Which Grounding Tool Do I Need?

PRACTICE · MATCHING THE TOOL TO THE MOMENT

Grounding refers to simple strategies that shift attention away from overwhelming feelings and towards the present moment and your surroundings (Najavits, 2002). No single technique suits every state: something that settles a racing body may not help when you feel numb or far away. Use the tree to find a starting point, then notice what actually helps you.

Pause. What is happening in me right now?

Notice your body, your thoughts and your energy. Choose the closest match; states often mix or change.

Is my body speeding up? **yes ↓**

Do I feel numb, distant or unreal? **yes ↓**

Am I caught in a loop of thinking? **yes ↓**

Is there too much coming at me at once? **yes ↓**

Racing or over-activated

I MIGHT NOTICE

- heart pounding, breathing fast
- restless, tense, keyed up
- thoughts speeding up
- irritable or on edge

TRY

Orienting
Let your eyes move slowly around the room. Rest them on a few things you can see.

Slower breathing
Breathe a little more slowly, with the out-breath a little longer than the in-breath.

Muscle release
Tense your hands or shoulders for a few seconds, then let go and notice the change.

If watching your breath makes it worse, switch to orienting.

Disconnected or far away

I MIGHT NOTICE

- numb, flat or foggy
- things feel unreal or distant
- losing track of time
- heavy, slowed or shut down

TRY

Sensory
Hold something with texture, smell something strong, or run cool water over your hands.

Movement
Stand up, press your feet into the floor, stretch or walk around.

Environmental orientation
Say where you are, the date, and three things you can see.

Keep your eyes open; choose alerting over calming.

Stuck in my thoughts

I MIGHT NOTICE

- replaying, looping or worrying
- lost inside my head
- hard to notice the room
- "what if…?" or "why did I…?"

TRY

External attention
Describe one object in detail: colour, shape, texture, light.

Sensory grounding
Name five things you see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell, one you can taste.

Listen outward
Find the furthest sound you can hear, then the closest.

The thoughts may return. Gently bring attention back each time.

Overwhelmed

I MIGHT NOTICE

- too much at once
- can't think where to start
- frozen or flooded
- on the edge of tears or shutting off

TRY

Simplify
Shrink the horizon to the next ten minutes. Turn down noise, screens or demands where you can.

One immediate action
Choose one small, doable thing: sit down, drink water, open one window, write one line.

Then the next one
When that is done, choose the next small step, or rest.

Small and done beats big and planned.

1 Notice
Which branch fits best right now? A rough guess is fine.

→ **2 Try one tool**
Give it one or two minutes. Go gently; it doesn't need to be done perfectly.

→ **3 Check and adjust**
Better, the same, or worse? If it isn't helping, try another tool or branch.

How I might know it's helping

- ○ I can feel my feet or the chair
- ○ The room feels clearer
- ○ My breathing is steadier
- ○ I can think a little more clearly
- ○ I can choose what to do next
- ○ The feeling is still there, but more manageable

Not sure where to start? Orienting is a gentle first step for many people: look around slowly and name what you see.

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01 My own grounding tree

STATE	HOW I CAN TELL IT'S HAPPENING TO ME	MY FIRST-CHOICE TOOL	MY BACKUP
Racing or over-activated			
Disconnected or far away			
Stuck in my thoughts			
Overwhelmed			

02 Grounding practice log

WHEN	WHAT I NOTICED	BRANCH	TOOL I TRIED	BEFORE	AFTER	FIT
		R D S O		___ /10	___ /10	○ better ○ same ○ worse
		R D S O		___ /10	___ /10	○ better ○ same ○ worse
		R D S O		___ /10	___ /10	○ better ○ same ○ worse
		R D S O		___ /10	___ /10	○ better ○ same ○ worse
		R D S O		___ /10	___ /10	○ better ○ same ○ worse
		R D S O		___ /10	___ /10	○ better ○ same ○ worse

Branch: R racing · D disconnected · S stuck in thoughts · O overwhelmed · **Before and after:** how intense, 0–10

03 Reflection

What tends to help me most, and in which state

What didn't help, or made things harder

Bring to my next session

questions, patterns, a tool I'd like to practise

A note on the evidence. Grounding is widely used in trauma-informed therapy, but research on individual grounding techniques is still limited, so treat these as starting points rather than prescriptions. Slow breathing has been linked with calmer physiological and emotional states, mostly in small studies of healthy adults (Zaccaro et al., 2018). Thinking of states as over- or under-activated draws on the idea of the window of tolerance (Siegel, 1999; Ogden et al., 2006), and choosing and adjusting strategies to fit the moment reflects research on regulatory flexibility (Bonanno & Burton, 2013).

A note of care. If grounding isn't enough, you often lose time, or you feel unsafe, please tell your clinician. Contact emergency services if you are in immediate danger.

SOURCES

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