

## Grounding Techniques

Grounding is a practice that can help you pull away from flashbacks, unwanted memories, and negative or challenging emotions.

These techniques may help distract you from what you're experiencing and refocus on what's happening in the present moment.

You can use grounding techniques to help create space from distressing feelings in nearly any situation, but they're especially helpful if you're dealing with:

- anxiety
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- dissociation
- self-harm urges
- traumatic memories
- substance use disorder

## Physical techniques

These techniques use your five senses or tangible objects — things you can touch — to help you move through distress.

### 1. Put your hands in water

Focus on the water's temperature and how it feels on your fingertips, palms, and the backs of your hands. Does it feel the same in each part of your hand?

Use warm water first, then cold. Next, try cold water first, then warm. Does it feel different to switch from cold to warm water versus warm to cold?

### 2. Pick up or touch items near you

Are the things you touch soft or hard? Heavy or light? Warm or cool? Focus on the texture and color of each item. Challenge yourself to think of specific colors, such as crimson, burgundy, indigo, or turquoise, instead of simply red or blue.

### 3. Breathe deeply

Slowly inhale, then exhale. If it helps, you can say or think "in" and "out" with each breath. Feel each breath filling your lungs and note how it feels to push it back out.

### 4. Savor a food or drink

Take small bites or sips of a food or beverage you enjoy, letting yourself fully taste each bite. Think about how it tastes and smells and the flavors that linger on your tongue.

### 5. Take a short walk

Concentrate on your steps — you can even count them. Notice the rhythm of your footsteps and how it feels to put your foot on the ground and then lift it again.

### 6. Hold a piece of ice

What does it feel like at first? How long does it take to start melting? How does the sensation change when the ice begins to melt?

### 7. Savor a scent

Is there a fragrance that appeals to you? This might be a cup of tea, an herb or spice, a favorite soap, or a scented candle. Inhale the fragrance slowly and deeply and try to note its qualities (sweet, spicy, sharp, citrusy, and so on).

#### 8. Move your body

Do a few exercises or stretches. You could try jumping jacks, jumping up and down, jumping rope, jogging in place, or stretching different muscle groups one by one.

Pay attention to how your body feels with each movement and when your hands or feet touch the floor or move through the air. How does the floor feel against your feet and hands? If you jump rope, listen to the sound of the rope in the air and when it hits the ground.

#### 9. Listen to your surroundings

Take a few moments to listen to the noises around you. Do you hear birds? Dogs barking? Machinery or traffic? If you hear people talking, what are they saying? Do you recognize the language? Let the sounds wash over you and remind you where you are.

#### 10. Feel your body

You can do this sitting or standing. Focus on how your body feels from head to toe, noticing each part.

Can you feel your hair on your shoulders or forehead? Glasses on your ears or nose? The weight of your shirt on your shoulders? Do your arms feel loose or stiff at your sides? Can you feel your heartbeat? Is it rapid or steady? Does your stomach feel full, or are you hungry? Are your legs crossed, or are your feet resting on the floor? Is your back straight?

Curl your fingers and wiggle your toes. Are you barefoot or in shoes? How does the floor feel against your feet?

#### 11. Try the 5-4-3-2-1 method

Working backward from 5, use your senses to list things you notice around you. For example, you might start by listing five things you hear, then four things you see, then three things you can touch from where you're sitting, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Make an effort to notice the little things you might not always pay attention to, such as the color of the flecks in the carpet or the hum of your computer.

#### Mental techniques

These grounding exercises use mental distractions to help redirect your thoughts away from distressing feelings and back to the present.

#### 12. Play a memory game

Look at a detailed photograph or picture (like a cityscape or other "busy" scene) for 5 to 10 seconds. Then, turn the photograph face-down and recreate the photograph in your mind, in as much detail as possible. Or, you can mentally list all the things you remember from the picture.

#### 13. Think in categories

Choose one or two broad categories, such as "musical instruments," "ice cream flavors," "mammals," or "baseball teams." Take a minute or two to mentally list as many things from each category as you can.

#### 14. Use math and numbers

Even if you aren't a math person, numbers can help center you.

Try:

running through a times table in your head.

counting backward from 100

choosing a number and thinking of five ways you could make the number ( $6 + 11 = 17$ ,  $20 - 3 = 17$ ,  $8 \times 2 + 1 = 17$ , etc.)

#### 15. Recite something

Think of a poem, song, or book passage you know by heart. Recite it quietly to yourself or in your head. If you say the words aloud, focus on the shape of each word on your lips and in your mouth. If you say the words in your head, visualize each word as you'd see it on a page.

#### 16. Make yourself laugh

Make up a silly joke — the kind you'd find on a candy wrapper or popsicle stick.

You might also make yourself laugh by watching your favorite funny animal video, a clip from a comedian or TV show you enjoy, or anything else you know will make you laugh.

#### 17. Use an anchoring phrase

This might be something like, "I'm Full Name. I'm X years old. I live in City, State. Today is Friday, June 3. It's 10:04 in the morning. I'm sitting at my desk at work. There's no one else in the room."

You can expand on the phrase by adding details until you feel calm, such as, "It's raining lightly, but I can still see the sun. It's my break time. I'm thirsty, so I'm going to make a cup of tea."

#### 18. Visualize a daily task you enjoy or don't mind doing

If you like doing laundry, for example, think about how you'd put away a finished load.

"The clothes feel warm coming out of the dryer. They're soft and a little stiff at the same time. They feel light in the basket, even though they spill over the top. I'm spreading them out over the bed so they won't wrinkle. I'm folding the towels first, shaking them out before folding them into halves, then thirds," and so on.

#### 19. Describe a common task

Think of an activity you do often or can do very well, such as making coffee, locking up your office, or tuning a guitar. Go through the process step-by-step, as if you're giving someone else instructions on how to do it.

#### 20. Imagine yourself leaving the painful feelings behind

Picture yourself:

gathering the emotions, balling them up, and putting them into a box

walking, swimming, biking, or jogging away from painful feelings

imagining your thoughts as a song or TV show you dislike, changing the channel or turning down the volume — they're still there, but you don't have to listen to them.

#### 21. Describe what's around you

Spend a few minutes taking in your surroundings and noting what you see. Use all five senses to provide as much detail as possible. "This bench is red, but the bench over there is green. It's warm under my

jeans since I'm sitting in the sun. It feels rough, but there aren't any splinters. The grass is yellow and dry. The air smells like smoke. I hear kids having fun and two dogs barking."

## **Soothing techniques**

You can use these techniques to comfort yourself in times of emotional distress. These exercises can help promote good feelings that may help the negative feelings fade or seem less overwhelming.

### **22. Picture the voice or face of someone you love**

If you feel upset or distressed, visualize someone positive in your life. Imagine their face or think of what their voice sounds like. Imagine them telling you that the moment is tough, but that you'll get through it.

### **23. Practice self-kindness**

Repeat kind, compassionate phrases to yourself:

"You're having a rough time, but you'll make it through."

"You're strong, and you can move through this pain."

"You're trying hard, and you're doing your best."

Say it, either aloud or in your head, as many times as you need.

### **24. Sit with your pet**

If you're at home and have a pet, spend a few moments just sitting with them. If they're of the furry variety, pet them, focusing on how their fur feels. Focus on their markings or unique characteristics. If you have a smaller pet you can hold, concentrate on how they feel in your hand.

Not at home? Think of your favorite things about your pet or how they would comfort you if they were there.

### **25. List favorites**

List three favorite things in several different categories, such as foods, trees, songs, movies, books, places, and so on.

### **26. Visualize your favorite place**

Think of your favorite place, whether it's the home of a loved one or a foreign country. Use all of your senses to create a mental image. Think of the colors you see, sounds you hear, and sensations you feel on your skin.

Remember the last time you were there. Who were you with, if anyone? What did you do there? How did you feel?

### **27. Plan an activity**

This might be something you do alone or with a friend or loved one. Think of what you'll do and when. Maybe you'll go to dinner, take a walk on the beach, see a movie you've been looking forward to, or visit a museum.

Focus on the details, such as what you'll wear, when you'll go, and how you'll get there.

### **28. Touch something comforting**

This could be your favorite blanket, a much-loved T-shirt, a smooth stone, a soft carpet, or anything that feels good to touch. Think about how it feels under your fingers or in your hand.

If you have a favorite sweater, scarf, or pair of socks, put them on and spend a moment thinking about the sensation of the fabric on your skin.

#### 29. List positive things

Write or mentally list four or five things in your life that bring you joy, visualizing each of them briefly.

#### 30. Listen to music

Put on your favorite song, but pretend you're listening to it for the first time. Focus on the melody and lyrics (if there are any). Does the song give you chills or create any other physical sensations? Pay attention to the parts that stand out most to you.

### **Additional tips**

Grounding yourself isn't always easy. It may take some time before the techniques work well for you, but don't give up on them.

Here are some additional tips to help you get the most out of these techniques:

**Practice.** It can help to practice grounding even when you aren't dissociating or experiencing distress. If you get used to an exercise before you need to use it, it may take less effort when you want to use it to cope in the moment.

**Start early.** Try doing a grounding exercise when you first start to feel bad. Don't wait for distress to reach a level that's harder to handle. If the technique doesn't work at first, try to stick with it for a bit before moving on to another.

**Avoid assigning values.** For example, if you're grounding yourself by describing your environment, concentrate on the basics of your surroundings, rather than how you feel about them.

**Check in with yourself.** Before and after a grounding exercise, rate your distress as a number between 1 and 10. What level is your distress when you begin? How much did it decrease after the exercise? This can help you get a better idea of whether a particular technique is working for you.

**Keep your eyes open.** Avoid closing your eyes, since it's often easier to remain connected to the present if you're looking at your current environment.

Grounding techniques can be powerful tools to help you cope with distressing thoughts in the moment. But the relief they provide is generally temporary.

It's important to get help from a therapist so you can address what's causing your distress. If you don't have one yet, check out our guide to affordable therapy.