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Welcome to the Coping Skills & Grounding Techniques Workshop

*IT'S A
GOOD DAY
TO TEACH
COPING
SKILLS*

Goals

To learn more about practical coping and grounding skills

To learn more about triggers

To become more aware of trauma responses

To create a safe and supportive environment for sharing

Defining Trauma

Trauma can be defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It can result from a single event, a series of events, or a set of circumstances that is physically or emotionally harmful. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma can have lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (American Psychological Association, 2021).

Effects of Trauma on the Brain and Body

Trauma significantly impacts the brain and body. Research has shown that trauma can alter brain structures and functions. The amygdala, which is responsible for processing emotions, becomes hyperactive. The hippocampus, which is involved in memory formation, can shrink, affecting the ability to distinguish between past and present experiences. The prefrontal cortex, which helps with decision-making and impulse control, may also be impaired.

Physiologically, trauma activates the body's stress response system, leading to a range of physical symptoms:

- **Increased Heart Rate:** Trauma can lead to a persistent increase in heart rate, even when a person is not actively experiencing a traumatic event,
- **Elevated Blood Pressure:** Trauma can cause a chronic increase in blood pressure due to the body's prolonged stress response,
- **Muscle Tension and Pain:** Many people with trauma histories experience chronic muscle tension and pain, particularly in the neck, shoulders, and back,
- **Gastrointestinal Issues:** Trauma can impact the digestive system, leading to symptoms such as stomachaches, nausea, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS),
- **Weakened Immune System:** Chronic stress and trauma can weaken the immune system, making individuals more susceptible to infections and illnesses,
- **Sleep Disturbances:** Trauma often leads to difficulties with sleep, including insomnia, nightmares, and restless sleep. Poor sleep quality can further exacerbate other physical and mental health issues,
- **Changes in Appetite and Weight:** Trauma can cause changes in appetite, leading to weight loss or gain. This can be a result of emotional eating, changes in metabolism, or stress-related hormonal imbalances (Van der Kolk, 2014)

The 'fight, flight, or freeze' response is triggered, releasing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Over time, chronic activation of this stress response can lead to various health issues, such as anxiety, depression, cardiovascular problems, and weakened immune function.

Common Trauma Responses

People respond to trauma in different ways, often categorized into four primary responses:

Response	Description	Source
Fight	This response involves confronting the perceived threat, which can manifest as anger, irritability, or aggression.	Lang et al., 2000
Flight	This is the urge to escape from the threat, leading to avoidance behaviors, anxiety, or restlessness.	Bracha, Ralston, Matsukawa, Williams, & Bracha, 2004
Freeze	In this response, an individual may feel paralyzed or unable to act, often accompanied by feelings of helplessness or dissociation.	Shauer & Elbert, 2010
Fawn	This response involved attempting to please or appease the threat to avoid conflict which can result in people-pleasing behaviors or difficulty setting boundaries.	Walker, 2013

Understanding these responses can help us recognize how trauma manifests in ourselves and others. Knowing that these reactions are natural responses to abnormal situations can be reassuring and validating. Understanding these responses also allows us to know better how to cope and manage these responses.

Introduction to Coping Strategies

Triggers are specific events, situations, or stimuli that cause a strong emotional reaction, often related to past trauma (American Psychological Association, 2021). Identifying and understanding our triggers is a crucial step in managing our responses to them.

Identifying Triggers

Triggers can vary greatly from person to person and can include sights, sounds, smells, places, or even specific words or topics. Recognizing these triggers is the first step towards managing them. Here are some common categories of triggers (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020).

- **Sensory Triggers:** These are related to the senses, such as a specific smell, sound, or visual cue that reminds an individual of a past traumatic event.
- **Emotional Triggers:** These include specific feelings or emotional states that can remind someone of past trauma.
- **Situational Triggers:** These are related to specific situations or environments that can evoke a traumatic memory.
- **Relational Triggers:** These involve interactions with others that can remind a person of past trauma. For example, arguments or conflicts in relationships can trigger memories of past interpersonal traumas (Cloitre et al., 2011).

- Internal Triggers: These are related to internal states such as thoughts, memories, or physical sensations. For example, a rapid heartbeat or feeling of dizziness can trigger panic attacks in someone with a history of trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Activity: Create a Personalized Coping Plan

We will now create a personalized coping plan for triggers which will be a nice addition to our grounding kits which we will create later. For now, I would like each of you to retrieve a piece of paper and a writing utensil.

1. First I would like you to consider some triggers you have identified in your life. Feel free to write some of them down.
2. Now look at the list of your identified triggers, what are some coping strategies you could use when faced with these triggers.
3. Finally, write down a support person or a few that you can reach out to in times of need.

Strategy	Description	Reference
Mindfulness Practices	Encourage practices like mindful breathing, mindful walking, or mindful eating. This can help individuals stay grounded in the present moment and reduce anxiety and stress.	Kabat-Zinn, 1990
Physical Activity	Regular physical activity can significantly reduce stress. Activities like walking, running, yoga, or dancing can help manage stress.	Craft & Perna, 2004
Art	Engaging in creative activities such as drawing, painting, or crafting can provide an emotional outlet and reduce stress.	Stuckey & Nobel, 2010
Writing/ Journaling	Keeping a journal to express thoughts and feelings can help process emotions and reduce anxiety and stress.	Pennebaker & Chung, 2011
Support Groups	Joining support groups where individuals can share their experiences and coping strategies can foster a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation.	Yalom & Leszcz, 2005
Self-Soothing Statements	Using positive affirmations and kind self-talk can help reduce self-criticism and promote a sense of well-being.	Neff, 2003
Gentle Activities	Engaging in Activities that bring comfort and joy, such as taking a warm bath, reading a favorite book, or spending time in nature can help soothe and calm the mind.	Gilbert, 2010

Introduction to Grounding Techniques

Grounding techniques are strategies designed to help individuals bring their focus to the present moment. These techniques are particularly useful when someone feels overwhelmed by distressing emotions, flashbacks, or anxiety. Grounding helps to break the cycle of negative thoughts and emotions, allowing a person to feel more centered and in control.

So, why are grounding techniques important? They can be an essential part of managing stress and trauma responses. They can:

- Help reduce symptoms of anxiety and panic.
- Provide immediate relief during moments of intense emotional distress.
- Improve the ability to focus and engage in daily activities.
- Enhance overall emotional regulation and resilience.

There are three different types of practical grounding activities: physical, mental, and soothing.

Practical Grounding Exercises

Now, we will look at several grounding techniques as well as practice a few of them together.

1. Physical Grounding Techniques:

- a. Temperature Change
 - i. Fill a bowl with cold water and another with warm water (not hot).
 - ii. Place your hands in the cold water for 30 seconds, then switch to the warm water for 30 seconds
 - Rationale: The contrast between cold and warm sensations can be very grounding and help divert focus from distressing thoughts (Craig, 2002)
- b. Vagus Nerve Stimulation through Cold Exposure
 - i. Splash cold water on the face or,
 - ii. Hold an ice back against the chest or back of the neck.
 - Rationale: Cold exposure can stimulate the vagus nerve, which helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting a state of calm and reducing the body's stress response (Breit et al., 2018).
- c. 5-4-3-2-1 Technique
 - i. Look around the room and name five things you can see.
 - ii. Focus on four things you can feel (e.g., the chair you're sitting on, the texture of your clothing).
 - iii. Listen for three sounds you can hear.
 - iv. Identify two things you can smell.
 - v. Notice one thing you can taste.
 - Rationale: This technique engages all five senses, bringing focus to the present moment and away from distressing thoughts (van der Kolk, 2014).
- d. Tactile Grounding with Texture Exploration
 - i. Gather a variety of small objects with different textures (e.g., a smooth stone, a rough piece of sandpaper, a soft piece of fabric).

- ii. Spend a few minutes exploiting the texture of each object, noting how each feel against your skin.
- Rationale: Focusing on different textures can provide a strong sensory input that helps you ground in the present moment (Field, 2010).
- e. Planted Grounding
 - i. Dig your heels into the floor.
 - ii. Notice the tension centered in your heels as you do this.
 - iii. Remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
- Rationale: connecting oneself to the earth/ ground can remind you where you are and keep you, literally, grounded.
- f. Grounding Object
 - i. Choose a small object (e.g., a stone, piece of jewelry, or a stress ball).
 - ii. Focus on the object's texture, weight color, and temperature.
 - iii. Hold it in your hand and describe it in detail to yourself.
- Rationale: Focusing on a physical object helps anchor your mind to the present and can be calming (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006)

2. Mental Grounding Techniques:

- a. Puzzles, Games, Problem-Solving
 - i. Do a puzzle, complete a crossword, play sudoku, play a logic game on your phone.
 - ii. Spend a few minutes solving these problems or playing these logic games when you feel distressed.
- Rationale: Engaging in logical problem-solving tasks can distract the mind from emotional distress (Najavits, 2002).
- b. Alphabet Game
 - i. Choose a broad category (e.g., brands, countries, types of trees)
 - ii. Name an item in that category for each letter of the alphabet (e.g., A for apple, B for banana, etc.).
- Rationale: This activity shifts focus from emotional distress to a structured mental task (Linehan, 2014).
- c. Counting backwards
 - i. Start at 100 and count backward by threes (100, 97, 94, etc.).
 - ii. Focus on the numbers and the process of subtracting.
- Rationale: This activity requires concentration and distracts the mind from distressing thoughts (Najavits, 2002).
- d. Saying Words of Song
 - i. Choose a song that you know well.
 - ii. Either sing or say the lyrics out loud.
 - iii. Focus on the words and the melody.
- Rationale: This activity engages the auditory and verbal parts of the brain, requiring concentration and helping to divert attention from distressing thoughts. Singing and speaking familiar lyrics can also stimulate memory and cognitive processes, providing a grounding effect (Thaut, 2005).

3. Soothing Grounding Techniques

a. Safe Place Visualization

- i. Close your eyes (or softly focus on the floor if you are uncomfortable closing them)
- ii. Listen to a guided audio on how to create your safe place.
- iii. Imagine a place where you feel safe and relaxed (e.g., a beach, forest, or cozy room).
- iv. Use all of your senses to make the visualization vivid: What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel?
- v. You can store this place in your mind to return to in the future.

➤ Rationale: Visualization can create a sense of calm and safety, helping to counteract feelings of distress (Singer, 1974).

b. Bi-Lateral Stimulation

- i. Cross your arms over your chest and alternate tapping each shoulder with the opposite hand.
- ii. Continue this rhythmic tapping for a few minutes, focusing on the sensation and movement.

➤ Rationale: Bi-Lateral Stimulation can help calm the nervous system and reduce distress by promoting a sense of safety and balance (Shapiro, 2017).

c. Scent Grounding

- i. Choose a calming scent (e.g., lavender, vanilla, eucalyptus).
- ii. Use an essential oil, scented candle, or lotion and take deep breaths, focusing on the scent.

➤ Rationale: Scent can have a powerful impact on mood and can be very grounding when used mindfully (Herz, 2009).

d. Wrapping Yourself into Your Own Space

- i. Using a long shawl or a light blanket, wrap it around your shoulders or the midsection of your abdomen.
- ii. Gently twist the ends, that way you can apply gentle pressure on the wrapping motion.
- iii. Do this to apply pressure to the point where you find the pressure that is comforting to you.
- iv. Now slowly release the wrap when ready.

➤ Rationale: Some people find pressure to be comforting and grounding.

e. Self-Soothing Statements

- i. Write down a list of positive affirmations or comforting statements (e.g., “I am safe,” “This feeling will pass,” “I am in control”).
- ii. Read these statements aloud or silently to yourself when feeling distressed.

➤ Rationale: Repeating positive affirmations can counteract negative self-talk and promote a sense of well-being (Neff, 2003).

Tips for grounding techniques:

- Stay neutral- no judgment- good or bad.
- Use grounding when you are at a 6 on a 0-10 scale. Rate the emotional pain before and after so you know if the grounding technique worked for you.
- If a grounding technique works this time, remember it may not work every time depending on the trigger.
- Having many different coping skills at our disposal sets us up for more success when combatting triggers.

Developing a Personal Grounding Kit

Now, we're going to create our personal grounding kits. A grounding kit is a collection of items that help you stay connected to the present moment and feel safe and calm. These items can be physical objects, written reminders of techniques, or anything else that brings you comfort.

Take a moment to think about items that make you feel grounded. You might want to include things like smooth stone, scented lotion, textured fabrics, pictures, affirmations, or a list of grounding techniques. If you have these items around your home, go ahead and gather them. If not, make a list of what you'd like to include in your kit.

Materials

- Small box or bag (anything you have available e.g., shoebox, makeup bag, old gift bag, etc.)
- Suggested Items:
 - Smooth stones or pebbles
 - Scented items (essential oils, lotions)
 - Textured items (fabric, stress balls)
 - Visual items (pictures, small artworks)
 - Written reminders (affirmations from earlier, coping plan from earlier)
 - Auditory items (headphones, favorite CD/ DVD, previously recorded grounding message)
 - Pencils, notebooks, artwork
 - Mint or hard candy for grounding the senses
 - Something comforting (little stuffed animal, sentimental item)

Once you have your items or list, place them in a small box or bag. You can decorate your kit to make it personal and special.

Having a grounding kit can be a helpful tool for managing stress and trauma responses. Keep your kit in an accessible place and use it whenever you need to feel grounded.

If you find yourself without your grounding kit, remember that you can still utilize the coping and grounding techniques we've practiced in this workshop. These techniques can be performed anywhere and most of them require no special tools. Additionally, consider creating smaller travel kits for places you frequent, such as work or school. These kits can be as simple as a few small items that fit in a snack baggie. Practicing these techniques regularly will also make them

more effective when you need them most. The key is to be as prepared and flexible, adapting to your environment and using the resources available to you.

Additional Resources

- Books such as *Seeking Safety* by Lisa M. Najavits and *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk.
- Websites like the National Center for PTSD and the American Psychological Association's resources on trauma.
- Local support groups or support groups with Hope Recovery and any other workshops we offer through Hope Recovery.

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