportunity to process together how it is making you feel, and brainstorm any questions you might have for the lawyer in the future.

## Sharing Your Testimony

Throughout the asylum application process, you will be asked to share the story of what has happened to you and why you want to stay in the U.S. many times and by many different people. These people may include lawyers, government officials, doctors, therapists, judges, and others. Along the way, people will sometimes ask you questions about your story that feel rude, unkind, or uncomfortable. When you are asked to share about your experiences, **it is okay and normal to finish the process feeling worse than when you started.**

This process of storytelling can continue for years, and it is normal for it to feel painful and exhausting. However, sharing your experiences with others may also feel empowering. It can provide an opportunity for you to share what has happened to you from your perspective. **Remember – your story is important and your experience is valid. There are people who believe you, who want you to be safe, and who want to hear what you have to say.** Sometimes those people may be far away or difficult to be in touch with regularly – it is normal to feel lonely during this process. **Even if it may not always feel like it, you are being heard!**

### Tips!

#### ■ You can ask questions, too!

Throughout the asylum application process, many different people will ask you to share your story and it is normal to feel confused about who they are and why they are asking you questions. **If you are not sure who the person asking you for information is, ask them what their position is and how they plan to use the information you share.**

#### ■ If you begin to feel uncomfortable or unable to continue telling your story, you are allowed to ask for a break.

It may be helpful to step outside, ask for water or a snack, or to use some of the coping skills outlined later in this guide to regulate your emotions.

## Psychological Evaluation

If you are working with a lawyer on your asylum application, they may arrange an appointment for you called a “psychological evaluation.” This is an assessment that is used to gather more information about your legal case and help the U.S. government make a decision on your asylum application. It is normal to be referred for a psychological evaluation and is not a reflection of your mental wellbeing. It is also normal for your asylum application not to include a psychological evaluation.

If you do attend an evaluation, the process will involve an interview with a mental health clinician about why you left your home, why you want to stay in the U.S., and what the impact of these experiences has been on your mental health and wellbeing. The information you share during this interview is important, so the clinician will probably take notes on what you say. The psychological evaluation can last many hours and may even take place over multiple meetings.

**It is okay to feel uncomfortable sharing personal details with a stranger!** The psychological evaluation is an additional space for you to tell your story in support of your asylum application.

### Tips!

- **Talk to the mental health clinician about creating a plan in case the evaluation experience becomes too overwhelming for you to continue.**

It is normal to have a hard time answering multiple questions about your past and present feelings and experiences. **It can be helpful to make sure you have a shared understanding of what you will do if you need to stop the evaluation before you even begin the conversation with the mental health clinician.**

- **Just like when you are meeting with your lawyer or other officials, you can ask the mental health clinician questions!**

If you are unclear or curious about why you are being asked certain questions or what the information will be used for, it is okay to ask.

## Forensic Medical Evaluation

Your lawyer might similarly arrange an appointment for you called a “forensic medical evaluation,” during which your health and medical status will be documented. It is normal to be referred for a forensic medical evaluation and is not a reflection of your physical health or wellbeing. It is also normal for your asylum application not to include a medical evaluation.

A forensic medical evaluation will include a meeting with a doctor, but this meeting might feel different from a typical doctor’s appointment. The doctor will carry out an interview with you to learn more about some of the difficult experiences you have had and how they have affected your body. The doctor will also examine your body closely and take notes on what they observe. This process may include taking photographs of different parts of your body. The evaluation can last up to a few hours.

**Allowing a stranger to examine your body can be an uncomfortable experience and it might bring up difficult emotions or memories. It is normal and okay to leave the appointment feeling worse than when you arrived!**

### Tips!

■ **If you do not want someone to touch you or take your picture, you can say no!**

No part of your body should be touched or examined without your permission. If you are unclear or uncomfortable, ask questions about what the doctor is doing.

■ **It is normal for medical forensic evaluations to feel long and tiring.**

Ask for a break if you need it, and you can also bring water and snacks to the appointment.



## Asylum Interview

Some people going through the asylum process have a formal interview with a U.S. government official called an “Asylum Officer” to discuss their asylum application. Which cases are processed by an Asylum Officer is determined by a few different factors, including if you are considered an “unaccompanied youth” and whether or not you are going through certain kinds of other legal proceedings. Whether you meet with an Asylum Officer or have your application processed in court does not impact whether or not you will ultimately be granted status and does not mean that your story is more or less true or important.

This interview is an opportunity for the U.S. government to better understand why you might have left your home and do not feel comfortable returning. **It is normal for this meeting to feel scary and distressing.** It is the job of the Asylum Officer to decide whether the government believes your story, so during the interview they may ask you questions that feel rude, unkind, or uncomfortable.

Sometimes, an Asylum Officer may make you feel like they do not believe your story or that you are in trouble, **but remember – what happened to you is not your fault, even if the Asylum Officer may make you feel like it is.** If you do not speak English, you will be asked to bring an interpreter with you to the interview so that you are able to tell your story in the language you feel most comfortable speaking. Your lawyer will also usually attend the interview with you, and during the weeks and months beforehand they will help you prepare. **If you are feeling nervous or confused, make sure to ask your lawyer what to expect during the interview!**

### Tips!

- **The day of your interview, make sure to take care of your body.**

It can be helpful to drink water, eat a nutritious meal, or go for a walk outside beforehand in order to prepare yourself for what might be a stressful experience.

- **If possible and your schedule allows, avoid making any plans immediately after your interview finishes.**

This can be a draining experience and you may feel like you need time to rest and recover before jumping into the next activity.

- **During the interview, you are allowed to ask for a break or for some water if you need it.**

- **If the Asylum Officer is asking you questions that are making you uncomfortable or triggering difficult emotions, you can say to them “this part of my story is hard for me to talk about - can I have a minute before I answer your question?”**



## Going to Court

**Sometimes, instead of or in addition to an interview with an Asylum Officer, you may have to go to court as part of the asylum application process.**

There are different reasons you might be required to attend court, including appointments called a “Masters Hearing,” a “Merits Hearing,” or “Removal Proceedings;” and it is normal to be asked to attend court multiple times. On some occasions at court, you will only be asked a few questions about your immigration status and your asylum application. Other times, you will be asked in much more detail to share your experiences from your home country or from your migration journey, and explain why you might be fearful to leave the U.S. and return home.

If you work with a lawyer, they will attend court with you and may be able to answer the judge’s questions on your behalf. During the weeks and months beforehand your lawyer will help you prepare to answer the judge’s questions. **If you are feeling nervous or confused, make sure to ask your lawyer what to expect during the court hearing!**

Just like an Asylum Officer, the role of the judge is to decide whether the U.S. government believes your story. As a result, the demeanor or attitude of the judge might feel rude or unkind, and the questions they ask might feel uncomfortable or distressing – **this is normal, and not a reflection of the validity of your story.** It is okay to feel uncomfortable, upset, or low in confidence during the court hearing. **Remember – what happened to you is not your fault, even if the judge may make you feel like it is.**

**If you have never been in a U.S. courtroom before, it can feel scary or intimidating walking into the unknown. Here is some information about what to expect inside the building:**

In the courtroom there may be several people you have not met before. These people will likely include the **judge** (the person who makes the decision about your asylum or visa application) and the **judge’s clerk** (the person who introduces the judge before they walk into the room). In addition, there will be the **government attorney** (a person or people arguing on behalf of the U.S. attorney’s office). If you will be giving your statement in

a language other than English, a courtroom interpreter may also be present. The court hearing may also be recorded – this is normal. A recording is made so the judge can re-listen to parts of the hearing later while they are making their decision.

**You may be nervous on your court day – this is normal and not a reflection of how the day or your case will go.** When you walk into the courthouse building, you might walk through a metal detector and see security guards. There will be many courtrooms within the building and each could have their own waiting area. If you are attending court in Chicago, you will wait in the general waiting room. There will be a bathroom and water fountain nearby. Outside each courtroom will be a dry erase board that has the time and the name of the case that will take place there. On a “Masters Hearing” day, there will be many names listed on each dry erase board. On a “Merits Hearing” day there will only be a few names listed.

Inside the courtroom, everyone has a specific place to sit. Any people you bring with you for support will sit in one of the rows of benches you will see when you walk in the courtroom door. The judge will sit in the front of the courtroom. The U.S. government attorney will sit on one side of the courtroom and you and your attorney will side on the other side of the courtroom. If you are going to testify, you will do so by sitting on the right side of the judge at a small table. On the table, there will be a microphone for you to speak into when it is your turn to speak. **It is normal to feel intimidated or uncomfortable inside of this room! If you are confused about where to go or what to do, make sure to ask your lawyer – they are there to support you!**

### Tips!

- **Appointments at court can take a very long time - even an entire day!**

Make sure to bring activities to keep yourself busy while you're waiting, such as books, games, your phone, etc.

- **Don't forget to bring snacks and water to keep you energized while you're waiting!**

- **It is normal to feel overwhelmed, frightened, or uncomfortable during court appearances.**

Consider bringing mementos or objects that are meaningful to you or help you feel strong and brave. Perhaps you can make a playlist of calming or empowering songs to listen to while you wait!

- **If you work with a lawyer, they will join you during court. However, you can also bring additional people to accompany you for support during the day.**

Having a friend or family member, a spiritual leader, a therapist or counselor, or someone else who you trust to stay with you throughout the day can be comforting and give you strength.

## Waiting for a Decision

Unfortunately, asylum and immigration proceedings can last a very long time before a decision is made on your case! It is normal to have completed all of the application requirements and then be required to wait multiple years before any action is taken by the U.S. government. **Remember that long delays are okay and are not a reflection of the outcome of your application!**

**It is normal for waiting years for such an important decision in your life to cause anxiety, fear, or frustration.** You might feel a sense of urgency that is not reflected in the process, and that can be hard to manage! This is a difficult and overwhelming process and it is designed to challenge you. It is normal to feel like it is impossible to make future plans or even feel like things will never get better. **However, asylum applicants are eligible for some government benefits and resources that may provide you relief and access to resources in your day-to-day life.**

For example, all asylum seekers have a right to apply for a work permit 150 days after filing your application. If you are under 18 years old, you have a right to a free public education from kindergarten to 12 grade. You are also eligible to receive a restricted Social Security Number. Depending on the state in which you live, you may also have access to public healthcare benefits, cash and food assistance, or a driver's license.

If you are ultimately granted asylum, **you will be eligible to apply for lawful permanent residence, or a "green card," one year after your application is approved.** However, if you ultimately receive a rejection of your asylum application, **remember that you have the right to appeal the U.S. government's decision** and relaunch the application process. An appeal is the legal process to ask a higher court or government body to review a decision by a judge in a lower court because you believe the judge made a mistake.

It is important to try and take care of your body and your mind throughout this process, and identify people around you who can support you, care for you, and give you strength. This may include family members, friends, a spiritual leader or faith community, your lawyer, a therapist or counselor, teachers, etc. **You are brave and you can get through this process, and it is okay to ask for support along the way!**

### Tips!

- **If you are working with a lawyer on your application, you can contact their office for updates if you feel like the process is taking too long or the sense of urgency becomes too intense.**



## ■ COPING SKILLS

This guide has provided an outline of some of the different experiences you might face during the asylum or other visa application processes, along with suggestions of things you might do to make yourself more comfortable along the way. However, it is normal for the many steps of the asylum application process to bring up difficult or overwhelming memories or feelings that can be hard to manage.

We all have our own strategies that we use to reduce stress, anxiety, and other difficult emotions. Perhaps you listen to music, speak to a loved one, or pray. This section of the guide provides a menu of additional tools and strategies that you might find helpful to regulate your emotions and cope with the challenges of the application process in difficult moments.

## MANAGING TRAUMATIC MEMORIES OF STRONG EMOTIONS

### 5-4-3-2-1

This strategy asks you to focus on your five senses to help bring you back to the present moment, which can be helpful if thinking and talking about the past is making you feel upset, scared, or like it is happening to you all over again now.

- **Say aloud or to yourself 5 things that you see around you.** Try to include descriptions. For example, “I see a brown patterned chair.” Don’t forget to keep count! Name each thing slowly and focus on seeing each object before moving onto the next.
- **Say aloud or to yourself 4 things you can touch or feel.** Include descriptions of how these objects feel and try to feel the sensation of each object while you are acknowledging it.
- **Say aloud or to yourself 3 things you can hear.** Sometimes it can help to close your eyes and focus on the noises around you!

- **Say aloud or to yourself 2 things you can smell.** This one can be hard to do – remember the smell of nothing still counts! You can also search for scents by smelling things around you like your hands or some soap.
- **Say aloud or to yourself 1 thing you can taste.** What taste does the inside of your mouth have? Gum? The taste of a food you recently ate?

You can repeat this strategy as many times in a row as you need. **It can be helpful to try and name different things for each category each time!**

## Breath Counting

Take a second to close your eyes and focus on the sensation of your belly rising and falling. Paying attention to your belly can help you notice when you are inhaling and exhaling. Next, start to count your inhales and exhales.

- **Say to yourself “1” while you breathe in and “1” while you breathe out. On your next inhale, say “2” while you breathe in and “2” while you breathe out.**
- **Continue counting as you breathe, focusing on the air entering your mouth/nose, going down your throat and into your belly. Feel your belly expand with air. As you exhale, focus on the breath leaving your body – your belly deflating as the breath goes up your throat, and leaves through your mouth or nose.** You can also pretend there is a balloon in your stomach that is inflating as you breathe in and deflating as you breathe out.

Try and see if you can count to at least ten breaths. If you lose track, that’s ok and normal! Notice what drew your attention away and then begin to count again.

## 3-5-7

This strategy asks you to control your breathing. You can change the number of seconds for each part as is comfortable for you.

- **As you breathe in count: 1, 2, 3.**
- **When you reach number 3, hold your breath and count: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.**
- **When you reach number 5, exhale as you count: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.**
- **Then start again!**

The goal of this strategy is to breathe out longer than you breathe in. This is important because it tells your body that it’s time to calm down by activating the part of your nervous system that tells your body to rest and digest. Activating this nervous system will deactivate the other part of your nervous system that was telling your body it needed to be ready to fight or flee. Don’t worry if it takes a couple of rounds of 3-5-7 breathing for your body to start to feel calm – that’s normal!

## TIP

This strategy helps you regulate your emotions by activating parts of your body that already do this naturally!

### ■ Temperature

Change your body temperature by splashing cold water on your face (try 10 splashes in a row!), put an ice pack or ice cubes on your neck or eye lids for a couple seconds, take a cold shower, or – if it’s winter – stand outside without a coat for a couple of minutes (as long as it isn’t too cold!). Once your body adjusts to the temperature, you may feel some relief.

### ■ Intense exercise

Run in place as fast as you can for as long as you can. Then allow your breathing to return to normal – once you have regulated your breath, you may feel some relief.

### ■ Paired muscle relaxation

This strategy helps release tension from your body by tensing and relaxing your muscles. Follow the script below or click on the links for a recorded version:

- Take a deep breath in and exhale. As you exhale begin to focus on the sensations of your body. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Whether you are sitting or laying down make sure your arms and legs are uncrossed. Now you are going to bring your attention to your face, head, ears, nose and mouth. As you inhale tense all the muscles in your face and head for 3 seconds. Then as you exhale for 5 seconds release all the muscles in your face and head. Continue tensing on the inhale and releasing on the exhale as you tense and release the following parts of your body individually: your neck, shoulders, left arm, right arm, left hand, right hand, back, stomach, chest, right leg, left leg, right foot, and left foot. After you have tensed and released these parts of your body take a second to notice what it feels like to have less tension in your body.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKyRpW-Yuc> – English
- <https://spark.adobe.com/video/oze3eOavJFxNc> - English / Spanish

## Listen to Music

Music can help people regulate their emotions. Sometimes listening to happy songs when you feel sad may make your mood more positive. Sometimes listening to upbeat songs when you are scared may help you feel brave. Think of your favorite music and how listening to this music makes you feel. Think of how you want to feel and listen to some songs that might help you start to feel that feeling! If you are struggling, you can ask a friend or family member what song they listen to when they are feeling different ways.

## CALMING YOURSELF WHEN FEELING TENSE

(this works for many emotions!)

### Listen to a Meditation Video

There are many different meditations available to you online or through free meditation apps, such as InsightTimer, Smiling Mind, Bambú Meditation and Mindfulness, and more. Here are links to a few that you might like – if you don't like one, you don't need to use it!

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w\\_bmCKMrLYs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_bmCKMrLYs) – English (10 minutes)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ue9fs4ticOo> – Spanish (6 minutes)

### Observing Without Judgment

Sometimes how we are feeling can negatively impact our view of the situation we are in, or what we are experiencing. Naming what we are experiencing without using judgements can prevent this from happening. **A judgement is when a person looks beyond the facts of a situation by adding their opinion or using the facts to reach a conclusion.**

For example, if you say to yourself: “I am sitting on a chair, I am moving my fingers, I hear people talking,” then you are not making judgments. However, if you were to say to yourself: “I am sitting on an ugly chair, I am anxiously fidgeting with my fingers, I hear annoying people talking,” then you are adding judgements to your observations.

For this exercise, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. First, notice your body and the movements and sensations it is experiencing. Then begin to notice your thoughts – allow them to come and go. As a thought arises, observe it without judgment and with curiosity. Observe your thoughts just as you observe the feelings in your body.



## DISTRACT FROM OR EXPRESS YOUR EMOTIONS

### Read

Reading can help distract us from the present moment by transporting our mind to a different place. Read something you have already read or something new! This can include books or social media posts.

### Art

Sometimes expressing feelings with words is difficult. Instead of using words, you can use art to express how you are feeling! Draw, paint, photograph, or create a piece of art representing whatever comes to your mind or something you witness or experience in your environment. You can also color pre-made coloring pages or color in your own drawings. Use the type of art material that feels good for you in the moment or that you have access to.

### Practice Religion/Spirituality

If you practice a religion or identify as religious, you might find that praying, reading or listening to a spiritual text, or speaking to a spiritual leader might be helpful for expressing or processing your emotions. For individuals belonging to faith communities or traditions, engaging in religious activities or practices can bring you comfort. Remember, if you are not religious or do not identify as a member of a faith community, that is okay!

### Tell Someone You Trust How You are Feeling

At times, expressing how you are feeling with words might help provide you with relief as well as get you the support you need. It might be helpful to talk to a trusted individual, such as a parent, family member, religious leader, friend, teacher, therapist, or someone else with whom you can share your feelings. It is okay if you think this person will not be able to relate to your situation or that they might be burdened by what you are saying – during times of stress, you might believe these things to be true even when they are not! If a loved one was feeling stressed, you would likely want to support them. **This suggests that when you are stressed, your loved ones will want to support you too!**

Sometimes when a person is stressed or upset, it is normal to feel sure of something even when there is no evidence, to expect the worst to happen, or to feel that the bad things that have happened or are happening are their fault. **If you notice yourself having these types of thoughts, it is okay. When feeling overwhelmed, it is helpful to check the facts with a safe and trusted person.** This can look like asking someone you trust to help you figure out which of your thoughts are reflecting reality and which are reflecting your emotional distress.

**Maybe you are your own trusted person – that works too!** Write a letter or passage to yourself about how you are feeling. You can check your passage later when you are calmer and see if what you wrote reflects distress or reality.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### If you have not yet applied for asylum or another visa status:

- [United States Citizen and Immigration Services on Asylum eligibility and Applications](#)
- [National Immigration Legal Services Directory](#) – search for immigration attorneys and legal services providers by state, county, or detention facility. Only nonprofit organizations that provide free or low-cost immigration legal services are included in this directory.
- The [Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project](#) addresses legal updates, videos, frequently asked questions, and other information for asylum seekers

### For further explanation of the Asylum Application Process and your rights as an Asylum Seeker, check out these links:

- [“Know Your Rights” Video for Asylum Seekers, HIAS](#)
- [“Asylum: Your Case is in Your Hands” video for Asylum Seekers, AI Otrolado](#)
- [Informacion para Migrantes en Español, AI Otrolado](#)
- [“Know Your Rights: Immigrants Rights,” ACLU](#)

To check your asylum application case status online with the receipt number that the US Immigration Services mailed you after you filed your application, start here: [uscis.gov/casestatus](https://uscis.gov/casestatus).

If you are in Illinois, you can call the Automated Case Information Hotline at **1-800-898-7180 / 304-625-2050 (TDD 800-828-1120)**.

### If you or someone you know is experiencing a crisis:

The Illinois CrisisText Line serves anyone, in any type of crisis, 24-hours a day. **Text HELLO to: 741741**. Trained crisis counselors will respond and help you, and are available to communicate with you in English and Spanish.

National SAMHSA helpline provides free and confidential treatment referral and information in English, Spanish, and over 100 additional languages (to connect with a counselor in your primary language, simply indicate your preferred language to the responding counselor and she/he will connect to a live interpreter). Support is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week: **1-800-622-4357**

## DOCUMENT INFORMATION

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