Grounding Techniques for Dissociation and Flashbacks

Grounding techniques are brief interventions that are designed to help people bring themselves back to the present when they have become disconnected from it during a flashback. This shift of focus to the present can both reduce the intensity of a flashback and increase your sense of control.

Grounding is built on the observation that, although we can have an awareness of a number of things at once, we can only properly attend to one thing at a time. So, attending to the present means that we cannot simultaneously attend to the past, although we can of course simultaneously maintain an awareness of the past.

Before engaging in any of the following grounding exercises, it may be helpful to rate your awareness from +5 (totally present in the room) to -5 (totally present in your thoughts). You can then re-evaluate this after doing the exercise.

1  **Label what you can see**

Say aloud what you can see in the room (e.g., picture, table, ceiling, etc.) Try to do this at a rate of about one object a second and keep going until you have labelled about 20-30 items. Alternatively, label 3 green objects, 3 brown objects, etc.

2  **Throw and catch an object**

Select a soft object, such as a cushion or a box of tissues, and throw it to someone who then throws it back to you. Alternatively, throw it in the air and catch it. Vary the height. Keep throwing and catching the object for a few throws, without a break.

3  **Describe an object**

Select a small object with no connection to the traumatic event and carry it around with you. During a flashback, hold it in your hand, look at it and, if you can, describe it aloud (e.g., colour, size, weight, texture, etc.) If you are not able to describe it, you could either feel it or squeeze it in your hand.

4  **Inhale an aroma**

Identify a fragrance or a smell that you like and that has no connection with the traumatic event. Put a small amount of it into a portable form (e.g., put some fragrance in a bottle). Inhale the aroma and allow yourself to be settled by it.

5  **Take a controlled breath**

Breathe in deeply, hold it for a slow count of ‘1, 2, 3, 4, 5,’ then slowly breathe out as if blowing a soap bubble, focusing on the sensations as you do so. Allow your breathing to settle back to its normal rate and depth. Repeat only once or twice.
6 Go for a brief walk

Walk around, either within a room or outside. For a few minutes, allow yourself to become constantly aware of the feeling of your feet as they make contact with the ground and the feeling of your arms as they swing.

7 Have a hot or a cold drink

Take one sip of a drink. As you swallow the drink, allow yourself to focus on the sensations involved and notice the temperature of the drink. Wait for the sensations to fade, then take another sip and repeat.

8 Say an affirming sentence

Develop a sentence that's a positive affirmation of present-day reality. This might be, ‘My name is ___ ____, I am standing in my home and I am now safe.’ It might be helpful to write the sentence on a flashcard that you keep with you as a reminder.

9 Adopt a good posture

Adopting a good posture can be grounding. For this, it may be helpful to mentally follow a set sequence, such as: ‘Stand up, feet apart, knees slightly bent, shoulders back and head up.

10 Dolan’s 54321 Exercise

a Say out loud five objects you can see
b Say out loud five sounds you can hear
c Say out loud five sensations you can feel
d Repeat a-c with four things (which can be any of the five)
e Repeat a-c with three things
f Repeat a-c with two things
g Repeat a-c with one thing

‘Resolving Sexual Abuse’ by Y.M. Dolan (1991)