

# Using Grounding to Detach from Emotional Pain

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# What is Grounding?

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to detach from emotional pain (e.g., drug cravings, self-harm impulses, anger, sadness). Distraction works by focusing 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.

Many people with PTSD and substance abuse struggle with feeling either too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing & 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 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*** & 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 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 on the lights*** to stay in touch with the present.
- ***Rate your mood before and after grounding***, to test whether it worked.

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- **Stay neutral**- avoid judgements of "good" & "bad".
- **Focus on the present, not the past or the future.**
- **Note that 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

Three major ways of grounding are described below—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 one type works better for you, or all types may be helpful.

### **Mental Grounding:**

- **Describe your environment in detail**, using all your senses—for example, "The walls are white; there are two 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 subway: "I'm on the subway. I'll see the river soon. Those are windows. This is the bench. The metal bar is silver and cold. The subway map has a lot of colors..."

- **Play a 'categories' game with yourself.** Try to think of "types of dogs", "jazz musicians", "states that begin with 'A'", "cars", "TV shows", etc.

- **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; etc.)

- **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 & your pain.
- **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 word backward so that you focus on the letters and not on the meaning of the words.

## 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 clothes. Notice textures, colors, materials, weight, temperature. Compare objects you touch: Is one colder? light?
- **Dig your heels into the floor**— literally "grounding" them. Remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
- **Carry a grounding object in your pocket**— a small object (rock, ring, piece of cloth, etc.) that you can touch whenever you feel triggered.
- **Jump up & down.**
- **Notice your body:** the weight of your body in your chair; wiggling your toes; the feeling of your back against the chair. Reminding yourself you are connected to the world.
- **Stretch.**
- **Clench & release your fists.**
- **Walk slowly, noticing each footstep in detail.**
- **Eat something, describing the flavors in detail.**
- **Focus on your breathing,** noticing each inhale & exhale.

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## 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, ok?"
- **Think of favorites**. Think of your favorite color, animal, season, food, time of day, TV show, etc.
- **Picture people you care about**, and/or look at pictures of them
- **Remember a safe place**. Describe a place that you find very soothing (real or imagined), perhaps the beach or mountains, a favorite room, etc. Focus on everything about that place, the sounds, colors, shapes, textures.
- **Plan a treat for yourself**, potentially something sweet like ice cream, a nice dinner, or a warm bath.
- **Think of things you are looking forward to soon**—perhaps time with a friend, going to a movie, or going on a hike.

## What if Grounding does not work?

Like any other skill, you need to practice to make it as powerful a ritual as possible. Below are suggestions to help make it work for you.

- **Practice grounding for a long time (20-30 min.)**. And repeat so that you'll know what methods work best for you & have it memorized to take with you to the outside world.
- **Create your own methods**. Any method you make up may be much more effective than those listed here because it's uniquely yours.
- **Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle**. Start when a substance craving just starts or when you have just started having a flashback

- ***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.
- ***Create a voice recording of a grounding message*** that you can play when needed. Consider asking your therapist or someone close to you to record it if you want to hear someone else's voice.
- ***Think about why grounding works.*** 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?
- ***Don't give up!***