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# ADVOCACY SKILLS

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## GROUNDING

### WHAT IS GROUNDING AND WHY IS IT HELPFUL?

Grounding is the feeling of being present and connected in the here and now.

Trauma can make survivors feel lost in time and space or overwhelmed by their emotions. Grounding is helpful when survivors are triggered, leading them to re-experience parts of a traumatic incident. In that moment survivors are caught in the past. Grounding lessens the distress of flashbacks and helps to bring survivors back into the present.

**Our Advocacy Skills series** includes discrete tools that you can use in your work with adult survivors of child sexual abuse to meet each individual's unique needs. This resource is not designed to be used by survivors, but instead to help advocates develop skills. As you develop this skill it will become an ingrained part of your advocacy practice and you will no longer need this resource to prompt your practice.

Grounding is also a helpful tool for survivors to use in situations that could be triggering. By diverting their attention away from the potential trigger, they are able to minimize the impact of it. For example, a survivor could use grounding techniques to focus on other aspects of an examining room during a gynecological exam in order to get through the exam, a potentially triggering experience.

Grounding is also helpful when dissociation begins to happen outside of a survivor's control. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse have years or decades of coping with the trauma of child sexual abuse.

Many survivors have effectively used dissociation as a coping mechanism to numb themselves, so they don't experience the terror and the horror of trauma in the moment of the abuse. Years after the abusive incidents have ended, dissociation is still a great coping tool when the adult survivor feels overwhelmed or unsafe. However, dissociation can reduce present day awareness and participation in daily life. Grounding can help survivors be more present, have here-and-now awareness and utilize present-day resources.

## **HOW CAN ADVOCATES HELP SURVIVORS GROUND THEMSELVES?**

Whether you are working with someone on the phone, via video, or in person, you can walk a survivor through a few exercises to help them become and remain present. Always check in with survivors about their physical abilities and the resources or limitations of their environment, and adapt the grounding techniques you use accordingly. For example, survivors who are incarcerated will be limited in the grounding tools they can access.

Some adult survivors of child sexual abuse cope by distancing and disconnecting from their body. This is important to note before walking a survivor through a grounding technique, as it may be harder for them to physically find and sense their own bodies. Checking in is as simple as asking if they feel connected to their body or if they would feel more comfortable using a grounding technique that involves deep breathing exercises or using their senses to identify objects in the room.

Help the survivor to use their breathing to help ground them.

- You do this by asking the survivor to notice their breathing. There's no need to control it at first; just notice it.
- Ask them to take a slow deep breath through their nose and hold it for 2 to 3 seconds and release breath slowly through their mouth. Ask the survivor to try to totally fill their belly with breath and then totally empty it.
  - » Sometimes people get dizzy or lightheaded when they start using this technique. That's okay! If that happens, the survivor can take a few normal breaths before taking another deep one.
- Once you feel they are starting to focus on their breathing see if you can get them to breath in as they do a mental count. Breathe in through their nose, as they do a mental count to 4, hold it for a count of 4 and release it through their mouth for a mental count to 8.
- There are GIFs and phone apps that provide an image to focus on and time the breath.
- Repeat this exercise as needed for the survivor to become more present.

Ask the survivor to notice how their body feels and focus on parts of their body as you guide them. (**Cautionary note:** this is not a technique to use for adult survivors of child sexual abuse who cope through distancing and disconnecting from their body.)

- Ask them to focus on their feet and notice how their feet feel on the floor.
- Ask them to focus on their legs and how they feel against the chair they are sitting in.
- Ask them to focus on their back and how their back feels against the back of the chair
- Ask them to focus on their arms and how their arms feel on the chair.

The part of the mind that is focusing is only in the present moment, and is only noticing. You can explain to the survivor that no matter how big their emotions are or no matter how bad the flashback might be, there is a part of their mind that is only in the present moment.

Ask survivors to notice their senses and ask them questions based on their senses.

- **Sight** – look around; name some present-day sights that are a particular color or shape and then connect with them. “I see a red ball. I squeeze this red ball when I get nervous.” They can also look at objects in their environment that help them reconnect to the present. You can ask them to identify 3 blue objects in the room, 2 square things that they can see, and connect to them by asking whose are those things? Or for example, “This is my shirt. It’s an adult size shirt. That means I am an adult now.”
- **Sound** – listen for present-day sounds and name them. What is that sound connected to in your life now? For example, ask what the noise is – a dog barking – and whether they know the dog’s name or owner.
- **Taste** – give a survivor a candy or gum they like (they can carry this with them as part of a grounding kit) or you can give a survivor a cup of tea or soda. Ask them what it tastes like or how it tastes.
- **Smell** – use comforting smells like scented candles or incense and ask the survivor what it smells like to them and how do they like it?
- **Touch** – Ask a survivor to run their hands under cold water, hold a fuzzy blanket or pet a cat or dog and describe how it feels. Emotional support animals are perfect for this sense. You can continue this grounding exercise by asking the survivor “who’s is this?”

Facts about the present day can help ground a survivor who is experiencing a flashback. Invite them to look at a calendar or clock and note the day and time. You can also ask survivors the date and if they remember where they are and if they remember who you are.

Focus skills that distract can help after these grounding exercises if survivors are still struggling. Advocates can use the alphabet to help survivors focus, by asking survivors to identify objects in the room that start with each letter of the alphabet or name a country, state, city or town for each letter of the alphabet. The kind of focus required to do this can help survivors release the remnants of a flashback, dissociative state or keep their focus away from something they are trying to avoid.

## TIPS TO CONSIDER

1. Practice grounding techniques with other advocates, friends, or family before helping a survivor.
2. Worry stones and beaded bracelets are great objects for survivors to use that allows them to fidget with, focus on, and feel in an effort to ground themselves in the present. Providing these to survivors (or making them together!) would be a great strategy to help survivors ground themselves on their own and as a reminder of the support they are getting to you program.
3. A grounding kit might also be helpful for the survivor to create and carry with them. That way they have belongings with meaning that enable more connection for the survivor. Items that might be included in the kit might be a cell phone for sight or sound, scented lotion or essential oils for smell, candies or gum for taste, a stone or ball for touch. These should all be things the survivor has positive connections to. Remember to take into account the survivor's physical abilities when guiding them through the development of a grounding kit.
4. It's important when working with survivors that you remain as present and attentive as possible. These grounding exercises can be helpful to you before or after you've been working with survivors throughout your day to manage your emotions.
5. Survivors can use this technique on their own. We've developed a tip sheet for survivors to walk through these grounding techniques. It might be helpful to walk them through the tip sheet before they use it on their own.

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