Using Grounding to Detach from Emotional Pain

What is Grounding?

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to detach from emotional pain (e.g. drug cravings, self-harm impulses, anger, sadness, anxiety). Grounding works as a distraction by focusing your attention outward on the external world, rather than inward toward the self. You can also think of it as "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, provides relief from your emotional state, and keeps you safe.

Many people with PTSD, substance abuse, and intense emotional states struggle with feeling either too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing and dissociation.) 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 substance craving, or whenever your emotional pain feels overwhelming. Grounding puts healthy distance between you and negative feelings.
- Keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn on the light to stay in touch with the present.
- Rate (1 to 10) or name (distracted or numb) your mood before and after grounding to test whether it worked. Did it change?
- Don’t talk or journal about negative feelings—you want to distract away from negative feelings not get in touch with them.
- Focus on the present, not the past or future.
- 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.

Ways of Grounding

Three major ways of grounding are described below—mental, physical, and soothing. Mental means focusing you 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 you may find help from all three. You will learn which approach works best for you by trying them all.
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Mental Grounding

- **Describe your environment in detail**, using all your senses. For example, “The walls are white; there are five chairs at the table; there is a wooden bookshelf on the wall...”
- **Play a categories game with yourself**. Try to think of types of dogs, jazz musicians, states that begin with A, types of cars, TV shows, sports, songs, cities.
- **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 (e.g., now I’m nine, now I’m 10) until you are back to your current age.
- **Describe an everyday activity in great detail**. For example, describe an activity such as how you make a favorite snack or engage a hobby (e.g., first I mix the paint with water...)
- **Imagery**. Use an image: you are jogging away from your painful emotions; changing the television channel to find a program which is visually calming; listen to calming music and imagine yourself playing one of the instruments; imagine a wall being erected that protects you from the intense emotions.
- **Say a safety statement**. “My name is ______; I am safe right now. I am in the present, not the past. I am located in ______; the date is ____.”
- **Read something, saying each word to yourself**. Or, read each letter backward so that you can focus on the letters and not on the meaning of the words.
- **Use humor**. Think of something funny, or keep something funny on hand, to jolt you 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, your key, clothing, the desk, the walls, your bunk. Notice the texture, colors, materials, weight, temperature. Compare the objects you touch: Is one cooler? Lighter?
- **Dig your heals into the floor**. Literally ground 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**. It may be your key or something written on a piece of paper which you can touch whenever you feel triggered.
- **Jump up and down**.
- **Notice your body**. The weight of your body in the chair, wiggling your toes in your socks, the feel or your back against the chair, bunk, or wall. You are connected to the world.
- **Stretch**. Extend your fingers, arms, or legs as far as you can. Gently roll your head around.
- **Clench and release your fists**. Focus on the physical sensations.
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- **Walk slowly, noticing each footstep.** Say “left” or “right” with each footstep.
- **Eat something.** Describe the flavor or sensation in your mouth to yourself. (Refrain from this activity if you use food as comfort in a way that has been unhealthy for you.)
- **Focus on your breathing.** Notice each inhale and exhale. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale (e.g.: your favorite color, a soothing word such as “safe” or “easy”).

Soothing Grounding

- **Say kind statements.** Speak to yourself as you would someone you care about, such as “You are a good person going through a hard time right now. You’ll get through this.”
- **Think of people that you care about, that care about you, and want you to be alright.** Maybe it is your children, close friends, or family members. Look at a picture if you have one (but, only if it makes you feel better.)
- **Remember the words to an inspiring quote, song, or poem.** Identify written or spoken works that leave you feeling better so that you can access those words when you need them (e.g., the serenity prayer.)
- **Remember a safe place.** Describe a place (e.g., beach or mountain) that you find very soothing and describe it. Focus on the details—the sounds, colors, temperature, shapes, and textures of the place.
- **Say a coping statement.** “I can handle this.” “This feeling will pass.”
- **Plan a safe treat for yourself.**
- **Think of things you are looking forward to next week.** Perhaps it is outside rec, going to the library, or a particular movie.

**What if Grounding Does Not Work?**

Grounding does work! But, like any other skill, you need to practice to make it as powerful as possible. Here are some suggestions to help make it work for you.

- **Practice as often as possible.** Even when you don’t need it so you know it by heart.
- **Practice faster.** Speeding up the pace gets you focused on the outside world quickly.
- **Try grounding for long periods of time (20-30 minutes.)** And, repeat, repeat, repeat.
- **Notice which methods work best for you.** Maybe it’s one type or a combination.
- **Create your own methods of grounding.** Any method you make up may be worth much more that what is listed here because it is YOURS!
- **Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.** Start when a substance craving just starts or when you have just started feeling a negative emotion or flashback. Start before anger feels out of your control.
- **Make up an index card.** List your best grounding methods and how long to use them.
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- **Have others assist you in grounding.** Teach friends, mentors, or family about grounding so they can help guide you in it if you become overwhelmed by your emotional experience.
- **Prepare in advance.** Know what works for you, where you have the materials that help remind you to use grounding (a quote, poem, or picture.)
- **Think about why grounding works.** Why might it be that by focusing on the external work, you can become more aware of inner peacefulness? Notice the methods that work for you—why might those be more powerful for you than other methods?
- **Don’t give up.** It takes time and practice but grounding works!