

GROUNDING & IMAGERY TECHNIQUES

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Grounding and Imagery Techniques

Grounding Techniques

Grounding is a technique that helps keep someone in the present. They help reorient a person to the here-and-now and in reality. Grounding skills can be helpful in managing overwhelming feelings or intense anxiety. They help someone to regain their mental focus from an often intensely emotional state.

Sensory Awareness Grounding Exercise #1:

Begin by tracing your hand on a piece of paper and label each finger as one of the five senses. Then take each finger and identify something special and safe representing each of those five senses.

For example: Thumb represents sight and a label for sight might be butterflies or my middle finger represents the smell sense and it could be represented by lilacs.

After writing and drawing all this on paper, post it on your refrigerator or other safe places in the home where it could be easily seen and memorize it. Whenever you get triggered, breathe deeply and slowly, and put your hand in front of your face where you can really see it – stare at your hand and then look at each finger and try to do the five senses exercise from memory.

Sensory Awareness Grounding Exercise #2:

- Keep your eyes open, look around the room, notice your surroundings, notice details.
- Hold a pillow, stuffed animal or a ball.
- Place a cool cloth on your face, or hold something cool such as a can of soda.
- Listen to soothing music
- Put your feet firmly on the ground
- FOCUS on someone's voice or a neutral conversation.

The 54321 "game"

- Name 5 things you can see in the room with you.
- Name 4 things you can feel ("chair on my back" or "feet on floor")
- Name 3 things you can hear right now ("fingers tapping on keyboard" or "tv")
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (or, 2 things you like the smell of)
- Name 1 good thing about yourself

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Cognitive Awareness Grounding Exercise:

Re-orient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

1. Where am I?
2. What is today?
3. What is the date?
4. What is the month?
5. What is the year?
6. How old am I?
7. What season is it?

Moving

Separating past from present can be accomplished on a body level. During a flashback or trauma work getting up and moving (e.g. walking around or moving from one room to another) will help to reinforce the here-and-now reality that the trauma is no longer occurring. 'I could not move then, but I can move now.' Moving can also help to complete a sequence of impulses that were blocked at the time of the trauma (e.g. the impulse to run or push away).

Developing Muscle Tone

For many people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) induced relaxation (e.g. relaxation exercises) will precipitate a trauma reaction, increasing hyper arousal and anxiety, risking flashbacks. For such people, building or maintaining muscle tension is preferable to relaxation. For many people, muscle tensing helps reduce unpleasant body sensations attached to the trauma - even to the point of enabling sleep. This is not about aerobic exercise as elevated heart and respiration rates can be trauma triggers. Rather, it is slow, focused, muscle building exercise that is beneficial. To be effective it must be done with body awareness - with attention given to body sensations generally and to the muscles being exercised specifically. Also, the exercise must stop at the point of mild tiredness in the muscle, while it is still a pleasant experience. Developing muscle tone increases self-confidence and reduces feelings of vulnerability and hyper arousal. Muscle tensing can be used as an emergency measure when anxiety threatens to escalate into overwhelm or panic. Exercises that enhance sensations of calm, solidity and increased presence are beneficial. The idea is to build a positive experience of being in the body by developing musculature that can better contain hyper arousal and the full range of the emotions.

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Simple toning exercises:

- Push-ups: these help build tone in the arms, chest and back. Begin by standing a few feet from a wall, leaning into it and pushing away. Gradually move lower and lower on the wall until there is enough strength to push up from stairs or the floor.
- Thighs: Sitting in a chair, place both feet flat on the floor. Press weight onto your feet just until you feel tension build in your thighs, then slowly release.
- Leg lifts in many directions also need no special equipment. Simple weights such as milk cartons, books, water bottles can be used for strengthening the front of the upper arms.

'Write/Draw, Read, Destroy' Task

This can provide a powerful experience of containing, processing and ending something for those who are plagued by intrusive and repetitive thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations and images.

- On day 1 spend a set amount of time (an hour maximum - usually less) writing or drawing the distressing or disturbing material and then put it away and move to another activity.
- On day 2 (preferably in the same place, at the same time of day) read over or look at what you have produced and then destroy it.
- On day 3 start the procedure again as for day 1. You may produce new material or it may be a repeat of previous drawing or writing.

Containment Imagery Technique

Threat demands attention; and rightly so. However once the person has survived, and the threat is gone, (s)he should be able to stop attending to it. That just isn't the case with traumatic memories. With traumatic memories, those threatening images, sights, sounds, smells, emotions, and sensations continue to play themselves out, as if happening in the present, i.e., the memory is experienced as a present threat-continually demanding attention; full attention! It is very difficult, if not impossible, to sustain attention on routine, but necessary life tasks, when disturbing/traumatic material from the past continuously intrudes on and invades one's present.

"The Container" is an imaginal resource that addresses the need to compartmentalize the distressing material, in order to be present in the here and now, attending to what one needs to. Be clear: this is not a repression or suppression of memories, thoughts, affect, emotion; this is a technique employed to allow one to attend to what (s)he needs to attend to until (s)he has the necessary resources to attend to those distressing/disturbing memories, thoughts, affects, emotions. (Remember: time is a resource)

Allow yourself to be comfortable...either lying down or sitting up- with your back, neck and spine fully supported. Knowing that you will not be interrupted for the next little while, begin by gently closing your eyes.

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(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Now begin to bring your attention to your breath- the direct experience of your breath-however it is... and how ever it changes. Allow yourself to softly focus your awareness on to the breath that is arising right now...the in-breath and the out-breath... the rising and the falling. If you can, try to follow one full cycle of the breath- from the beginning of the in-breath, through its entirety...the beginning of the out-breath through its entirety. Allowing yourself the time and the space to be in direct contact with the breath throughout one entire cycle.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

As you continue to pay attention to the breath, you may notice distractions that arise. Just allow yourself to notice... those distractions...any bodily sensations... any thoughts that may arise. If possible, allow yourself to become aware of the separateness of those bodily sensations -notice how those sensations are separate-distinct from your thoughts, your ideas and your words.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Now, as you continue with this focused awareness, you will notice how often you lose contact with the breath... maybe you become caught in a thought or an idea or plan or maybe some other bodily sensation has pulled your attention. ...When this happens, simply notice that you have lost connection with the breath, and, gently bring your awareness back to the breath.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation) We'll begin now with a deep breath in through your nose...inhaling slowly and deeply. Exhale through pursed lips until all the air has been released.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Now we are going to be creating a container. It doesn't matter what kind of container it is, as long as it can hold "any and all disturbing material". If you were going to develop something like that, what kind of container would it be? Some people have used boxes, safes, trunks or chests, others have used book bags, knapsacks or other pieces of luggage. It can be anything really, a tank, a submarine, an underground well... anything that suits you.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Can you bring to mind an image of something like that... Something that would be able to contain any and all disturbing material? When you have one in mind, take a good look at it. What material is it made out of? How is it held together? How big is it? What color is it? Are there any markings on it? If there are markings, notice them, if not that's fine. But I'd like you to add something to this container. I'd like you to add in some way...whether it be a note or a sign or an inscription of sorts on it... I'd like you to add a note to indicate that this container will remain tightly sealed. It will remain tightly sealed, until you wish to open it and retrieve something from it, otherwise it will remain sealed. It can be opened-but only by you.... and it should be opened only in the service of your healing.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

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So once again, look at your container. Does it already have that message on it? If not, place it on there now.

(Pause) Now, how does this container open? Are you able to open it by yourself, or do you need help? Is there a lock on it? If not, feel free to put one or several on it now.

Pause. (Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation).

Once the locks are in place, we'll experiment with opening and closing it, locking and unlocking it. As you do that, notice how much- or how little- effort it takes to open and close.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

When you feel comfortable handling it, I'd like you to think of something that you might put into the container... just for practice. Do whatever is necessary to open it up, and then place something in there. When I say "something" ...I mean anything, really, anything that may be distressing or disturbing to you right now.... it could be thoughts or worries, bad feelings or bad memories . . . it could be something that you have to do but not right this minute-... or it could be something that keeps you from being present with this exercise...It could be self judgement, doubt or pain...whatever it is, you're going to put it into the container...whatever you need to do to get it in there, do that now.

(Pause)

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Once the disturbing material is in, close it up and lock the container. (Pause) Now, breathe deeply as you look at the locked container, securely holding anything that you need or want it to hold.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Notice how you feel in your body having set aside whatever distressing thing you put in your container. Can you sense that it is fully contained? Is there something that keeps it from feeling fully contained? If so, can we try opening your container and putting that in there as well? Remember that this container is yours and will hold any and every thing that you need it to hold for as long as you need it to.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

Now imagine walking away from your container... so that it is no longer in your sight. Notice the feeling in your body now that you are no longer burdened by what you put in the container. Notice your breath, your in-breath . . . your out-breath . . . and any sensations of relief you feel in your body, maybe your shoulders have dropped a bit, or some of the tension in your neck has subsided. Whatever feelings of relief you notice, breathe deeply and just notice.

Whatever you put in the container is now securely locked inside. It is for you to open whenever you wish to put things in or take them out.

So now, just for practice, let's go back to your container. Once you have it in sight, look closely...see if you can read what is written on the outside. (Pause) Continue focusing on your breath as you continue to approach the container. When you are in reach, unlock it and open it up. ... as you open it notice that

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what you put in there, is still there, separate from you. You might want to put something else in, or maybe even a few things. Or you may just wish to lock it back up. Whatever feels right and safe to you, do that now.

(Pause)

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

And once you're finished practicing putting things in your container and securely locking it back up . . . you can walk away from the container...as you walk away begin to bring yourself and your awareness back to this room. Knowing that this resource-this secure container- is available to you at any time. Knowing that you can use it to hold any and all disturbing things. Knowing that all of the things that you have chosen-or anything that you choose to contain in the future, will be secure and will remain secure. You can access the material whenever you feel resourced to do so ...but for now, you may leave it, knowing it is safely and securely contained.

(Breathe audibly with the exhalation longer than the inhalation)

And now, whenever you are ready, gently bring yourself back to the room by counting up from one to five. When you reach the number five, your eyes will gently open. You will be awake and alert, and feeling only peace. One.... Two.... Three. Take a deep breath.... Four.... And five.

Dealing with Flashbacks

What are flashbacks? Anyone who has experienced sexual abuse, rape or any other traumatic event can experience flashbacks. Flashbacks are a memory of a frightening or painful experience, which occurred either in childhood or adult life. It tends not to be like an ordinary memory, but more a sudden and unexpected intrusion. Flashbacks can be experienced as a single slide from a slide show, a snapshot or photograph that flashes repeatedly or like a video clip. A flashback can feel almost as real as when it originally happened and can also be as frightening. Not everyone's flashbacks are visual. Some take the form of words and phrases or sounds that were heard in the past. They can be accompanied by intense feelings, e.g. shame, sadness, anger, or physical sensations known as 'body memories', which may have been felt at the time of the original abuse. Flashbacks can happen at any time, anywhere and often occur without warning. They can be triggered by, the time of year or day, TV programs, films, smells, words, phrases, songs, places, someone who reminds you in some way of your abuser, pictures, tastes, a particular feeling such as fear or anxiety, having sex or being intimate with your partner. These can occur instantly or sometime later. Sometimes a flashback can occur in response to hearing voices that tell you to do things, e.g. harm yourself or someone else. Hearing voices can be very frightening.

Ideas on how to cope with flashbacks

- Let yourself know that what you are experiencing is a flashback and that this is a normal reaction to the abuse you experienced. It may be useful to look around you and take note of what is happening in the here and now.

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- Use objects and activities associated with being an independent adult to ground yourself during flashbacks. Most useful are things that you have or can do now which weren't available to you as a child, or when the abuse took place, e.g. holding car or house keys, typing on a computer keyboard, listening to music on headphones. Also useful is a 'first aid kit' (where a person collects a number of items that have good here and now associations to safe people, good memories and calming sensations).
- Try to associate to your immediate surroundings by feeling where your body makes a boundary with the chair and floor ('feel the arms of the chair against your arms and your feet on the floor') name things with your senses ('what can you hear that tells you are in the present?' 'name 5 things in this room that are green?'). A useful question for you to consider is 'Think of something that you know is real now that helps you to know that (event) is in the past, that you survived it and are safe now.'
- You may find it reassuring or grounding to carry a stone or something familiar and comforting in your pocket that you can stroke, hold or rub when a flashback occurs. Some people keep an elastic band around their wrist and 'ping it' to try and bring them back to the here and now.
- Try to breathe from your diaphragm (put your hand just above your navel and breathe so your hand is pushed up and down). This can help prevent a panic attack.
- If the flashback occurs whilst you are out and about try to get yourself to somewhere that you feel safe and secure.
- If you are wakened by a flashback, also known as a 'night terror', try to write it down, then go and have something warm to drink, watch some TV, listen to music or do something else that you find relaxing. It's often best not to try and sleep until you have been able to relax for a while.
- Keep a list of people you can contact in the event of experiencing a flashback.
- It may be useful to write the flashback down or tell it to someone you trust - though it can be very painful to speak about, talking it over with someone can help your healing.
- If you self-harm/injure in response to a flashback, try to take some precautions to minimize the longer term harm that you might do to yourself).
- It may be useful to try and identify if there is anything in particular that triggers your flashbacks. It may be useful in the short-term to avoid your triggers, although you can't always control when they occur.
- If you start experiencing a flashback while having sex with your partner you can stop and take time to relax. It's OK to take time out from the sexual side of your relationship to work through these memories if you need to. Your partner should respect your choice and support you.

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- Do something that helps you relax, e.g. have a bath, listen to your favorite music after you have had a flashback.
- Remember flashbacks are a normal response to what you have experienced.

Flashback Halting Protocol:

- Right now I am feeling (describe your current emotion, e.g. 'terrified')
- And I am sensing in my body (describe your current bodily sensations, e.g. 'pounding heart, tight chest', shaky legs)
- Because I am remembering (name the trauma by title only- no details, e.g. 'being hurt by my mother')
- At the same time, I am looking around where I am now in (the actual current year), here (name the place where you are)
- And I can see (describe some of the things that you see right now, in this place),
- And so I know (name the trauma by title only again, e.g. 'being hurt by my mother') is not happening now or anymore.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

Ask the client to take a deep breath and fill her lungs completely so she gets the most out of breathing. You may suggest she scoot forward in her chair and place one hand over her abdomen and the other over her chest.
(Demonstrate for client.)

"Start by exhaling and then breathe in all the way with your abdomen for a count of 2 and then breathe in all the way with your chest for a count of 2."

"Hold that for a count of 7 and then breathe out all the way with your abdomen for a count of 4 and breathe in with your chest for a count of 4."

Demonstrate for the client and/or do it together.

Repeat the sequence 4 times.

Four Fingers

To begin, close your eyes and take several deep and relaxing breaths.

1. Touch your thumb to your index finger. Recall a time when your body felt healthy fatigue, after exhilarating physical activity (e.g. after a race, after a baseball game, etc.).



2. Touch your thumb to your middle finger. Recall a very warm and loving experience.

3. Touch your thumb to your ring finger. Recall accepting the nicest compliment you ever received.



4. Touch your thumb to your little finger. Recall the most beautiful place you have ever seen.

Resource: Wexler, D.
Harborview CBT+ 03

Relaxation Exercises

• Stairway

Imagine yourself standing on the top of a 10-step stairway, any kind you want. With each breath, count backwards from 10 to 1 as you visualize yourself walking down the stairs, becoming more relaxed with each step.

*Optional: You can continue this exercise by imagining that you have arrived at a special, personal place; then explore this place in your mind.



• Filling Your Room

Let your eyes close and relax. Imagine yourself sitting along quietly in an empty room. Notice how you feel. Now imagine adding a person or object that you would especially like to have with you in your room. Observe



how you feel. Now add someone or something else and observe how you feel. Continue adding people and special objects or decorations to your room until you have filled it to your satisfaction. Pay attention to how full, satisfied, and safe you feel.

• Blackboard Technique

Sit quietly and take several deep, relaxing breaths. Imagine yourself traveling to a private place where you notice a blackboard. Written on the blackboard are three critical statements that others have made about you in the past. Notice how you feel when you read these. Walk up to the blackboard, erase the statements, and write three positive statements about yourself in response. Notice how you feel when you read them. Take a deep breath and remind yourself that you can make these positive statements to yourself whenever you need to.



Resource: Wexler, D.
CBT+