

# GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND EDUCATORS

## FINGERHOLDS FOR MANAGING EMOTIONS

Companion to the illustrated children's book:

*Howling With Huskies and Other Ways to Feel Good*

<https://howlingwithhuskies.com/>

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### DESCRIPTION

Naming and working with emotions with a practice that combines sensation/touch, breath, focused attention, and visualization to build emotional literacy.

### HOW AND WHY

Fingerholds help us to identify and work with emotions. Pent-up or ignored emotions often come out as unwanted behaviors. It may not make sense to us in the moment why we are acting a certain way unless we connect with how we are really feeling. The process of fingerholds helps us to explore how we are feeling through a process where you name an emotion that you want to work with, notice how it feels in the body, and use breath and visualization to release that emotion. Art activities (tracing, coloring, decorating) can be added to the practice to expand expression and discussion of emotions.

While the fingerhold technique might sound like it is just for children, it is used by all ages. Teens like fingerholds because they can do it without anyone else noticing. Fingerholds are used in parenting support, hospice, disaster relief, anger management programs, refuge camps, shelters, and many other community settings.

Fingerholds can be done in classrooms as part of social emotional learning (SEL) and with family to work with emotions. These techniques can be helpful when facing a challenge such as taking a test, preparing for a competition, waiting for a medical appointment, or when having trouble falling asleep. While we usually do fingerholds for ourselves, with permission, we can also do it for someone else if they are in a situation that they can not do it for themselves.

There is a growing need for simple strategies that help us to build emotional literacy across the lifespan. Fingerholds are an easy-to-use tool that can be used on-the-go in daily life and during challenging times when emotions feel overwhelming.

## CONSIDERATIONS

What feels acceptable in one situation or moment might not feel that way at another time. Working with and releasing emotions can bring up other emotions and sensations that may feel uncomfortable or overwhelming in the moment. Let everyone know that if something feels like too much or not okay in the moment, that they can stop the practice and bring their attention to their breath or feeling their feet on the ground.

It may be helpful to say a few words that remind us that our breath is an anchor in the body that can help us in choppy seas when we feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Just noticing the breath makes a difference. Beginning with a grounding practice such as feeling the feet on the ground, gives our nervous system a sense of stability by connecting with the earth.

## INSTRUCTIONS

How fingerholds are done will depend on the setting you are in, the amount of time you have and who you are sharing the practice with. To work with children, check out the free coloring sheet for children at our website for *Howling with Huskies* (<https://howlingwithhuskies.com/>). Described below is an activity that has been used in classrooms, with families, with support groups and other community settings. Consider how the fingerhold technique could be done as part of art class, as an activity at family night at school, or as part of a community event.

## SUPPLIES FOR ARTWORK (OPTIONAL)

Blank sheet of paper for each participant

Colored pencils, crayons

Small decorations such as sparkles, stones, different shapes

Glue

## STEPS

If you are working with yourself or one person, please adjust the wording to the singular.

**OPTIONAL ARTWORK:** Steps 2-4 are optional if there is time and supplies to trace, color, and decorate the drawing of the hand. *Please note that the artwork option can also be effective with adults and in group community settings as a way of expression and sharing. This has been used to help adults process emotions in circumstances that might surprise you such as parent support groups and hospice.*

1. **GROUNDING WITH AN ANCHOR:** Place both feet on the ground, feeling the feet touching the earth and take a few long breaths. Notice how this feels and remind everyone that they can come back to this anchor if something does not feel OK.
2. **FINDING WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS FOR EMOTIONS:** Use the coloring sheet handout from the **Howling with Huskies** website (<https://howlingwithhuskies.com/>) as a reference to brainstorm about age- and culturally-appropriate words for emotions shown in the handout/reference. For example, we might use the words “sad or upset” with children for the thumb while teens would have different words. These words may be expanded for adults to include “grief and emotional pain.” Identifying words that we connect with an emotion/feeling builds our emotional literacy.

Ask everyone to write the words that they would like to use for each emotion next to each finger. In addition to or instead of words, emojis can be drawn in the circles, drawings made, and colors selected that connect with or illustrate an emotion.

People sometimes ask if they can change the emotions that are traditionally used for the fingerhold practice. The operative word here is traditional. The suggestion here is to begin by finding words that connect with the emotions shown in the picture of the hand to become familiar with the traditional practice of fingerholds. When familiar with the practice, you can then decide how you would like to adapt and/or expand the practice.

3. **COLOR & DECORATE:** Use the handout from the Howling with Huskies website (<https://howlingwithhuskies.com/>) or have participants trace one of their hands on a piece of paper and write words they have chosen for each emotion next to the appropriate finger. The next step is coloring and decorating the hand. Encourage participants to explore what colors, decorations etc. speak to them. Does a certain emotion connect with a particular color? Is there an image for an emotion you want to draw (like an emoji or something else)?

As a side note here, you might think this step is just for children but we have seen adults color and decorate a drawing of their hand to share emotions that they find difficult to express. Emotional literacy is for everyone.

4. **CHOOSE AN EMOTION TO WORK WITH:** Have everyone look at their drawing or the fingerhold illustration and choose a feeling to work on. Ask participants to choose an emotion that does not feel overwhelming or too big in the moment as they are learning about this practice. You could also choose the emotion for the group to work with.
5. **HOLDING THE FINGER:** Ask participants to wrap the fingers from one hand around the finger on the other hand that corresponds to an emotion they want to work with. The pressure on the finger being held should be light so they are not squeezing the finger too tightly. There should be no discomfort.

Participants sometimes say that they can feel their pulse. This is an opportunity to remind everyone not to squeeze tightly because this is not where we take our pulse! Emotions are energy in the body that can be released. It may be helpful to mention that someone might notice pulsing as they hold a finger and that is normal. Sensations are moving continuously throughout the body including electrical signals and our circulation. It is also OK if we do not notice any sensations.

6. **FOCUS ON THE EMOTION:** Focus attention on the emotion that has been chosen while holding the finger and taking a few easy breaths. Suggest that they imagine breathing the emotion they are working with right out of that fingertip.
7. **HOW LONG SHOULD I HOLD MY FINGER?** Adults may hold a finger while focusing on an emotion for several minutes (2-5 minutes is common but it could be longer) while children may hold a finger for just 30 seconds to one minute. Children's systems move quickly. Encourage them to explore and see what they notice.
8. **FEELING EMOTIONS IN THE BODY:** Emotions start as physical sensation in the body. It is our early communication system about how we are feeling. Many adults and children do not recognize how emotions feel in the body. This practice can help us to listen to the body and gain valuable insight into our emotions.

Depending on how much time you have, be curious and hold each finger, one-by-one, and think about the corresponding emotion and how it feels in the body. We often feel more than one emotion at a time but do not recognize it. Ask participants to be their own detectives to notice how this emotion feels in their body...being curious and kind...no judgment.

- “Do you notice anything in your body as you think about this emotion? Maybe your belly, your heart, or somewhere else? Is it warm or cool...tingling or like a tickle?”

9. **COMPLETE THE PRACTICE** by checking in with some questions and/or discussion.
  - How are you feeling now? What did you like about doing fingerholds? What didn't you like? How might you change that? Is there something that you want to remember from this?