

Managing Distress

Grounding Tips for Crime Victims, Survivors and Family Members of Mass Violence Incidents (MVIs)

When you witness or hear about a mass violence incident, you may experience intense and distressing feelings that can come in waves or are felt as a persistent ache. A strong wave of feeling can be frightening if it seems it may never end or may go out of control.

You may want to avoid information about the event or you may want to watch every minute of coverage. Each victim or survivor has his or her own way of coping. There are no right or wrong feelings. However, if you do see news on TV or social media, be prepared for some strong feelings.

Seeing the news, hearing arguments of different points of view, either in person or on-screen, can bring up strong and difficult reactions. You may have disturbing thoughts and images such as flashbacks to your own trauma experience, images of a loved one suffering, or thoughts of revenge. Anger and anxiety may turn to sadness, then to numbness and back again to frustration that all of this is out of your control.

While it may seem impossible at first, grounding and mindfulness are distress tolerance techniques that make it possible to witness a mass violence incident, experience strong emotions, effectively cope with the discomfort, and feel safe at the same time. You learn to bear strong feelings, eventually ride out a wave of distress and regain your composure.

Distress tolerance skills are used when it is difficult or impossible to change a situation. They help us cope and survive during a crisis, and help us manage our internal emotional state and to bear even intense emotional pain. These skills allow you to stay in the present moment while you are being reminded of the past.

Grounding and mindfulness techniques are also useful to feel calmer and to think more clearly in everyday life.

What is Grounding?

*Grounding is a way to lessen or change feelings. Grounding guides you to focus on something other than the difficult emotions you are experiencing. When your mind is racing or your heart is pounding, grounding brings you back to the here-and-now and guides your attention **towards present safety**. Grounding interrupts the thoughts in your mind that are causing you to feel distressed, anxious or sad. It gives you a little space to find ways to improve the moment despite pain or difficulty.*

To be **grounded** is to feel the world around you moment to moment. For example, take a moment right now to feel your feet on the floor and your seat in the chair. That awareness of physical sensation is one type of grounding.

You may also think of grounding as centering, distracting, creating a safe place, or healthy detachment. Although grounding does not solve the problem that is contributing to your unpleasant emotions, it does provide a temporary way to gain control over your feelings and prevent things from getting worse. Grounding anchors you, gives you a chance to calm down, and allows you to eventually return and address the problem that is causing the painful emotions to begin with.

Grounding can be done anytime, anywhere, as a way to self-soothe, relax and use your full senses to feel more at peace. You may need to 'turn your mind' many times. Be persistent.

How does meditation support grounding skills?

While grounding can be applied to any situation throughout the day, meditation is usually practiced for a specific amount of time, from ten to twenty minutes or more. By taking regular time to meditate and practice mindfulness of breathing or thoughts, your skills build up and are more available during times of crisis.

The Importance of Practice

Like any new skill, it is best to practice grounding ahead of time. That way you can go into a difficult situation with greater confidence and calm.

If you expect to be in a challenging situation, sit quietly and deliberately imagine what might happen and how you want to respond. This way, you face the anticipated stressful situation on your own terms, with a powerful sense of control.

Once you have learned and practiced these techniques, you will gradually learn to stay grounded in the middle of difficult conversations or other stressful moments

Check out the techniques below. Practice each one a few times. Maybe different ones can help you at different times; with practice, you will discover the technique(s) that work best for you.

You can also ask friends what they do to stay grounded and be mindful, and share what works. On the actual day, take a note card where you have written down which techniques you want to use.

Remember, if the technique is not immediately helpful, repeat or shift the technique. Be patient. Let time pass. It may take several minutes to let the emotion fade. Grounding yourself isn't always easy. It may take some time before the techniques work well for you, but don't give up on them.

Once you have calmed down and your mind stops racing, you will be able to think more clearly. Certain communities may have experienced a reduction in resources due to the current crisis situation.

Grounding Techniques

As you read through the examples and begin to practice them, note the ones you like the best.

The important idea in grounding is to zero in on small details and sensations. This takes you out of thinking and reacting and into your immediate surroundings or physical experience.

- Slow deep breathing
 - This important exercise slows the heart rate and tells the whole body to “slow down.” Racing thoughts tend to slow down as well. It’s simple. Take a slow deep breath in through the nose and hold it. Then slowly breathe out through the mouth. Keep breathing slowly, gradually increasing the time of the inhale up to a count of five seconds. Notice the turning of the breath, that brief pause at the top. Breathe out for another count of five seconds, relaxing as you exhale. After several of these long deep breaths, return to your normal breathing. Continue to breathe normally, noticing how the air is cooler as you breathe in and warmer as you breathe out. Notice the rise and fall in the chest and belly. Hear the slight sounds of breathing. Relax as you exhale.
 - If you are having difficulty getting a deep enough breath, put your elbows on your knees or a table with your chin in your hands. Notice how the area of your belt now moves strongly as you breathe in and out. Your breath is always with you. Whenever you feel stressed, remember to breathe! You can do this with eyes open or closed.
 - Other helpful breathing tips are to let the breath out in a big sigh at the same time you relax your shoulders; purse your lips as you breathe out; yawn; breathe a silent affirmation or prayer in and out. You may even sing quietly, hum or whistle. Keep your attention on the breath as you do this.
- Notice gravity
 - Begin to feel the weight of the body pressing down and the different points of contact with your seat or your feet on the floor. Gravity is always there, hence the term grounded. Let your arms feel heavy and relaxed. Let your legs feel heavy and relaxed. You can imagine this gravity going all the way down, connecting you to the earth. Think of your feet as strong roots that go down through the floor and are grounded into the earth. No matter how strong the wind, wave or storm, imagine the strength of your roots. Another way to tune in to the present moment is to balance on one foot or one side of the body. This takes concentration and immediately brings you into awareness of gravity and your body. If you are sitting, even a slight shift of weight to one side or the other will take your attention away from what is distressing.

- Look around
 - Look away from what is distressing you to something neutral, like the ceiling or the floor, or someone's blue jacket. Mentally describe the neutral object in detail until you are calmer. For example, challenge yourself to think of specific colors, such as crimson, burgundy, indigo, or turquoise, instead of simply red or blue. You may want to bring something with a vibrant color to use for this technique. You can also let your eyes gaze steadily at a point or object for 20 seconds. Still eyes, still mind. If you want to look at the presentation of something distressing, look only briefly or half close your eyes to limit the intensity. Then look back at the neutral or soothing object.
- Listen
 - Deliberately listen for natural sounds. Are there sounds outside? Are there people shuffling their feet? What else can you hear? Can you bring a portable music player and earphones with you with favorite music? Consider creating a playlist of your favorite, relaxing and calming music.
- Touch
 - Bring your full attention to the sense of touch. Rub or tap your hands together or on the chair, wriggle your toes to feel the inside of your shoes, or touch the texture of your clothing. Tap with two finger tips on the top of your other hand. Place your hand over your heart. Hug yourself. Hold hands with a friend. Put your hands over your face. You may want to bring a small stone, coin or special object you can touch that brings you back to the present moment. You may find touching an ice cube or sipping cold water helpful. Are the things you touch soft or hard? Warm or cool? Focus on the small details of each item, and how it feels to you in the moment.
- Taste
 - Slowly and deliberately eat something small like a raisin, mint, a bit of lemon or something salty. Really taste this small bit of food. Perhaps close your eyes and shut out everything but this taste in this moment. Put your tongue to the roof of your mouth, or against the cheek in the space between your teeth. Sip water, tracking it from lips to tongue, and down your throat, see how far down you can feel it.
- Smell
 - For some, a scent can be calming and grounding. A small bit of your favorite fragrance on a handkerchief or a bit of scented candle can be used to focus on your sense of smell. Inhale the fragrance slowly and deeply and try to note its qualities (sweet, spicy, sharp, citrusy, and so on).

Become more aware of what is going on inside of you

- Body scan
 - Tune into your body from head to toe. Are you feeling jumpy, calm or something else? Starting from the top of the head, gently notice any sensation. Is your back straight? Check your shoulders and let them drop if they are tight. Let your teeth part slightly so your jaw can relax. Notice any sensations around your chest. Can you feel your heartbeat? Is it rapid or steady? Does your stomach feel full, or are you hungry? Become aware of your hands all the way down to your fingertips. Scan all the way down to your toes. Are your legs crossed, or are your feet resting on the floor? Let go of any tension as you do this. Wiggle your toes. Are your feet warm or cold? How does the floor feel against your feet? Notice any tingling or tightness. Notice any sense of spaciousness or calm that appears.
- Muscle tense and release
 - Shrug your shoulders or make a tight fist. Hold for several seconds. Then let go and notice relaxation flowing down your arm and into your fingers. Press your feet hard against the floor. After a few seconds, release and feel relaxation spread through your lower body. Breathe out as you release. Repeat until you feel calmer.
- Stretch and release
 - Stretch out one or both of your arms or legs, or tilt your head to stretch your neck. Focus all your attention on the way the stretch feels. Notice any feeling of relaxation as you release. Breathe out as you relax. Repeat as needed.
- Rag doll
 - Let go of all tension at once, as if you are a rag doll. Rest until you are ready to go again.
- Move
 - If there is a break in proceedings, do jumping jacks, tippy toes, or pushups against the wall or fast walking around the building. Increasing heart rate and oxygen gets emotion out. While you are exercising, stay focused on your breath. Concentrate on your steps (you can even count them). Notice the rhythm of your footsteps and how it feels to put your feet on the ground. Pay attention to how your body feels with each movement, and when your hands or feet touch the floor or move through the air.

Become more aware of the content of your mind

Often we go through life on automatic pilot, reacting, having opinions, saying things that just jump out. We were not aware that we were thinking something until we hear ourselves say it out loud. Becoming more conscious of the content of our thoughts helps control the impact they have on our feelings and reactions.

- Writing thoughts down brings them into focus
 - Some thoughts increase distress while others are calming. Write down your thoughts in a journal or even on a scrap of paper. This helps you see what thoughts are there, how often a certain thought appears and what feelings go along with it.
 - Watch out for “catastrophizing” thoughts that start with “What if...?” “What if I am never happy again? What if things go even worse? What if I get stuck in this bad feeling forever?” “What ifs” focus on the future. Instead, focus on “what is...” Turn your awareness back to the present. You may be feeling a lot of distress but it is easier to deal with just the immediate situation without adding the past and future as well.

- Is there a memory or thought that makes things better?
 - You may want to write down positive thoughts or affirmations to take with you. Examples might be:
I can do this. I can accept help when it's offered. Today, I choose to heal. I am gentle with myself as I heal. I'm surrounded by support, seen and unseen. I choose to heal my hurt spirit.

- Name all the feelings and reactions
 - You may want to expand your writing by asking, “What are some words that can express or describe how I'm feeling about things right now?”
 - If tears or other reactions happen, allow them to come and go. Your emotion is a sign of your caring. Notice what thoughts or memories are connected to your feelings. If you can, accept your emotions as true in the moment. Say to yourself, “This, too, is here.” If the emotion feels overwhelming, remember to breathe, and take note of what triggered the feeling. Let time pass. Shift your attention back to the body.
 - Is there anything else there? Is hope, gratitude, or any positive feeling also present along with the negative feelings?

- Rate the intensity of the feeling
 - Give it a number on a scale from one to ten. Does that number change as you track and describe the feeling?

- Judgments
 - People often judge themselves for having certain feelings.
“I should be stronger.”
“I am so tired of feeling sad and upset. I wish this feeling would go away.”
 - Notice these self-critical thoughts without getting caught up in them.

- Talk to yourself
 - “It is okay to not be okay. It is okay to have strong feelings. I can remember to breathe my way through it. If I let time pass, this feeling will pass if I don’t feed it.”
 - “Let me stay in the present moment.”
 - Offer yourself positive reassurance and affirmations that you will be ok.

- Make lists
 - List three favorite things in several different categories, such as foods, trees, songs, movies, books, places, and so on.
 - Write or mentally list four or five things in your life that bring you joy, and briefly visualize each of them.
 - Keep the list with you for reference.

Other Grounding Ideas

- **Imagine your thoughts as leaves floating on a stream.** They arrive, are present for a while, and then float away. You do not have to do anything but watch them pass.
- **Imagine your thoughts as a song or television show.** Change the channel or turn off the volume — they’re still there, but you don’t have to listen to or watch them.
- **Use math.** Count backwards from 100. To challenge yourself, count backwards by threes or sevens.
- **Orient to time and place.** “Today is Friday, June 3. It’s 10:04 in the morning. I am in Chicago.” You can add more specific details until you feel calm, such as, “It’s raining lightly, but I can still see the sun. It’s 30 minutes until the break time.”
- **Plan an activity.** This might be something you do alone or with a friend or loved one. Think of what you’ll do and when. Maybe you’ll go to dinner, take a walk in a park, see a movie to which you’ve been looking forward, or visit a special place. Focus on the details, such as what you’ll wear, when you’ll go, and how you’ll get there.
- **Read.** Let your mind go somewhere else in a book, a story or magazine article.
- **Let time pass.** Most emotion comes and goes in waves. Be patient. Wait for the storm to subside.

Tune into spiritual and emotional strengths and support

People get strength from within themselves and from their community. Remember your strengths and resources.

- **Imagine supportive people** standing nearby in loving support. They can be miles away or from the past. Let their caring endure and be present in these difficult times. Picture their faces. Feel their presence. Tune into the love you have known.

- **Imagine the voice or face of someone** who is or was a positive influence in your life. Imagine them smiling at you. Imagine them telling you that the moment is tough, but that you will be ok. Feel their presence with you.
- **Recite** a prayer, mantra or phrase that can soothe, reassure and uplift you. Silently say the words, keeping your focus on its meaning for you.
- **Connect** to whatever Higher Power is meaningful to you. If you are part of a spiritual or supportive community, feel that connection as a network of caring.
- **Become aware of the “Big Picture.”** Imagine the Universe in all its complexity and history. You are a significant part of that.
- **Practice gratitude:** List all the things for which you are grateful. You may want to keep a gratitude jar filled with these notes. Pull out a slip of paper when you are feeling shaky; read it and remember all for which you are thankful!
- **Create a safe place image** based on a real or imagined place. It could be in the presence of a religious being, an ideal vacation spot or a place where you have felt safe and secure. Think of the colors you see, the sounds you hear, and the sensations you feel on your skin. Remember the last time you were there. Who were you with, if anyone? What did you do there? How did you feel? Recall that image when you feel stressed. Take yourself back to a place of comfort and solace.
- **Practice self-kindness.** Repeat kind, compassionate phrases to yourself. Say them as many times as you need.
 - “You are a good person.”
 - “You’re having a rough time, but you’ll make it through.”
 - “You can move through this pain.”
 - “You’re trying hard, and you’re doing your best.”
 - “You’ll get through this somehow.”
- **Acceptance. Acceptance of reality is not approval of reality.** You may still not like what is going on, and wish it were not happening. Accepting the situation as it is, allows you to plan how to wisely respond. There will be many things out of your control, so it’s important and helpful to focus on what you can control.
- **Imagine that you may become a stronger person because of these difficulties.** As a result of great challenge, some people become more aware of their own inner strengths, have closer relationships, are aware of the importance of day to day blessings, or discover new priorities. How have you grown as a result of tragedy?
- **Put it all together.**

Say to yourself:

 - “Let my arms feel heavy and relaxed.
 - Let my legs feel heavy and relaxed.
 - Let my breathing be gentle and even.
 - Let my mind become calm and quiet.
 - Let me be present in this moment.
 - I can do this.”

How to Practice

Practice your favorite techniques several days in advance of an upcoming stressful situation. Try out at least three techniques and practice them five or more times. Each practice may only take a few minutes, but you will gain confidence as you become more skilled at and comfortable with each technique. Practice them so they are easy to remember when you really need them. Practice when you are only slightly worried about something, not when you are super stressed. Start with ordinary unpleasant feelings and work up to the hardest, most horrible feelings. Then when a feeling is unexpected or overwhelming, you will know what to do in the moment, because you have practiced.

Start early. Try doing a grounding exercise when you first start to feel bad. Don't wait for distress to reach a level that's harder to handle. If the technique doesn't work at first, try to stick with it for a bit before moving on to another.

Check in with yourself. Before and after a grounding exercise, rate your distress as a number between 1 and 10. What level is your distress when you begin? How much did it decrease after the exercise? This can help you get a better idea of whether a particular technique is working for you. Take a moment to self-review, look back and see what helped you.

Prepare for the unexpected wave of feeling. You may be able to predict the onset of some feelings, like when you hear someone talking about what happened, or near an anniversary date. Other waves come as a surprise. Only afterwards you may realize what brought on the strong emotion.

If you feel the beginning of intense emotion, do not try to push it away. Fear of the feeling can intensify things. It is better to say to yourself, "This too is here. I can feel a wave of emotion rising. It is okay to not be okay. It is okay to have strong feelings. I can remember to breathe my way through it. If I let time pass, this feeling will pass if I don't feed it." "Let me stay in the present moment".