Quotation

"No feeling is final."

—Rainer Maria Rilke
(20th-century German poet)

From *Seeking Safety* by Lisa M. Najavits (2002).

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). 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 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 goes above 6 (on a 0-10 scale).*** Grounding puts healthy distance between 1 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 grounding,*** to test whether it worked. Before grounding, rate your evel of emotional pain (0–10, where 10 means "extreme pain"). Then rerate it afterward. Has it gone down?
- ***No talking about negative feelings or journal writing***—you want to distract *away* from negative feelngs, not get in touch with them.
- ***Stay neutral***—avoid judgments of "good" and "bad." For example, instead of "The walls are blue; I dislike lue 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 istraction strategies, and is intended to help extreme negative feelings. It is believed to be more effective than relaxion training for PTSD.

/AYS OF GROUNDING

ree major ways of grounding are described below—mental, physical, and soothing. "Mental" means focusing your nd; "physical" means focusing on your senses (e.g., touch, hearing); and "soothing" means talking to yourself in a ry kind way. You may find that one type works better for you, or all types may be helpful.

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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," or "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; then 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 get to a better show; think of a wall as a buffer between you and 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 letter backward 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 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, keys, your clothing, the table, the walls. Notice textures, colors, materials, weight, temperature. Compare objects you touch: Is one colder? Lighter?
* ***Dig 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 grounding object in your pocket***—a small object (a small rock, clay, a ring, a 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.
* ***Clench and release your fists.***
* ***Walk slowly, noticing each footstep,*** saying "left" or "right" with each step.
* ***Eat something, describing the flavors*** in detail to yourself.
* ***Focus on your breathing,*** noticing each inhale and exhale. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale (e.g., 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—for example, "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.

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+ ***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 AA 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 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, going to a movie, or going on a hike.

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. Below are suggestions to help make it work for you.

★ ***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 looooooonnnnnggggg time (20–30 minutes).*** And repeat, repeat, repeat.
★ ***Try to notice which methods you like best***—physical, mental, or soothing grounding methods, or some combination.
★ ***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 a substance craving just starts or when you have just started having a flashback. Start before anger gets out of control.
★ ***Make up an index card*** on which you list your best grounding methods and how long to use them.
★ ***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.
★ ***Prepare in advance.*** Locate places at home, in your car, and at work where you have materials and reminders for grounding.
★ ***Create a cassette tape 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!***