

Wellness Tips

Grounding for Tolerating Emotional Distress

Just like wires need grounding to prevent the dangerous discharge of electricity, we humans can benefit from a similar idea so our emotions don't leak out of us in unhelpful ways when we are feeling emotionally overloaded. Grounding can be used to anchor yourself to the present moment & calm your system, thus increasing the likelihood of having your rational brain come online, gaining clarity about what is happening, and finding an effective course of action for dealing with the distressing situation.

Grounding itself - as a Distress Tolerance skill - will not make the situation go away, but it can give you the mental space you need to choose a course of action that decreases the chance of making the situation worse.

There are many ways to ground yourself, and you are encouraged to play around with a variety of strategies to figure out what works well for you. Experiment and practice in everyday life so you know what helps and feels good. In the midst of emotional overload is NOT the time to be figuring it out!

Grounding strategies are loosely categorized in the following ways, although know that sometimes a strategy fits multiple categories.

Cognitive Grounding: Choosing a mental task that 1) requires your FULL attention in order to complete successfully, and 2) is UNRELATED to the situation causing distress.

Examples –

- Trying to remember the state capitols
- Doing multiplication tables
- Playing a categories game (e.g., naming all animals you can think of that start with the letter 'P')
- Trying to remember all the countries on a specific continent
- Doing a challenging sudoku puzzle, word find, or crossword puzzle

Physical Grounding: Getting into your body and engaging one (or multiple) sensory systems. Be fully present in your body as you focus on the current sensation.

Examples –

- Doing a 5-senses mindfulness minute
 - Sight - notice five things you see around you (colors, book titles, textures, etc)
 - Touch - describe four things you feel (shirt on your body, feet on the ground, etc.)
 - Sound – name three things you can hear in your environment (internal or external)
 - Smell – identify any specific aromas around you
 - Taste – notice if there's a specific taste you can identify
- Engaging in slow deep breathing, being fully present with the inhalation and exhalation
- Listening to music that doesn't reinforce your distress and hum/sing along, noticing the nuance of the melody and instruments involved
- Taking a walk, being present with your senses and in your body
- Stretching your body, observing what that feels like
- Giving yourself a hand massage or scalp massage, noticing the sensations

Soothing Grounding: Doing something that is an expression of care and kindness to yourself, which helps you to calm down.

Examples –

- Repeating a favorite quote, mantra, or prayer with words of encouragement
- Cuddling up under your favorite blanket, noticing what that feels like
- Lighting a candle with a scent you enjoy
- Closing your eyes and visualizing your favorite place or a safe/calming/soothing space
- Looking at photos of your favorite places, people, and things
- Placing a hand over your heart, noticing the warmth and weight of it while you take slow deep breaths

Grounding is one set of Distress Tolerance skills that people find helpful. Everybody is different. You won't know what works until you try some out. See if you can collect a number of strategies that work because you won't always have access to the same one in every situation. Once you find some that feel good, stick them in your wellness toolbox to pull out when useful.

If you would like to talk with someone about how to manage emotional distress, or for any other questions or concerns, feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment.

Check out the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

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Remember, life is really hard at times - be gentle with yourself!

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Pronouns: she/her