

GIVE YOUR BRAIN A BREAK WITH

# GROUNDING EXERCISES

A low-stakes, no pressure, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" approach to bringing your brain into the present moment.

[www.svpro.ubc.ca](http://www.svpro.ubc.ca)



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# WHAT IS GROUNDING?

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to detach from the effects of trauma, emotional pain, or stress. Grounding works by focusing outward on the external world, rather than inward toward the self. You can also think of it as distraction, centering, creating emotional safety, looking outward, or healthy detachment. Whatever feels best for you.

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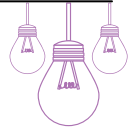
## HOW CAN GROUNDING HELP?

Research shows that our brains respond poorly to prolonged stress. It may change our physical health, the way we store information, recall information, our ability to rest, our relationship to food. When our brains enter this stress state, we are not necessarily accessing the parts of our brain that allow us to rationalize or contextualize our feelings. This is why when someone tells you to snap out of it, we cannot just do it! Instead of trying to fight the brain in this state, we can refocus our brains long enough to deactivate the state of stress. Finding a way to detach may allow you to feel more control over your feelings and safety. Grounding “anchors” you to the present moment, no more, no less. Many people who have experienced a traumatic event or compounding micro-aggressions, struggle with feeling either too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing and dissociation). In grounding, the goal is to establish 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. It is only one part of your experience - the other parts may feel inaccessible through the pain, but it is possible to find them again, and grounding may help.

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## GROUNDING GUIDELINES



Grounding can be done any time, anywhere, so long as you are comfortable. Grounding techniques are subtle, so not necessarily noticeable to others in your vicinity. It may be time to practice grounding when you are faced with a stressful memory, or the external stress you are feeling reactivates the feelings of stress you experienced with trauma. The goal of grounding is to put a healthy distance between you and these negative feelings.

Optional steps:”

- If it feels safe for you, keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on to stay connected with the present moment.
- Consider your mood before and after grounding, to decide whether a particular exercise has helped. Only you can decide if it was a helpful technique or not.”
- With grounding, it helps to stay away from talking or writing about negative feelings because the goal is to distract from the negative feelings, as opposed to being in touch with them.”

- To the best of your ability - avoid judgments of “good” and “bad.” For example, instead of “This is not working” try to say “I am feeling distracted” and move on.

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## METHODS OF GROUNDING



Three major methods of grounding are described below - cognitive, physical, and soothing. “Cognitive” means focusing your mind; “physical” means focusing 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.

### Cognitive 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 bus: “I’m on the bus. I’ll see the river soon. Those are the windows. This is the bench. The metal bar is silver. The bus map has four colors.”
- Play a ‘categories’ game with yourself. Try to think of “types of dogs,” “jazz musicians,” “countries that begin with ‘A’,” “cars,” “TV shows,” “writers,” “sports,” “songs,” or “cities.”

- 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 pain; change the TV channel to get to 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 \_\_\_\_\_; the date is \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Read something, saying each word to yourself so that you focus on the word itself, instead of the meaning. You can also try reading each word backward.
- Use humour. Laughing releases chemicals to our brain that can break the cycle of stress. Think of a joke, use your devices to watch a comic, or think back to a funny moment with friends or family.
- Count to 10 or say the alphabet, very  
s . . . l . . . o . . . w . . . l . . . y.




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## Physical Grounding

- Run cool or warm water over your hands and describe the sensation.
- Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can. Hold your breath as long as is comfortable for you, and release.

- 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 that you can assign meaning to (a small rock from a park you love, a ring that is special to you, a piece of cloth or yarn from a fabric you like) that you can touch whenever you feel your stress activating.
- Jump up and down and shake it out.
- 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 away as you can; roll your head around, slowly release the stretch from head to toe (neck, shoulders, arms, torso, legs, feet).
- Clench and release your fists. Repeat.
- Walk slowly, noticing each footstep, saying "left" or "right" with each step.
- Eat something, describing the flavours 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 favourite colour, or a soothing word such as "safe" or "easy").



## Soothing Grounding

- Say kind statements to yourself, – for example, “You are a good person going through a hard time. You’ll get through this.” These thoughts are called positive cognitions, use them to reword negative cognitions- “You’ll get through this,” may replace thoughts of failing and, “you are a good person,” may replace thoughts about being bad or wrong.
- Think of favorites. Think of your favorite color, animal, season, food, time of day, TV show and describe to yourself why it is your favorite.
- Picture people you care about, and look at photographs of them. You can also use pets, or photos from a trip you really enjoyed.
- Remember the words to an inspiring song, quotation, or poem that makes you feel better. It can help to print one out or save it to your device so you can look at it when you cannot remember the words.
- 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, smells, 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 near future – perhaps time with a friend, going to a movie, or going on a hike.





# WHAT IF GROUNDING DOES NOT WORK? ヽ(ツ)ノ

Grounding will not always work, and what works for some people may be ineffective for others. Our experiences with resources and exercises are invariably impacted by our unique and multiple identities, experiences, histories and geographies. And that's okay, there is no right way to feel or respond.

There are other options out there to help cope and manage stress. Bottom line, if attempting grounding is causing you additional stress, it is okay to stop. For those interested in continuing to try grounding, the more you practice the more familiar it will feel. As it feels familiar it can feel safer and therefore more effective. Below are suggestions that may help:

**Practice as often as you feel comfortable**, maybe as part of a daily or weekly routine, even when you don't need it, so that it will feel safe and comforting when you do need it.

**Try grounding for a long time** (20-30 minutes) to give yourself space to practice with no pressure for it to 'work'.

**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 to focus on the present moment may be worth much more than those you read here, because it is yours.

**Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.** Start with a flicker of stress to help you navigate ongoing stress from a more grounded place.

**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 recording of a grounding message** that you can play when needed. Consider asking someone close to you or even a counsellor or other professional to record it if you want to hear someone else's voice.

**Think about why grounding works** or what you would like to get out of it. 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?

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Adapted by UBC SVPRO in 2021 from Seeking Safety by Lisa M. Najavits (2002)



*To speak with an SVPRO Support Specialist about grounding or for additional information:*

☎ 1-604-822-1588 | ✉ [svpro.vancouver@ubc.ca](mailto:svpro.vancouver@ubc.ca)

🌐 [www.svpro.ubc.ca](http://www.svpro.ubc.ca)

# RESISTANCE TO GROUNDING

## A SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDE FOR THOSE CARING FOR A PERSON IN CRISIS

If a person you are working with is too deep into a panicked moment or is not interested in calming down, there are a few things to try. Keep in mind that the identities of the person will be relevant to how they understand their safety both emotionally and physically. Respecting when someone does not want to proceed with grounding is important to establishing trust.

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A person impacted by violence, harassment, or harm, may react any number of ways. The same is true for those supporting survivors. One of these reactions may manifest in anger.

### **It is important to let them know it is okay to be angry.**

Definitely do not tell a person in this state to calm down. This may feel infantilizing and, for IBPOC, women and gender-diverse people of all racial backgrounds, this is a microaggression.

Give them space to be. You might try a statement like: *"It seems like you are really upset and that is understandable. What happened is incredibly upsetting and it's okay to be angry about it. I'm angry about it, too! I want to be able to help to the best of my ability and I want to respect what that looks like for you. Can we talk about what that might look*

*like? This is a tough conversation we are having and if it's okay I'd like to share some things that have made difficult conversations easier for me."*

At this point you may introduce grounding exercises. If they refuse, the best thing you can do is present calmly and sympathetically, no matter the response of the person with whom you are speaking.

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**Instead of trying to get someone to breathe,** it may be helpful to use some of the grounding tools without identifying them as such. For instance, start with a positive statement: *You are safe here.* Slowly repeat the statement a few times as you are breathing deeply, without asking the person to do any breathing themselves. Next you can try to bring them into the present moment by identifying things in the room.

*"See, you are here in the campus security offices. We are glad you are here. You are safe, sitting in our office- can you feel the floor under your feet? It's solid right?"*

Feet connecting to the ground is one of the best examples of literal grounding. It's also okay to make some funny comments like,

*"So solid, it is not comfortable for napping. Believe me, I've tried. I don't recommend it."*

Laughter can help distract. If they're thinking "this person is

so weird," they have broken their thought spiral, even if just for a moment. Continue identifying things in the room.

*"How is the chair- is it comfortable? Does it feel soft like you can melt into it or firm so you have to make yourself fit in it, or something else entirely? Do you see the four walls and our ceiling? What colour would you say these walls are?"*

If the person was receptive to the joke the first time, even if it was momentary distraction, you can always try again. As they are listening to your stream of consciousness, they may start having a new stream of consciousness as well, thus breaking the cycle.

*"We have a debate going- I say the walls are ecru, but the night shift keeps telling us they are 'Acadia White.' What does that even mean? Anyway, what do you think?"*

You can continue with this process, slowly addressing the various things in the room. This process can be thought of as containment. The literal space of the room can be the container for their thoughts and feelings, so by identifying what is in the room, you are essentially establishing boundaries for those thoughts and feelings to become manageable.

Containment is not a phrase people necessarily want to hear, it can remind them of closed spaces or feel offensive like we want to contain them as an individual, when really it is about containing overwhelming thoughts. It can help to

just put this into practice without explaining the concept. Once they are breathing normally, explanations may become more appropriate.

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**Another option is to start with an explanation of grounding.** First, recognize their capacity at the moment:

*"I know it's not always helpful to have someone telling you to breathe, so I won't do that, okay? Instead, maybe we can go through some grounding exercises together? [explanation of what grounding is and how it can help]"*

**A lot of times when a person receives a sufficient explanation, it feels safer to try something new.** That way they know what to expect and won't feel the malaise of not knowing what comes next or why they are being asked to try the things you are recommending. They may be breathing in a way that is verging on hyperventilating, but if you go through the explanation in a soothing manner, not asking them to focus, they will likely start listening to you, breaking their cycle of panicked thoughts.

If they haven't rejected the idea of grounding but are still in crisis mode, the goal is to achieve at least a momentary focus in the present. Say these statements softly so the survivor knows they have a choice and don't feel like we are demanding or forcing them to do something. Present the tools as options and always reassure them that whatever they choose is totally okay with you.

*"Sometimes if we focus our eyes the space feels more*

*manageable. Would you be okay looking at me? Does that feel safe to you? If not, that's totally okay. Can you pick a spot in the room to focus your eyes on? Maybe let's look at the clock and follow the second hand."*

Pick a grounding exercise that you feel comfortable with to guide the person in crisis. If they have already calmed down a bit, you can also ask them to select one that feels safe and possible for them.

Otherwise, pick your favourite and present it in your own words. It can be helpful to describe why you like the exercise.

*"I've always liked the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 exercise because it gives my brain a chance to think about something other than my breathing or my racing thoughts. Meditation doesn't really work for me because my brain is too busy to clear. This gives my brain something to do. Shall we try it together?"*

You may also suggest that they call a friend or family member they trust to walk them through a grounding exercise (you can email the document to the person the survivor chooses, or direct them to the SVPRO website).

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**A third option** for someone who is not responding to the other methods, is to let them have a few minutes alone. Ask them if this is something they would like, for you to step out for a few minutes. They may feel safer calming themselves.

You can leave the grounding exercises document for them to look at if they want to try any of these things on their own.

It may be helpful to suggest things like a cold glass of water or splashing cold water on their face, because the sensory experience may be distracting for their brains, too.

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Keep in mind you can also call SVPRO to assist if that is helpful. Support Specialists are typically available for consultations M-F from 8:30-4:30.

1-604-822-1588

After hours, you can contact WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre. WAVAW's phone is answered 24/7 and they are available not just for survivors, but for those supporting survivors. If you are not sure how to be most helpful and you cannot reach SVPRO, they are a great resource.

*National Toll-Free: 1-877-392-7583*