

Mindfulness and Grounding Techniques

When someone is in a heightened or agitated state, you can assist in de-escalation by guiding them through grounding techniques. These techniques are meant to help bring a survivor back to their present moment and to ease the overwhelming nature of what they are experiencing. They may be experiencing a flashback, dissociative episode, panic attack, or an emotional trigger. These techniques are meant to bring a survivor gently back to reality without being patronizing or condescending. If the survivor feels unsure, offer to practice these techniques alongside them but do not push them to use them. The survivor is the expert in their own life and their own healing. Listen to what their needs are and work with them.

Grounding techniques are based in a concept called mindfulness. This is a practice that encourages active awareness of one's reality. For this technique to be successful, the survivor must be in a physically and emotionally safe place. Returning to a painful and dangerous reality will not help in the survivor's healing in the fifteen to twenty minutes you are with them. Encourage them to get to a place where they are comfortable, preferably somewhere quiet. If they are able to, ask them to place their feet on the ground. Sitting is best but if a survivor is more comfortable lying down, standing, or even walking encourage that.

Turning Inward

When external stimuli is too strong, we can encourage the survivor to return to the body. A great way to do this is through the practice of mindful breathing. This is something you can practice alongside the survivor so they can time their breaths with yours and to feel less isolated. This can be as simple as the words *In* and *Out* timed with your inhales and exhales. Encourage the survivor to put their hand on their stomach to feel their own breathing. Listen to make sure that their breathing has softened before continuing into conversation.

If someone is experiencing disassociation or amnesia, you can help them return to the present by asking questions. *What is the date today? What year is it? What season is it?*

It is best if the questions you are asking is something you yourself can verify. This will help ground the survivor as you are confirming both what they already know and providing an objective and truthful narrative.

Turning Outward

The goal here is an easing of overwhelming feelings and experiences. Because of this, we should acknowledge that the body is not always a safe place to retreat to. Equilibrium can then be achieved not by looking inward but by looking outward. In this case, look to practices that look outside of the body for the present moment. This usually involves engaging the survivor's senses. Tactile stimulation can help focus attention on something real and present. When one splashes cold water on their face or holds on to a favourite stuff animal, they are turning outwards to ground themselves. You can encourage a survivor to focus on your voice or other sounds in the room. You can encourage them to hold something cold or warm. You can ask them for details about the room that they are in: What can they see? What can they hear? If where they are is not comfortable, what can they do to change their surroundings? An extra blanket or an opened window can make a huge difference in returning a person to the present.

Grounding Techniques

Guided Breathing

Take a seat with your feet on the ground. If you can, put a hand on your belly.

Take a deep breath in. Feel your body as you inhale.

Take a long breath out. Notice your body as you exhale.

Follow your breath in and out.

Rest your mind on your belly or your chest or at your nostrils.

Just be aware as you breathe in and aware as you breathe out.

Body Scan

Take a few moments to relax, breathing in and out in slow deep breaths

When you are ready to start, shift your attention to your feet.

Take a moment to focus on the way they feel.

Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tight as you can. Hold for a count of 10.

Relax your feet. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your feet feel as they become loose.

Relax for a moment then move slowly up through your body legs, stomach, back, arms, neck and shoulders and face contacting and relaxing muscle groups as you go.

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

Grounding Object

Carry a grounding object with you. This can be a stone, a coin, a pendant, or any small thing that you can carry. Hold this when you need to be reminded of your connection to the world outside yourself. Focus on what it feels like, how it looks, how it fits in your hand.

Breathing Meditations

Observing the Body

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breathe.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out a long breath.*

Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.

Breathing out, I smile to my whole body.

Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.

Breathing out, I calm the activity of my whole body.

* This will vary depending on what we notice about our breathing – our breath can be long, short, deep, easy, uneasy, etc. We simply notice the characteristics of our breath.

Mindful Sitting

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

Breathing in, I see myself as a flower.

Breathing out, I feel fresh.

Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain.

Breathing out, I feel solid.

Breathing in, I see myself as still water.

Breathing out, I reflect things as they truly are.

Breathing in, I see myself as space.

Breathing out, I feel free.

Mindful breathing meditations are adapted from those of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. You can find out more about him at: <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/>

Definitions

Disassociation – a psychological experience of detachment from either immediate surroundings and/or physical and emotional experiences. The major characteristic is a detachment from reality, rather than a loss of reality as in psychosis. A nonpathological experience of disassociation change range from daydreaming to drug induced altered states of consciousness. In the field of trauma, a survivor experiencing disassociation might have a sense of themselves or the world being unreal, forget their identity or sections of their memory, or feel lost in a vivid recollection of a memory. An extreme example of this state might appear as a fragmentation of their identity or self into separate consciousness. These experiences are often associated with longer term mental health conditions such as an anxiety disorder, dissociative identity disorder, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Flashback – an involuntary recurrent memory in which an individual has a sudden and intense re-experiencing of a past experience or elements of a past experience. The term is used particularly when this memory is so encompassing that the person relives the experience, unable to fully recognize it as memory and not something that is happening in in the present moment. In the case of survivors of sexual trauma, this can include a physical flashback of the assault where the body itself relives the experience.

Grounding –a technique that helps a person reorient themselves to the present moment. These skills can be helpful in managing overwhelming feelings, intense anxiety, or returning to the present when experiencing disassociation, a flashback, or a panic attack.

Meditation - a practice where an individual focuses their mind on a particular object, thought or activity to achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm state. Meditation may be used to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and pain or to encourage emotional well-being and positivity. It may be done in a variety of ways, including in a seated position, while walking, while chanting, in a group, or by closing one's eyes in a quiet environment.

Mindfulness – the act of bringing one's attention and awareness to what they are experiencing in the present moment. Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali term *sati*, a significant element in the Buddhist psychological tradition and spiritual practice. These teachings can be used in a secular or even clinical context to help treat anxiety and depression.

Panic Attack –a sudden period of intense fear that may include palpitations, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, faintness, numbness, or a feeling of impending doom. Those experiencing their first attack may believe they are having a heart attack, feel as if they are dying, or that they are about to have a psychotic break. The most severe symptoms usually have a duration of a few minutes. Panic attacks can be triggered by specific stimuli, usually unique to the individual, or worsened with the use of stimulants and depressants. Theorists believe that people with panic disorder may experience these attacks because they mistake their bodily sensations for life-threatening situations. Because of this hijacking of the Fight, Flight, or Freeze response, they can be considered a specific type of disassociation. Those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse are at a high risk factor for developing a panic disorder.