**Tool: Grounding**

**Goals:** to increase awareness in the here and now; to facilitate clear reality contact; to reduce posttraumatic experiences (i.e., flashbacks, hypervigilance, and intrusive recollections) and to reduce dissociative experiences (i.e., spontaneous trance, depersonalization, time loss, and uncontrolled switching).

**Ideas:**

1. **Present focused awareness** is important for combating the avoidance that occurs through dissociation (spontaneous trance, uncontrolled switching, time loss, and depersonalization) and traumatic stress adaptations (numbing, avoidance, flashbacks, nightmares, and panic). If you are paying attention to the here and now, then you are less likely to be lost in the past with no awareness of present-day resources. In addition, you are also less likely to be caught up in fearful thoughts about the future. In the past, dissociation may have been the only defense against trauma; leaving the body was a helpful skill back then. It was too painful and/or dangerous for you to focus on experiences as they happened. In the present, however, shutting thoughts and feelings out or leaving your body re-creates the old fears and might make you feel just like you did as a child. Present focused awareness is your defense against becoming trapped in the hopeless and helpless feelings of the past.

2. **Grounding** is the process of being present and connected in the here and now. Stress responses can numb people so they don’t experience the terror and the horror of trauma in the moment. Dissociation and numbing continue to reduce present awareness in an attempt to protect against overwhelming traumatic events and experiences. However, over time, the process of dissociation and numbing may fail or may interfere with everyday life. Survivors become aware of stress responses such as flashbacks. Dissociation and numbing were wartime survival techniques, and using wartime strategies during peacetime is not effective. Dissociation may have helped you to manage the unmanageable, but as an adult in peacetime, you need life skills rather than survival skills. Just like war veterans with PTSD who struggle to cope with peacetime living, you need to learn how to manage intense, overwhelming experiences in more present-focused ways.

*B. had a traumatic childhood. He witnessed terrible fights between his parents and had to protect his brothers and sisters from his father. He was always afraid when he heard people yelling because to him it meant danger in*
his house. He used to “fade away” (trance out) whenever the yelling would start so that he wouldn’t have to be scared. Now, as an adult, B. can’t go anywhere that might expose him to yelling because he becomes terrified and “fades away” (trances out) almost automatically. B.’s inability to manage his reactions to yelling severely restricts his life because he can’t be around his children when they yell, and he can’t enjoy things like ball games because of the yelling. Sometimes he hears yelling in his head, and he can’t stop himself from fading away. B.’s posttraumatic experiences (flashbacks) and wartime coping mechanisms (fading away) are interfering with his peacetime life.

B. can do several things to help himself. The first thing is to begin using grounding tools with self-talk. B. will need to practice the tools almost constantly in order to combat the automatic numbing and dissociation that takes over when he is “triggered” by the yelling.
Grounding Worksheet 1

Using Your Five Senses

- **Sight**—open your eyes; look around; name present-day sights; connect with them ("this is my driver's license," etc.); realize that you're an adult; look at how tall you are
- **Sound**—listen for present-day sounds and name them; let them bring you closer to the present; talk to yourself inside; say comforting things
- **Taste**—suck on a peppermint; chew gum; drink coffee; use tastes that are connected with being safe and being an adult; carry these things with you at all times
- **Smell**—use scented hand lotion, potpourri, a cotton ball soaked with perfume, or scented candles to remind you of the present, carry something with you that you can use anywhere
- **Touch**—hold a safe object; feel textures and let them bring you closer to the present; pet your cat or dog (or parrot!); connect with a loving presence in your life and let it help you remain in the present; carry a note or small object from someone you love

Items to Use for Grounding Yourself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sight</th>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>Smell</th>
<th>Taste</th>
<th>Touch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>watch or clock</td>
<td>soothing music</td>
<td>scented candle</td>
<td>peppermint</td>
<td>lotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>photograph</td>
<td>nature sounds</td>
<td>potpourri</td>
<td>cinnamon</td>
<td>a stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outdoors</td>
<td>familiar sounds</td>
<td>scented lotion</td>
<td>lemon</td>
<td>ice cube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>driver's license</td>
<td>your voice</td>
<td>essential oils</td>
<td>chewing gum</td>
<td>pets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List some of the things you can do to get grounded using your five senses.

**Sight** (Example)—When B. hears his children yelling, he can look at them and tell himself, "These are my kids, and it's natural for kids to yell; they are safe."

**Sound**—B. can learn to listen to the noise to identify what kind of yelling he's hearing. He can tell himself, "Those people are cheering. They are happy and excited. They aren't in danger."

**Taste**—B. likes the taste of cinnamon gum. He carries it with himself all of the time and can focus on the taste of the gum to help him feel more grounded.

**Smell**—B.'s wife uses Snuggle fabric softener in the laundry. When he plays with his kids, the smell of their clothes helps keep him focused on the present.

**Touch**—B. keeps a smooth piece of hematite rock in his pocket. He holds it when he feels scared.
What Are the Stress Responses that Interfere with Grounding? Why Do They Happen?

- Spontaneous trance (zoning out), switching, age regression (thinking you are getting little), flashbacks, hypervigilance (being on guard), numbing, and avoidance interfere with grounding by reducing self awareness and awareness of the present environment. People with traumatic stress responses or dissociation usually experience these processes when they feel frightened or threatened in some way. The reactions may happen so often that they feel like a normal part of life.

Why Should I Consider Other Kinds of Coping?

- Using dissociation to cope with present stressors frequently brings up the same feelings and perceptions you had in the past, making it hard to know that things are different today.
- The traumatic connections that come up when you use old coping mechanisms (dissociation or numbing) also interfere with problem solving in the present.
- Your posttraumatic reactions can make you feel threatened even when you aren’t actually threatened. The old ways of coping (dissociation or numbing) might make the feeling of threat stronger.
- If you remain focused in the past or fearful about the future, you may not be able to tell the difference between what you feel and what is really happening. You won’t be able to remember that things are different now that you have helpers and resources. Remember that shutting things out today can increase the traumatic stress responses you will have later. Work to stay in the moment, right here, right now.
- Dissociation can keep a person emotionally trapped in the past. Dissociation interferes with emotional growth. This, in turn, makes it very difficult to have healthy relationships.
- Dissociation becomes problematic, and new coping skills need to be developed.

How Will I Know When I'm Having Traumatic Stress Responses?

- Learning about your stress responses will help you recognize them. Pay attention to yourself.
- Spontaneous trance may feel like you are fading or going away; like you are disappearing, disconnecting, or zoning out. You may also feel like you aren’t real, or the world isn’t real, or that you are drugged.
- Switching may feel like something or someone else is taking over, like you are slipping away, like you are moving out of the “hot spot,” or like
someone else inside is in control now. It may seem that there is a gap in what just happened or that you are filling in the blanks, picking up in the middle of things.

- Age regression may make you feel as if you are getting little or younger; everything else is getting big; your clothes don't fit; your hands appear too big; you feel helpless or very young and unable to talk. People may ask you, "What just happened?"
- Flashbacks may make you feel like you are experiencing some part of the trauma again. Initially it is common to experience flashbacks as intense emotions or physical pains that do not seem connected to anything in the present or past. You may be seeing (in your mind or in the environment) or hearing things related to trauma even though those things are not currently present in the environment (e.g. you hear the voice of your abuser even though he or she has been dead for years). You may be feeling physical pains that have no medical source, or smell things no one else smells.
- Hypervigilance feels like being on guard, needing to keep track of everything going on around you, jumping at every sound, or watching for the threat that you feel is there. This adaptation can make you feel threatened even when you are safe.
- Numbing may make you feel like you are separated from your body, or as if you have no body or no feelings.
- Avoidance may make you feel like you have to get away or ignore something. You may feel like you just can't deal with or discuss something; it's the wrong thing to do.

**Skills**

*What Should You Do When You Are Having a Traumatic Stress Response or a Dissociative Experience?*

- Grounding techniques are the methods used to increase mindfulness. They help you keep track of what is really going on inside yourself and in the environment. The basic tools will help you to know the following:

  - **Who** you are—you are an adult in an adult body
  - **Where** you are—location in the present
  - **When** you are—the present day and date

  If you can answer these questions and connect with the answers, you are less likely to lose track of the differences between the past and the present. This is important because you will be less likely to have a flashback and will have fewer dissociative experiences.
It is important to be able to focus on present reality no matter how you are feeling or what part of yourself is in control. In this way, you will be grounded when you are happy, sad, angry, feeling little, or in a different identity state. This will help you to control disruptive experiences and have a more satisfying life. Without grounding, you can feel like a real free-for-all inside, and sometimes outside too.