

Grounding Exercises

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What is grounding?

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to detach from the effects of trauma, emotional pain, or stress. Grounding works by focusing outward on the external world, rather than inward toward the self. You can also think of it as distraction, centering, creating emotional safety, looking outward, or healthy detachment. Whatever feels best for you.

How does grounding help?

Research shows that our brains respond poorly to prolonged stress. It may change our physical health, the way we store information, recall information, our ability to rest, our relationship to food. When our brains enter this stress state, we are not necessarily accessing the parts of our brain that allow us to rationalize our feelings. This is why when someone tells you to snap out of it, we cannot just do it! Instead of trying to fight the brain in this state, we can refocus our brains long enough to deactivate the state of stress. Finding a way to detach may allow you to feel more

control over your feelings and safety. Grounding “anchors” you to the present moment, no more, no less.

Many people who have experienced a traumatic event or compounding micro-aggressions, struggle with feeling either too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing and dissociation). In grounding, the goal is to establish 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. It is only one part of your experience – the other parts may feel inaccessible through the pain, but it is possible to find them again, and grounding may help.

Grounding guidelines

Grounding can be done **any time, anywhere, so long as you are comfortable**. Grounding techniques are subtle, so not necessarily noticeable to others in your vicinity.

It may be time to practice grounding when you are **faced with a stressful memory, or the external stress you are feeling reactivates the feelings of stress you experienced with trauma**. The goal of grounding is to put a healthy distance between you and these negative feelings.

Optional steps

- If it feels safe for you, **keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on** to stay connected with the present moment.
- **Consider your mood before and after grounding**, to decide whether a particular exercise has helped. Only you can decide if it was a helpful technique or not.
- With grounding, it helps to stay away from **talking or writing about negative feelings** because the goal is to distract from the negative feelings, as opposed to being in touch with them.
- **To the best of your ability** – avoid judgments of “good” and “bad.” For example, instead of “This is not working” try to say “I am feeling distracted” and move on.

Methods of grounding

Three major methods of grounding are described below – cognitive, physical, and soothing. “Cognitive” means focusing your mind; “physical” means focusing your senses (e.g. touch, hearing); and “soothing” means talking to yourself in a very kind way. You may find one type works better for you, or all types may be helpful.

Cognitive Grounding

1. **Describe your environment in detail**, using all your senses – 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 temperature. You can do this anywhere. For example, on the bus: “I’m on the bus. I’ll see the river soon. Those are the windows. This is the bench. The metal bar is silver. The bus map has four colors.”
2. **Play a ‘categories’ game with yourself.** Try to think of “types of dogs,” “jazz musicians,” “countries that begin with ‘A,’” “cars,” “TV shows,” “writers,” “sports,” “songs,” or “cities.”
3. **Describe an everyday activity in great detail.** For example, describe a meal that you cook (e.g., “First I peel the potatoes and cut them into quarters; then I boil the water; then I make an herb marinade of oregano, basil, garlic, and olive oil . . .”).
4. **Imagine.** Use an image: Glide along on skates away from pain; change the TV channel to get to better show; think of a wall as a buffer between you and your pain.
5. **Say a safety statement.** “My name is _____; I am safe right now. I am in the present, not the past. I am located _____; the date is _____.”
6. **Read something, saying each word to yourself** so that you focus on the word itself, instead of the meaning. You can also try reading each word backward.
7. **Use humor.** Laughing releases chemicals to our brain that can break the cycle of stress. Think of a joke, use your devices to watch a comic, or think back to a funny moment with friends or family.
8. **Count to 10 or say the alphabet**, very s . . . l . . . o . . . w . . . l . . . y.

Physical Grounding

1. **Run cool or warm water over your hands** and describe the sensation.
2. **Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.** Hold your breath as long as is comfortable for you, and release.
3. **Touch various objects around you:** a pen, keys, your clothing, the table, the walls. Notice textures, colors, materials, weight, temperature. Compare objects you touch: Is one colder? Lighter?
4. **Dig your heels into the floor** – literally “grounding” them! Notice the tension centered in your heels as you do this. Remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
5. **Carry a grounding object in your pocket** – a small object that you can assign meaning to (a small rock from a park you love, a ring that is special to you, a piece of cloth or yarn that you enjoy the texture of) that you can touch whenever you feel your stress activating.
6. **Jump up and down** and shake it out
7. **Notice your body:** the weight of your body in the chair; wiggling your toes in your socks; the feel of your back against the chair. You are connected to the world.
8. **Stretch.** Extend your fingers, arms, or legs as far away as you can; roll your head around, slowly release the stretch from head to toe (neck, shoulders, arms, torso, legs, feet)
9. **Clench and release your fists.**
10. **Walk slowly, noticing each footstep,** saying “left” or “right” with each step.
11. **Eat something, describing the flavors** in detail to yourself.
12. **Focus on your breathing,** noticing each inhale and exhale. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale (e.g. a favorite color, or a soothing word such as “safe” or “easy”).

Soothing Grounding

1. **Say kind statements to yourself,** – for example, “You are a good person going through a hard time. You’ll get through this.” These thoughts are called positive cognitions, use them to reword negative cognitions- “You’ll get through this,” may replace thoughts of failing and, “you are a good person,” may replace thoughts about being bad or wrong.

2. **Think of favorites.** Think of your favorite color, animal, season, food, time of day, TV show and describe to yourself why it is your favorite.
3. **Picture people you care about,** and look at photographs of them. You can also use pets, or photos from a trip you really enjoyed.
4. **Remember the words to an inspiring song, quotation, or poem** that makes you feel better. It can help to print one out or save it to your device so you can look at it when you cannot remember the words.
5. **Remember a safe place.** Describe a place that you find very soothing (perhaps the beach or mountains, or a favorite room); focus on everything about that place – the sounds, colors, smells, shapes, objects, textures.
6. **Say a coping statement:** “I can handle this,” “This feeling will pass.”
7. **Plan a safe treat for yourself,** such as a piece of candy, a nice dinner, or a warm bath.
8. **Think of things you are looking forward to in the near future** – perhaps time with a friend, going to a movie, or going on a hike.

What if grounding does not work?

Grounding will not always work, and what works for some people may be ineffective for others. And that's okay. There are other options out there to help cope and manage stress. Bottom line, if attempting grounding is causing you additional stress, it is okay to stop. For those interested in continuing to try grounding, the more you practice the more familiar it will feel. As it feels familiar it can feel safer and therefore more effective. Below are suggestions that may help:

- **Practice as often as you feel comfortable, maybe as part of a daily or weekly routine,** even when you don't need it, so that it will feel safe and comforting when you do need it.
- **Try grounding for a long time (20-30 minutes) to give yourself space to practice with no pressure for it to 'work'.**
- **Try to notice which methods you like best** – physical, mental, or soothing grounding methods, or some combination.
- **Create your own methods of grounding.** Any method you make up to focus on the present moment may be worth much more than those you read here, because it is yours.
- **Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.** Start with a flicker of stress to help you navigate ongoing stress from a more grounded place

- **Have others assist you in grounding.** Teach friends or family about grounding, so that they can help guide you with it if you become overwhelmed.
- **Prepare in advance.** Locate places at home, in your car, and at work where you have materials and reminders for grounding.
- **Create a recording of a grounding message** that you can play when needed. Consider asking someone close to you or even a counsellor or other professional to record it if you want to hear someone else's voice.
- **Think about why grounding works or what you would like to get out of it.** Why might it be that by focusing on the external world, you become more aware of an inner peacefulness? Notice the methods that work for you – why might those be more powerful for you than other methods?