

DETACHING FROM EMOTIONAL PAIN (GROUNDING)

Lisa Najavits, PhD

WHAT IS GROUNDING?

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to **detach from emotional pain** (for example, 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 “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. As long as you are grounding, you cannot possibly use substances or hurt yourself. Grounding ‘anchors’ you to the present and to reality.

Many people with PTSD and substance abuse struggle with either feeling too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing and dissociation). In grounding, you attain balance between the two—conscious of reality and able to tolerate it.

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, having a flashback, dissociating, having a substance craving, or when 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** 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**—no judgments of “good” and “bad”. For example, “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 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 for PTSD than relaxation training.

WAYS TO GROUND

Mental Grounding

- ♣ **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 subway: “I’m on the subway. I’ll see the river soon. Those are the windows. This is the bench. The metal bar is silver. The subway map has four colors...”
- ♣ **Play a “categories” game** with yourself. Try to think of “types of dogs”, “jazz musicians”, “states that begin with “A”, “cars”, “TV shows”, “writers”, “sports”, “songs”, “European 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., “I’m now 9”; “I’m now 10”; “I’m now 11”...) until you are back to your current age.
- ♣ **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, I make an herb marinade of oregano, basil, garlic, and olive oil...”).
- ♣ **Imagine.** Use an image: Glide along on skates away from your pain; change the TV channel to a better show think of a wall as a buffer between you and your pain.

I am located in _____ the date is _____.

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

- ♣ **Use humor.** Think of something funny to jolt yourself out of your mood.
- ♣ **Count to 10 or say the alphabet** very slowly.
- ♣ **Repeat a favorite saying** to yourself over and over (e.g., the Serenity Prayer).

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 table, the walls. Notice textures, colors, materials, weight, temperature. Compare objects you touch: Is one colder? Lighter?
- ✕ **Dip 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.
- ✕ **Carry a ground object in your pocket**—a small object (a small rock, clay, ring, piece of cloth or yarn) that 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 of your back against the chair. You are connected to the world.
- ✕ **Stretch.** Extend your fingers, arms or legs as far as you can; roll your head around.
- ✕ **Walk slowly, noticing each footstep,** saying “left,” “right” with each step.
- ✕ **Eat something. Describe the flavors** in detail to yourself.
- ✕ **Focus on your breathing.** Noticing each inhale and exhale. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale (for example, a favorite, color or a soothing word such as “safe” or “easy”).

Soothing Grounding

- ♥ **Say kind statements,** as if you were talking to a small child. E.g., “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, TV show.
- ♥ **Picture people you care about** (e.g., your children; and look at photographs of them).
- ♥ **Remember the words to an inspiring song, quotation or poem** that makes you feel better (e.g., the Serenity Prayer).
- ♥ **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, shapes, objects, textures.
- ♥ **Say a coping statement.** “I can handle this”, “This feeling will pass.”
- ♥ **Plan out a safe treat for yourself,** such as a piece of candy, a nice dinner, or a warm bath.
- ♥ **Think of things you are looking forward to in the next week.** Perhaps time with a friend or going to a movie.

WHAT IF GROUNDING DOESN'T WORK?

- ♣ **Practice as often as possible.** Even when you don’t “need” it, so that you’ll know it by heart.
- ♣ **Practice faster.** Speeding up the pace gets you focused on the outside world quickly.
- ♣ **Try grounding for a looooooonnnng time (20-30 minutes).** And, repeat, repeat, repeat.
- ♣ **Try to notice whether you do better with “physical” or “mental” grounding.**
- ♣ **Create your own methods of grounding.** Any method you make up may be worth much more than those you read here because it is yours.
- ♣ **Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.** Start when the substance craving just starts or when you have just started having a flashback.