

A. CARING FOR YOUR BODY

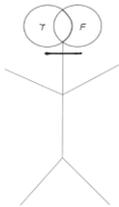
Do you ever ... or have you been told that you ...

- ... have a hard time calming down when you've been emotional?
- ... have health problems related to problems with stress?
- ... overreact to situations out of proportion to what actually happened?
- ... miss what's going on because you frequently drift off or daydream?
- ... cover your anger with a calm demeanor?

This unit makes the connection between how your body responds to perceived or real physical and emotional stress and how over time that can interfere with your ability to stay grounded.

What does it mean that someone is "ungrounded?"

When you're stressed, it's a pretty natural response to look for some kind of relief. When your emotions are running high, you can also look for relief because the intensity of your feelings makes you uncomfortable, or because you are afraid how such strong feelings will make you behave. This is called "being ungrounded." Ungrounded means to not be in touch with what is going on here and now, that somehow you are not fully present to the reality right in front of you.¹



What happens when you're ungrounded?

There are a couple of ways to think about this. First, imagine a steel plate at your neck that separates the connection between your mind and body. That steel plate hinders communication from your mind to your body and your body to your mind. It can mean that your body isn't paying attention to signals coming from your mind, and your mind isn't receiving signals from the body.²

You can also imagine that your brain is divided into two parts which we'll call Thinking Mind and Feeling Mind. Again, when you are ungrounded these two parts are not communicating well with one another. If Thinking Mind dominates, you deal with matters very logically and with no show or experience of emotion. If Feeling Mind dominates, your emotions drive your decisions without the benefit of some clear thinking.³

¹ Ungrounded may be "zoned out," unaware, or not hearing when someone is talking to you.

² Some examples of disconnected mind and body: the mind does not notice that your body has a fever or a stomachache; your body ignores a mind-signal to take some deep breaths in order to calm down, or you keep eating even though your mind signals that you are not hungry.

³ When ungrounded, Thinking Mind can take charge of the family while they shelter at home, not recognizing that the children may be afraid of dying. When ungrounded, Feeling Mind can feel intense anger and strike someone without regret or without considering the consequences.

There are some places and times for being ungrounded in your life. Daydreaming is a form of being ungrounded which can also unleash creativity – you may invent something that doesn't exist or produce a work of art. When you sit in a dark theater to watch a movie, you are allowing yourself to get involved in the reality depicted in the movie; you don't tell yourself the whole time, "This isn't real because I'm sitting in a theater" even though that is reality at that moment.

What does it look like when you're ungrounded?

When you are ungrounded, your emotions tend to go toward one of two extremes. Think of a scale that goes from 0 to 10.

You may move toward numbness (0 on the scale), i.e., you have no feeling, and you can get lost in your thinking. Unfortunately, when you turn off your painful feelings, you also turn off your pleasant emotions. Life then becomes dry, empty, robotic. Numbness can also show up as withdrawal and isolation. Sometimes when you're ungrounded you can also lose track of time.

Or when you're ungrounded you may move toward extreme emotion (9 or 10 on the scale). Your escalated feelings may cause you to feel out of control. You may physically react without thinking. You may not be able to recall what you did because your extreme feelings block your memory.

What are the consequences of being ungrounded?

One effect of being ungrounded is that the past and the present get mixed up, because you're not grounded in the here and now. You may connect a present experience to something emotionally similar in the past. When you're ungrounded, you may also repeat the past behavior rather than using your Thinking Mind to address the situation which exists right now.⁴

Another effect of being ungrounded is that you can get confused about feeling safe and unsafe. This also happens when you recall an event in the past and project those feelings onto the present moment. Or you deny the past and numb yourself and therefore do not protect yourself in a risky situation.⁵

If you have a habit of being ungrounded, over time you may lose an awareness of a continuum of feelings. You may believe that there are just two levels of emotion, 0 and 10. You forget or do not know how to express a whole spectrum of emotions of varying intensity, that is 1-9.⁶

⁴ When ungrounded, your Mind may say, "Here we go again. This is just like last week"

⁵ When ungrounded, you may not see a problem allowing the neighbor who harmed you as a child to now babysit your children. On the other hand, you may tell your children they can never return to school because they may catch the virus.

⁶ If the emotion is anger, the intensity can range from none to irritated, to frustrated, annoyed, exasperated, to angry, very angry, to furious, and rage.

Where do the feelings go when you're ungrounded?

When you're numb, it seems like the feelings are gone, but they don't actually disappear. Instead they get stored in your body and over time they can develop into physical illnesses.⁷

When you're ungrounded, you are likely to express your extreme feelings with extreme behaviors which can be directed at yourself and/or toward others.⁸

How do you get grounded and stay grounded?

When you're ungrounded, or you are headed into a situation that you believe will be emotionally intense, there are some things that you can do to help you get grounded and stay grounded.

1. Use your five senses to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell what is true in the present moment.
2. Sit erect with your backbone against a chair and both feet flat on the floor. Push your buttocks into a chair or stand with your feet pushed into the floor to feel physically grounded.
3. Avoid locking or closing your eyes. Instead, keep your head up and maintain eye contact.
4. Have something cool to drink or a glass of ice handy – to chew or to place your fingers in when necessary.
5. Avoid repetitive behaviors, such as tapping your fingers, twirling your hair, or clicking a pen.
6. Maintain awareness of your body, and relax your muscles.
7. Distinguish things in the present environment (e.g., color of walls, time of the day, people present).
8. Avoid extreme or distorted thinking that promotes intense feelings.
9. Do something that connects you to your Thinking Mind, like Sudoku, or listing 10 cities in Michigan that start with the letter "B."

Why bother to be grounded?

You cannot live a healthy and satisfying life if you are not mentally present, because you can't absorb information and process it intellectually, emotionally, and physically. In most life situations, it is important to be grounded in the moment. When grounded, you can react along a wide spectrum of emotions, including feelings that are both comfortable and uncomfortable. As a result, you will feel less vulnerable and have less need to avoid your feelings, which are part of what make you human. Then your thoughts, feelings, and behavior can be conscious, healthy and appropriate responses to your here-and-now reality.

⁷ Stress stored in the body can result in physical ailments such as migraine headaches, high blood pressure, and gastro-intestinal problems.

⁸ Extreme behaviors directed at yourself include self-harm and overeating; directed at others, they include impulsive acts, violence, and passive-aggressive behavior.

Exercise 3-A

Mental Safe Place

Close your eyes and imagine a place (real or fantasy) where you feel a sense of peace and safety. This can be a beach, the ocean, the mountains, a house, a room, etc. You can imagine anything or anyone in this place that creates a sense of safety. Draw this scene. (Don't worry about what your drawing looks like. Instead, try to focus on the feelings that come while you're drawing.)

After completing the drawing, try to visualize your safe place while taking deep breaths. Try to involve all of your senses. What do you hear? What do you see? What do you smell? What does your body feel?

In the future, when you feel frustrated or overwhelmed, remember that you have the power to choose where you will focus your attention. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and visualize your safe place.

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