

Using Grounding to get back into your “Window of Tolerance”

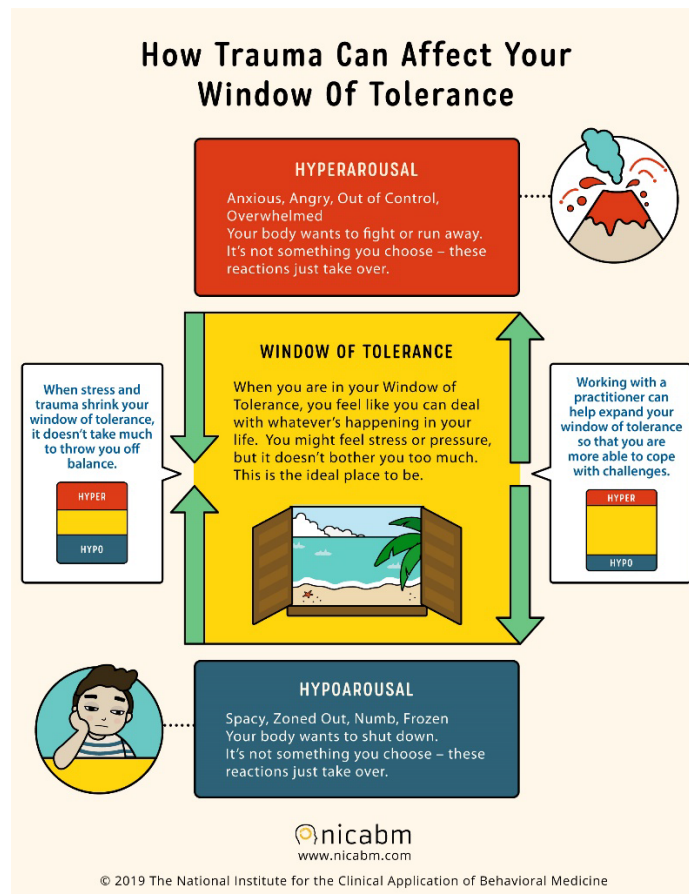
adapted from Seeking Safety by Lisa Najavits (2002), and The Developing Mind by Daniel Siegel (1999)

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When your body’s nervous system is working optimally, you are within the “Window of Tolerance”. When you are in your Window of Tolerance, you feel like you can deal with whatever’s happening in your life. You might feel stress or pressure, but it doesn’t overwhelm you. You have feelings and reactions, but you can also think clearly, reason how you want to respond, etc. This is ideal.

When we experience trauma, our window of tolerance can shrink, so that it doesn’t take much to throw you off balance (to get outside your window).

This can take the form of activating your fight/flight response (hyperarousal) or shutting down/freezing (hypoarousal). With treatment and practice of skills, we can learn to expand our window of tolerance so that we are more able to cope with challenges that come up in life.



What is Grounding:

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to safely and adaptively detach from emotional pain (self-harm impulses, substance use urges, anger, sadness, anxiety, panic symptoms) and bring you back into the window of tolerance. Distraction works by focusing outward on the external world, rather than inward on yourself. These strategies are also called "healthy detachment" or "centering."

Why Do Grounding:

Grounding physically and emotionally "anchors" to the present and to reality, which often becomes distorted during emotional crisis. Overwhelming emotions, memories of a traumatic event, a sense of detachment (unreality), and numbing can all cause significant distress that seems to take over your mind and your body. Grounding is a good way to remind yourself of your innate capacity to recover and feel resilient.

How to Practice Grounding:

- grounding can be done at any time, any place, and no one has to know
- good use of grounding is done when your distress score is above 6 on a 0 to 10 scale
- keeping your eyes open and turning lights on can help connect you to the present moment
- rate your mood before and after a grounding exercise - a small reduction in distress, even by one point is a strong indication the strategy worked for you
- grounding is not the same as relaxation - grounding is active, focuses on the present, and intended to help with negative feelings
- practice as often as you can
- notice what works for you and concentrate on that grounding skill or create your own method
- practice when not in distress
- engage support of others in practicing grounding

Mental Grounding:

- describe your environment in detail - scan each item/person in front of you and describe in neutral terms its position, color, texture, sound, smell, shape, or temperature. You

can do it out loud or in your head while others do not know that you are practicing grounding.

- play categories with yourself - for example, think of all kitchen objects, all cities that start with "A", all "cars" or "TV shows"
- describe an everyday activity in detail - for example, describe a meal that you cook (going through each step in the recipe as if reading from a recipe card). Another example may be to go over your morning routine, your dressing routine or your shopping routine
- say a safety statement - for example, "My name is _____. I am safe now; I am in the present, located at _____."
- read something, saying each word to yourself - pick something with neutral content; you can also read each word backwards to focus on the words, but not the meaning of them.
- use humor - think or view something funny to help yourself build a space between your suffering and your reality
- count to 10 or say the alphabet very slowly or backwards

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 - notice how they feel, texture, color, shape, weight, temperature
- dig your heels into the floor - literally "grounding" yourself
- carry a grounding object with you - a small rock or another small object that you consider to be safe
- jump up and down - this is great to releasing energy during panic or anxiety symptoms
- perform a brief body scan - notice all the different parts of your body, scan them in order, starting at your feet and moving up, notice how each part feels, notice how your body connects you to the world
- stretch - extend your fingers, arms, or legs as far as you can; roll your head around
- walk slowly, noticing each step - you can say to yourself "left foot, right foot" with each step
- eat something slowly, describing each bite in detail
- focus on your breathing - allow your body to take control, breathe as feels natural in the moment

Soothing Grounding:

- say kind statements to yourself - for example, imagine yourself a small child in distress and talk to that child in you
- think of favorites - your favorite person, book, TV show, vacation spot, animal, season, color, time of day, food
- picture people you care about
- review words from an inspiring song, quotation, or poem
- remember and picture a safe place - describe a place you find very soothing; focus on all the details of this place
- say a coping statement - for example, "I can handle this, "This feeling will pass"
- plan a safe treat for yourself
- think of things you are looking forward to in the next week

What if Grounding Does Not Work?

Grounding does work! But will need to be practiced regularly just like any other skill to make it as powerful as possible. Below are some suggestions to help make it work for you:

- **Practice as often as possible**, even if you don't need it, so that you will know it by heart.
- **Practice faster.** Speeding up the pace gets you focused on the outside world more quickly.
- **Try grounding for a loooooonnnngggg time** (20-30 minutes). And repeat, repeat!
- **Try to notice which methods you like best:** physical, mental or soothing, or some combination of them all.
- **Create your own methods of grounding.** What you create may be worth more than those you read here, because they're *yours*!
- **Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.** Start when you begin having a flashback, when anxiety or anger starts to build, or when having a substance craving.
- **Make up an index card or notes on your phone** on which you list your best grounding methods
- **Have others assist you in grounding.** Teach friends and family about grounding so that they can help guide you with it when 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 as needed.** Consider asking your therapist or someone close to you to record it when 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? Why are some methods more powerful for you than other methods?
- **Don't give up!!!**

Ideas for Commitment:

Commit to one action that will move your life forward this week! Keeping your commit is a way of respecting, honoring and caring for yourself.

Option 1: Practice grounding for 10 minutes or more, rating your feelings before and after (just like we did in this session).

Option 2: Re-read the handout, circling the methods that you most want to try.

Option 3: Find something to carry with you that helps you feel grounded (e.g., a small, beautiful rock; a picture of someone you love – person or animal; an AA chip you earned). Keep it in a place that you can access at any time, such as in your pocket or wallet, or on your key chain.

Option 4: Fill out the Safe Coping Sheet below:

Example of Safe Coping Sheet Applied to this Topic:

	Old Way	New Way
Situation	Having a flashback	Having a flashback
	I got stuck in it; it was awful. I tried to drown my feelings in three gin-and-tonics.	I can try to cope with a flashback by doing grounding. These are the ways that would work for me: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Run my hands under cool water• Try to remember the names of some shows I like to watch Turn on some music – loud, to drown out the flashback
Consequence	I just feel like I have no control over my feelings. I can't stop myself from drinking when I get overwhelmed.	The intensity goes down a bit, not completely away, but enough so that I don't feel like I have to drink.

On a scale of 0-10, with 10 being the highest level,

How safe is your old way of coping? _____ How safe is your new way of coping? _____