Grounding Strategies for Dissociative & Post-Traumatic Symptoms


Grounding techniques aim to keep you in contact with current reality rather than reliving and feeling overwhelmed by thoughts, feelings and events associated with past traumatic experiences. Grounding will assist with regulation of affect (feelings).

Maintain good lighting

In the wake of a traumatic event, people can often withdraw to beds, closets or other dark, dimly lit or confined places without environmental cues (e.g. clocks, calendars) as a way of coping. However, this tends to be more likely to trigger dissociative experiences and so remaining in well lit places that are less isolated is recommended.

Orientation to present (if trauma is in the past) or current safe place

Remind yourself of the date, time of day, and place where you are.

Visual contact with cues in the environment

Focus on your physical environment, familiar safe people and objects.

Remind others to use a calm reassuring tone of voice at near normal pitch and volume

Remind others to avoid rhythmic, soothing cadences (sounding hypnotic or trance inducing) which may promote dissociative experiences.

Maintain eye contact (where possible and safe)

It is impossible to remain in a dissociated dysphoric state and maintain interpersonal eye contact. If you have a trusted relationship, eye contact can facilitate interpersonal connection. Severely traumatised people have difficulty with eye contact (fearing anger or hatred seen in eyes of perpetrators). If you are having trouble with eye contact, try looking at objects in the room or a non-threatening part of the person you are with (not associated with traumatic re-experiencing, for example hair, shirt).

Identify and develop awareness of environmental cues, experiences and body memories which trigger the re-experiencing

This will enable you to use calming or grounding strategies in the presence of such cues.
Allow yourself to control pacing of a counselling/therapeutic session

If you are seeking counselling to assist you with your trauma response, remember that you have a right to continuously monitor the pacing of the session. Track the emotions you experience and the intensity of these emotions and give continuous feedback about pacing of interventions. A useful strategy is to rate (from 1 to 100) your comfort, feelings of readiness, feelings of safety, confidence etc and communicate this to your counsellor. This will prevent premature and potentially re-traumatising interventions.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.