

Grounding Exercises

WHAT IS GROUNDING?: Grounding is a set of simple strategies to detach from emotional pain (e.g., craving, anxiety, anger, sadness, panic). Distraction works by focusing outward on the external world, rather than inward toward the self. You can also think of it as “distraction,” “centering,” “a safe place,” “looking outward,” or “healthy detachment.”

WHY DO GROUNDING?: When you are overwhelmed with emotional pain, you need a way to detach so that you can gain control over your feelings and stay safe. Grounding “anchors” you to the present and to reality.

Many people with PTSD or those people who are struggling with feeling overwhelming emotions and memories or those feeling numb with dissociation, benefit from grounding. In grounding, you attain a balance between the two: conscious of reality and able to tolerate it. Remember that pain is a feeling; it is not who you are. When you get caught up in it, it feels like you are your pain, and that is all that exists. But it is only one part of your experience—the others are just hidden and can be found again through grounding.

Guidelines

Grounding can be done any time, any place, anywhere, and no one has to know.

Use grounding when you are faced with a trigger, enraged, dissociating, having a craving, or when ever your emotional pain goes above 6 (on a 0-10 scale). Grounding puts healthy distance between you and these negative feelings.

Keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on to stay in touch with the present.

Rate your mood before and after grounding, to test whether it worked. Before grounding, rate your level of emotional pain (0-10, where 10 means “extreme pain”). Then re-rate it afterwards. Has it gone down?

No talking about negative feelings or journal writing—you want to distract away from negative feelings, not get in touch with them.

Stay neutral—avoid judgments of “good” and “bad.” For example, instead of “The walls are blue; I dislike blue because it reminds me of depression,” simply say “The walls are blue” and move on.

Focus on the present, not the past or future.

Note the grounding is not the same as relaxation training. Grounding is much more active, focuses on distraction strategies, and is intended to help extreme negative feelings. It is believed to be more effective than relaxation training for PTSD.

WAYS OF GROUNDING: There are three major ways of grounding, mental, physical, and soothing.

“Mental” means focusing your mind; “physical” means focusing on your senses (e.g., touch, hearing); and “soothing” means talking to yourself in a very kind way. You may find that one type works better for you, or all types may be helpful.

Mental Grounding

Describe your environment in detail, using all 5 your senses (sight, hear, touch, smell, taste)—for example, “The walls are white; there are five pink chairs; there is a wooden bookshelf against the wall...” Describe objects, sounds, textures, colors, smells, shapes, numbers, and the temperature. You can do this anywhere.

Play a “categories” game with yourself. Try to think of “types of dogs,” “jazz musicians,” “states that begin with A...”

Do an age progression. If you have regressed to a younger age (e.g., 8 years old), you can slowly work your way back up until you are back to your current age.

Describe an everyday activity in great detail. For example, describe the meal that you cook (e.g., “First I peel the potatoes and cut them into quarters...”

Imagine. Use an image: Glide along on skates away from your pain; change the TV channel to get to a better show; think of a wall as a buffer between you and your pain.

Say a safety statement. “My name is _____; I am safe right now. I am in the present, not in the past.”

Read something, saying each word to yourself. Or read each letter backward so that you focus on the letters and not on the meaning of the words.

Use humor. Think of something funny to jolt yourself out of your mood.
Count to 10 or say the alphabet, very s...l...o...w...l...y.

Physical Grounding

Run cool or warm water over your hands.

Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.

Touch various objects around you: a pen, keys, your clothing, the wall....

Dig your heels into the floor-literally “grounding” them! Notice the tension centered in your heels as you do this. Remind yourself you are connected to the ground.

Carry a grounding object in your pocket, which you can touch when ever you feel triggered.

Jump up and down

Notice your body: the weight of your body in the chair; wiggle your toes in your socks; the feel of your chair against your back...

Stretch. Roll your head around; extend your fingers...

Clench and release your fists.

Walk slowly; notice each footstep, saying “left or “right”...

Eat something, describing the flavors in detail to your self.

Focus on your breathing, notice each inhale and exhale.

Soothing Grounding

Say kind statements, as if you were talking to a small child-for example, “you are a good person going through a hard time. You’ll get through this.”

Think of favorites. Think of your favorite color, animal, season, food, time of day...

Picture people you care about (e.g., your children), look at a photograph.

Remember the words to an inspiring song, quote, or poem.

Remember a safe place. Describe the place that you find so soothing.

Say a coping statement: “I can handle this.”

Plan a safe treat for yourself, such as a certain desert.

Think of things you are looking forward to in the next week-perhaps time with a friend, going to a movie.

WHAT IF GROUNDING DOES NOT WORK?:

GROUNDING DOES WORK! But, like any other skill, you need to practice.

Practice as often as possible, even when you don’t need it.

Try grounding for a long time (20-30 minutes).

Notice which methods you like best.

Create your own methods of grounding.

Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.

Make up index cards.

Have others assist you in grounding.

Prepare in advance.

Create a tape of a grounding message.

Think about why grounding works.

DON'T GIVE UP!