

Adult Mental Health Services
Stabilisation Workbook 9

Grounding: Learning to connect with my surroundings





Introduction

When people have been exposed to very difficult and / or traumatic past experiences, difficult thoughts, feelings and memories associated with the past can quickly start to feel too intense and overwhelming.

This can lead people to feel unsafe and out of control, and as if they are being pulled back into frightening situations from the past. Sometimes these difficult past memories and their associated thoughts and feelings become so strong that people can lose touch with the present moment entirely. When this happens, they may completely cut off from their body and feelings – this is called **dissociation**. Alternatively, the person may feel as if they are back and reliving that past moment of trauma – we can think of this as a **flashback**.

Grounding is about learning to take a step away from the past and reconnect with what is happening around you in the here and now. It is a technique that can be learnt to help people gain some distance from difficult or distressing thoughts, feelings and / or memories by bringing them back into the present moment. Grounding can also be helpful for managing unusual experiences, such as voices, by supporting people to draw their attention away from the voice and back into the present moment and their surroundings.

Grounding can be helpful in managing:

- Overwhelming emotions
- Intrusive past memories and flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Unusual experiences, such as voices or paranoia.

Grounding can also support people to avoid using more harmful coping strategies (e.g. cutting, drinking alcohol) that may have damaging consequences.

The rest of the workbook will introduce a range of different **grounding strategies** for you to try out and practice.

Noticing your environment exercise

Focus on the present moment by using all of your senses to notice where you are right at this minute.

Say aloud one thing that you can **see**, one thing that you can **hear**, and one thing you can **feel** with your body. For example:

“I can see the kitchen table.”

“I can hear music from the flat upstairs.”

“I can feel my hands touching the chair.”

Repeat this three times, or as many times as you need to.

Now describe the objects, sounds, textures, colours, smells and shapes around you. For example:

“The kitchen table is brown and has scratches on it. It is made of wood with a smooth plastic top. I can feel the grain and scratches on the surface...”

And so on.



Developing a grounding phrase exercise

A grounding phrase is made up of a few words, which are positive and remind you that you are surviving in the present.

A grounding phrase acknowledges the feelings you are experiencing, such as fear or panic, and also reminds you that you are safe now. For example, you may use the phrase:

“I am feeling frightened and I am safe right now.”

The word **and** is important here and is sometimes referred to as **dual awareness** – being aware of two different things at the same time.

Alternatively, you may want to use a statement that reminds you of your strengths, such as:

“I have survived the past and I am safe now.”

Some people find it helpful to leave copies or post-it notes of their phrase around the house. Or you could write out your grounding phrase on a piece of card and keep it somewhere accessible like your wallet or coat pocket.

Other people may prefer to keep a copy of their grounding phrase on their mobile telephone. You could take a photo of your grounding phrase and save it as your screensaver, store it somewhere in your notes, or set it as a reminder / alert that pops up on your mobile screen every day to help you keep it in mind for times when you may need to use it.

If you are struggling with nightmares or waking up in the night in distress, you could try leaving your grounding phrase somewhere you will easily see it. For example, you could frame it on your bedside table or write it on a poster stuck to the wall facing your bed.

Use the space below to write down your grounding phrase.

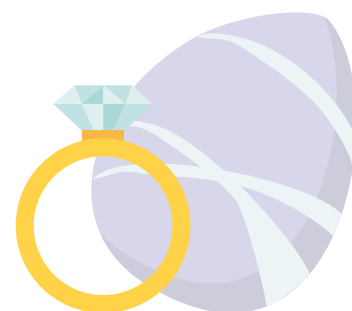
Grounding objects exercise

A grounding object is a comforting and **present-focussed** physical object you can hold, which carries a positive meaning for you and can support you to ground yourself back into the present and away from distressing thoughts, feelings and memories. Present-focussed means something that doesn't hold associations to the past but draws your attention into that object in the here and now.

Your grounding object should be something that does not have any association to past trauma or distress. It should be small enough to carry with you at all times so that it is easily accessible in times of need. For example, you might use a pebble from your favourite beach, a ring given to you by someone important, or a piece of soft cloth.

When you start to re-experience unpleasant memories or feelings, hold your grounding object and really focus on the way it looks (for example, its shape, colour, etc.) and the way it feels (temperature, roughness, smoothness, etc.).

Use the space below to make a note of your grounding object and where you will keep it.



Using your body exercise

There are also a number of grounding exercises that utilise the body to help ground you in the present. You can use them in moments of distress until you feel safer. Below is a list of examples for you to try out.

- Run cool water over your hands, noticing how this feels against your skin.
- Hold on to the arms of your chair as hard as you can, noticing the tension you feel when doing this.
- Touch every individual object around you. For example, your keys, your clothing, a table or the walls. Notice the textures, colours, materials, weight and temperature. Compare the different objects you touch. How do they differ? Is one colder? Lighter?
- Notice your body. Notice the weight of your body in the chair, the feeling of wriggling your toes in your shoes, the feel of your back against the chair.
- Stand in a doorway and push your hands against the frame as hard as you can, noticing the tension you feel when doing this.
- Walk slowly around your environment, noticing each footstep and saying “left” or “right” with each step.
- Eat something with a strong flavour and describe the flavours in detail to yourself. For example, biting down onto a chilli, sucking an extra strong mint, sucking a slice of lemon or crunching an ice cube in your teeth.
- Smell something strong that will grab your attention and pull you back into the present moment. For example, smelling salts, lavender, perfume, a scented candle, etc.
- Hold something heavy in your hands, for example, a weighted cushion. Move your hands up and down and notice how the weight of the object feels.



General grounding guidelines

- Grounding can be used any time or place and no one has to know that you are doing it.
- Try to think about the things you notice just as they are, without judging them or thinking of them as good or bad, or liking or hating them.
- Focus on the present and your surroundings. Try not to think about the past or the future.
- Practice as often as possible, even when you are not feeling anxious or overwhelmed. If you are able to use these strategies easily when you already feel relaxed, they will be much more helpful when your feelings, thoughts and / or memories become too intense to cope with.
- Notice which strategies or combinations of strategies work best for you.
- **Create your own methods of grounding. These may be more helpful than the suggestions here, because they are your own and will be especially meaningful to you.**



My grounding plan

When we are very distressed it can be difficult to think clearly and remember what we need to do to support ourselves. It is therefore a good idea to make a grounding plan, which has been prepared in advance, and can be easily accessed in times of distress to help bring you back into the present and away from difficult past memories and feelings.

Once you have tried out all of the different grounding strategies and have a better idea of which ones work for you, you can list them on your grounding plan below. It will be important to keep this plan in a prominent place, so that you can easily access it in times of distress.

My grounding phrase

Repeat your grounding phrase (insert below) out loud until you feel safer.

Grounding to my environment

Describe out loud one thing you can **see**, **hear**, and **feel** in the environment around you.

My grounding object

Hold and focus all of your attention onto your grounding object. Write down what your grounding object is and where it is stored below.

Grounding with my body

List your bodily grounding strategies below. Use them until you feel safe.

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Stabilisation Pack