

A Brief Introduction to Trauma & Triggers

What is Trauma?

Trauma refers to experiences that feel threatening or totally overwhelming. They can be sudden events or ongoing incidents that cause someone to feel a threat to their physical safety or sanity. Examples of traumatic events include car accidents, neglect, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse, as well as physical and sexual assault. Trauma "is not a disorder, but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situation in the real world. Trauma is a concrete physical, cognitive, affective, and spiritual response by individuals and communities (Burstow, 2003)." Trauma is subjective and unique to the individual's experience of the event or ongoing conditions. For example, two people could experience a car accident in the same car, and one could find it traumatic while the other does not.

The overwhelming nature of trauma means that trauma survivors and their actions don't always make sense to other people. This resource about trauma is for you to get a better understanding of how the trauma of childhood sexual violence affects survivors into adulthood. This resource is not going to address formal diagnosis of PTSD, C-PTSD, or any other psychological diagnoses, because advocates do not diagnose. The advocates' role is support while survivors explore and navigate healing, and faith in survivors' wholeness and resilience.

This resource is not designed to be used by survivors, but instead to help advocates develop skills around supporting survivors. As you reflect on this information, it will become an ingrained part of your advocacy practice.

Let's talk about the word 'traumatic': In recent years, people have started to use the word "traumatic" in common conversation, using it to describe situations that are stressful. Survivors who have lived through traumatic events, however, know that traumatic and stressful are not the same thing. Everyday hassles, like a confrontation with a friend or dealing with unemployment can be challenging, difficult and stressful. Traumatic events, however, go beyond challenging, difficult and stressful. A traumatic event is one that overwhelms the physical, emotional, and spiritual defenses.

In contrast to the over use of “traumatic” in common conversation, some survivors of trauma may not feel that what they experienced was bad enough to be considered traumatic, when it actually was. This is in large part because they were able to cope through dissociation, that can give a person some perceived distance from the traumatic event. Dissociation can leave a survivor feeling as though the incident or series of incidents weren’t that bad. They may not initially perceive what happened as traumatic. This is a common experience for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

What Happens When a Survivor is Triggered?

Trauma profoundly affects memory. Normal memories include several aspects:

- narrative memory – the verbal story of what happened,
- visual memory – what the person saw,
- sensory memory – what the person felt in their body and senses, and
- behavioral memory – what they did.

Traumatic memories split the verbal story from everything else. A survivor may be able to talk about the event but won’t be able to feel what happened or a survivor may have all the feelings but won’t have the words to tell what happened. Traumatic memories are stored differently than non-traumatic memories. The parts of the brain that hold traumatic memories are the parts that watch for danger and turn on the defense systems.

Traumatic experiences can affect perception in three main ways.

1. **Flashbacks** -- The survivor may re-experience a past traumatic incident as if it is happening in the present. They may see, hear, smell, or feel things that others presently with them do not. The memories come up, or are **triggered**, because something in the survivor’s daily experience is reminding them of the traumatic incident. Oftentimes, these triggers are subconscious and prompted by things the survivor is experiencing but are unaware of.
2. **Struggle with social perceptions** -- It may be hard for survivors to tell what is actually happening between them and another person and mistake neutral interactions for dangerous or abusive ones. Survivors also may not accurately recognize danger when it appears in a social interaction.

3. **Naming and understanding the trauma** – because trauma disrupts how memory is stored, and particularly the verbal memory, some survivors might not have full or comprehensible memories of what happened. Additionally, some people who commit sexual violence will seek ways to confuse a child's memory or awareness of what is happening (for example, abusing a sleeping child). These issues can cause disorientation or self-doubt for adult survivors.

In advocacy practice and fields like psychology and neuroscience, 'trigger' has a precise and narrow definition: the activation of traumatic memories. However, people have been using the word "triggered" in common language to describe an uncomfortable situation, often times connected to a challenging, difficult or stressful experience. This casual usage of the word does not involve the activation of a traumatic incident. As we discussed earlier, trauma is a response to an overwhelming physical and/or emotional threat and a trigger is something that activates the traumatic memory and the brain's defense systems. The overuse of the word "trigger" for uncomfortable situations tends to water down the original meaning of the word. For survivors who have experienced trauma, being "triggered" causes much more than discomfort, it causes a re-experiencing of a life threatening and/or psychologically overwhelming event.

Triggered flashbacks may leave the survivor feeling panicked, angry, disoriented, physically pained, grieving, or numb and shut down. In order to manage the painful feelings triggered by the reminder, survivors of trauma may cope in ways that are instinctive to them but confusing to other people: by dissociating, minimizing, or trying to control seemingly unrelated aspects of their environment. People who are triggered can also become very compliant or accommodating and agreeable when they experience the traumatic reminder. The accommodation is a survival skill that survivors have learned in the experience of the violence.

Why do survivors struggle with feeling the abuse didn't really happen to them?

When overwhelming trauma is repeated, the only way of dealing with it may be to escape it in your head, which is called dissociation. The person dissociates themselves from what is happening by 'checking out' from the incident and pretending that the abuse or trauma is happening to someone else. Although an incredible coping mechanism, survivors who dissociate end up feeling

disconnected from what happened, as if it is a scene from a movie, rather than their own experience.

This is why many survivors struggle to feel that anything bad actually happened to them – they're afraid that they are making it up. It can be very confusing for other people to see survivors claiming that they suffered terrible abuse but do not seem upset by it. Many survivors of child sexual abuse are likely to suffer from physical illness and pain, depression, or ways of coping such as substance abuse or eating disorders, that don't seem related to the abuse but are a direct result of the abuse and the coping mechanism that helped them survive it.

Trauma disrupts a person's sense of self and inner harmony. The more that advocates understand trauma and its effects, like dissociation, the more advocates are able to support a survivor's journey towards wellness and happiness.

SERVING
SURVIVORS
WITH
MENTAL
HEALTH
DISABILITIES

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A NOTE ABOUT MY PERSPECTIVE



GOALS OF THIS WEBINAR

1. Explore the challenges survivors who have mental health disabilities face accessing safety and healing services;
2. Examine the complexities mental health disabilities can present; and
3. Strategize what advocates and service providers can do to support survivors who have mental health disabilities.

WHAT WE KNOW

- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 51.5 million people in the United States have a mental health disability.
- 80% of women who experienced rape, stalking, or physical violence by an intimate partner reported significant short- or long-term effects including posttraumatic stress disorder. Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., Stevens, M.R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

WHAT WE KNOW (2)

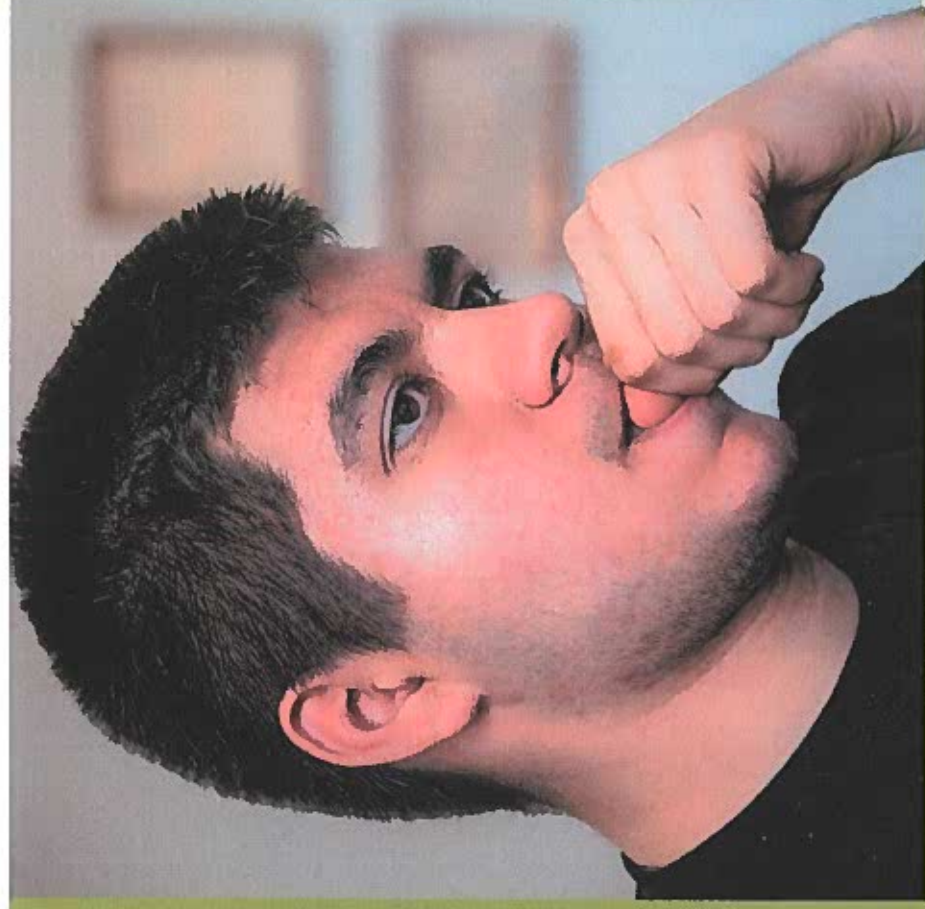
- In one study, approximately 20% of survivors of interpersonal violence (defined to include domestic violence and sexual assault) reported experiencing a new onset of psychiatric disorders.

QUESTION – ANSWER IN THE CHAT

- Have you worked with a survivor that had a mental health disability?
- Yes
- No
- I don't know

QUESTION 1 – ANSWER IN THE CHAT

- How did you know that the survivor you worked with had a mental health disability?



SURVIVORS WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITIES FACE BARRIERS

MENTAL ILLNESS IS INVISIBLE

- A survivor may not ask for assistance/ accommodations because their disability cannot be seen.
- A provider may not offer assistance/ accommodations because they cannot tell that the person has a disability.

STIGMA

- Disclosures can be rare because there is a lot of stigma around mental health disabilities:
- The words we use (crazy, nuts)
- Portrayal by the media, movies, TV
- Experience from previous disclosures
- Preconceived notions about people with mental health disabilities from service providers and advocates

CREDIBILITY

Survivors may not disclose a mental health disability because:

- Their disability has been used as part of their abuse – gaslighting, threats of disclosure...
- Their credibility and knowledge is often discounted because of their disability

PREVIOUS NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

- A survivor that disclosed their mental health disabilities in the past, may have found that they:
 - Faced attitudinal barriers, stigma, and even verbal/emotional abuse
 - Received unequal treatment
 - Were excluded or otherwise discriminated against

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

- Survivors with mental health disabilities may also fear other negative consequences of disclosing including:
 - Employment
 - Housing
 - Losing custody or CPS involvement
 - Unwanted psychiatric services involvement, including forced medication conditions, and
 - The impact disclosure may have on future civil and criminal court involvement

QUESTION 2 – ANSWER IN THE CHAT

- Have you seen survivors with mental health disabilities disclose this disability? Did that impact your perceptions of them?



COMPLEXITIES FOR ADVOCATES AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

BEHAVIORS

- You may encounter behaviors from survivors with mental health disabilities that are difficult to understand or are unfamiliar, such as:
 - Talking all the time
 - Being unable to remember what you talked about
 - Being withdrawn
 - Not seeming to pay attention
 - Getting frustrated and short tempered
 - Not following through
 - Tensions with other survivors

MORE BEHAVIORS

Difficulties planning and organizing

Stamina and fatigue (including sleeping and staying awake)

Difficulties tolerating stress

Erratic/inconsistent behavior

It is vital that you develop strategies to overcome these challenging behaviors to work with survivors to provide healing services and justice.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- People with mental health disabilities are more likely to be victimized than to be violent.
- The abuse, its aftermath, and trauma may exacerbate a mental health disability.
- Behavior is not always a choice; it can part of the person's disability.

DOES DIAGNOSIS MATTER?

These are *some* of the many
labels we put on people...

ADD/ADHD	Anxiety
Bi-Polar Disorder	Borderline Personality
Dissociative Identity Disorder	Major Depressive Disorder
PTSD	Schizophrenia

DIAGNOSIS DOESN'T MATTER

- These don't really matter for your purposes
- What helps is usually helpful regardless of diagnosis
- Focus on the needs of a person, not their diagnosis – everyone is different



CREATE AN ACCESSIBLE
SPACE

It is important
that you
create:

Physical Safety



Emotional Safety

CREATE
ACCESSIBLE SPACE
(2)

- **What kinds of things have you done to create physical or emotional safety?**

-Answer in the chat

CREATE PHYSICAL SAFETY

- Physical environment
- Who has access to the survivor or their information?
- How are survivors treated in your program by staff and other survivors?

CREATE EMOTIONAL SAFETY

- Intertwined with physical safety but goes further
- A lot of your effort will be spent here
- Build Rapport
 - Be Patient
 - Build Trust
 - Be Transparent
 - Remember people have been telling them they are a problem or hard forever, whether they say it or act like it.

CREATE EMOTIONAL SAFETY (2)

- Plan for more time
- Keep things simple
- Limit chaos to the extent possible
- Repeat things as often as needed
- Provide information in different modes of learning

DIFFERENT MODES OF LEARNING

- Walk them through it
- Use videos
- Provide information in writing
- Use drawings or fotonovela

OTHER THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Help create a checklist
- Provide written or drawn instructions
- Provide reminders
- Provide noise canceling headsets or sound machines
- Suggest the use of calendars or planners

BE STRUCTURED...

- Make things as predictable as possible
- Help survivors know what to expect
- Create routines for your work with survivors
- Help survivors create routines

BUT ALSO, BE FLEXIBLE

- Survivors with mental health disabilities often experience decreased stamina, or fatigue
 - Flexible schedule
 - Flexible sleeping arrangements
 - Periodic breaks
 - Break tasks down

PLAN FOR TRIGGERS

- Talk with survivors about challenges they experience
 - When they happen
 - How they come about
 - What helps them
 - What you can do to help

LEARN ABOUT GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

- Help to soothe and calm a person when triggered
- Practice grounding techniques with others before you need them
- Discuss beforehand with survivors
- Common techniques that help

ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT NEEDS

- Is there anything we can do to help you while you are here?
- If they disclose help them figure out whether they need to tell others.
- If they want to tell others, is there anything we can do to support you in doing so?
- It can get noisy and busy around here, if you think that will be a problem for you, what can we do to help?

ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT NEEDS (2)

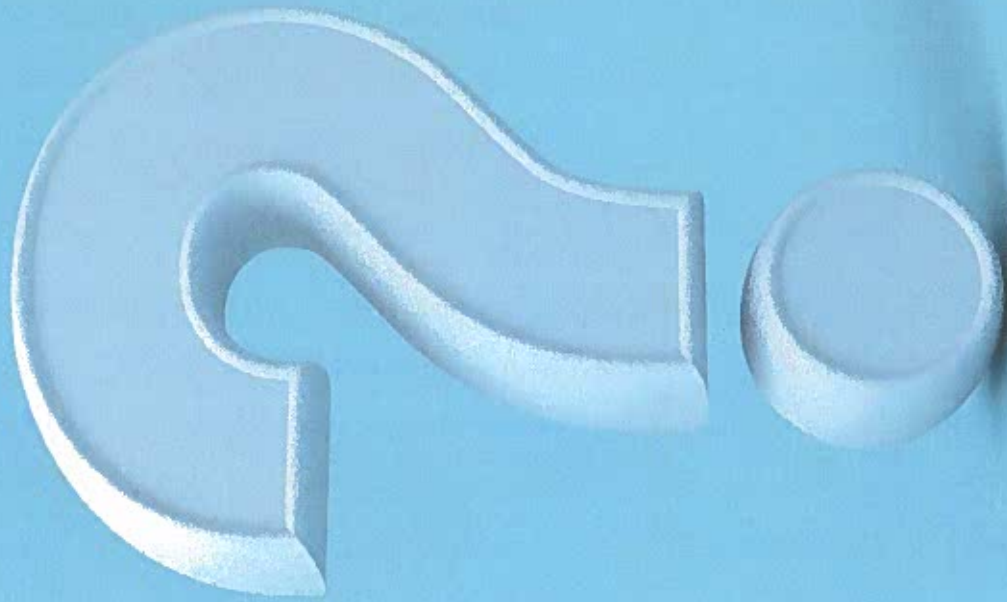
- I provided you with our medication policy, do you have any concerns about what it says?
- If you have any concerns about your medications or if you feel that they are not working properly, feel free to talk with one of us and we can try and help.
- I know that medications can have some side effects, like making you tired or feeling sick, if there is anything we can do to help you manage these can you let us know?

ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT NEEDS (3)

- Sometimes we give you a lot of information, let us know if we are giving you too much at one time or ask us to write things down, or whatever you need from us.
- We can have a pretty tight schedule of activities here, if you think that maintaining this schedule will be a problem, can you let us know how we can help?
- I know that at this point you may not be aware of things you may need, I will make sure to check on you throughout your stay. But, remember you can reach out to any of us and ask for assistance.

**ASK SURVIVORS
HOW YOU CAN
HELP**

**•How have you
done this? Were
your strategies
helpful? - Answer
in the chat**



QUESTIONS?

Tools for Working with Survivors: Grounding

Our Tools for Working with Survivors series includes discrete tools that you can use in your work with adult survivors of child sexual abuse to meet each individual's unique needs. This resource is not designed to be used by survivors, but instead to help advocates develop skills. As you develop this skill it will become an ingrained part of your advocacy practice and you will no longer need this resource to prompt your practice. There is a companion to this tool for survivors' use: [\[insert link\]](#)

What is grounding and why is it helpful?

Grounding is the feeling of being present and connected in the here and now.

Trauma can make survivors feel lost in time and space or overwhelmed by their emotions. Grounding is helpful when survivors are triggered, leading them to re-experience parts of a traumatic incident. In that moment survivors are caught in the past. Grounding lessens the distress of flashbacks and helps to bring survivors back into the present.

Grounding is also a helpful tool for survivors to use in situations that could be triggering. By diverting their attention away from the potential trigger, they are able to minimize the impact of it. For example, a survivor could use grounding techniques to focus on other aspects of an examining room during a gynecological exam in order to get through the exam, a potentially triggering experience.

Grounding is also helpful when dissociation begins to happen outside of a survivor's control. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse have years or decades of coping with the trauma of child sexual abuse. Many survivors have effectively used dissociation as a coping mechanism to numb themselves, so they don't experience the terror and the horror of trauma in the moment of the abuse. Years after the abusive incidents have ended, dissociation is still a great coping tool when the adult survivor feels overwhelmed or unsafe. However, dissociation can reduce present day awareness and participation in daily life. Grounding can help survivors be more present, have here-and-now awareness and utilize present-day resources.

How can advocates help survivors ground themselves?

Whether you are working with someone on the phone, via video, or in person, you can walk a survivor through a few exercises to help them become and remain present. Always check in with survivors about their physical abilities and the resources or limitations of their environment, and adapt the grounding techniques you use accordingly. For example, survivors who are incarcerated will be limited in the grounding tools they can access.

Some adult survivors of child sexual abuse cope by distancing and disconnecting from their body. This is important to note before walking a survivor through a grounding technique, as it may be harder for them to physically find and sense their own bodies. Checking in is as simple as asking if they feel connected to their body or if they would feel more comfortable using a grounding technique that involves deep breathing exercises or using their senses to identify objects in the room.

- Help the survivor to **use their breathing** to help ground them.
 - You do this by asking the survivor to notice their breathing. There's no need to control it at first; just notice it.
 - Ask them to take a slow deep breath through their nose and hold it for 2 to 3 seconds and release breath slowly through their mouth. Ask the survivor to try to totally fill their belly with breath and then totally empty it.
 - i. Sometimes people get dizzy or lightheaded when they start using this technique. That's okay! If that happens, the survivor can take a few normal breaths before taking another deep one.
 - Once you feel they are starting to focus on their breathing see if you can get them to breath in as they do a mental count. Breathe in through their nose, as they do a mental count to 4, hold it for a count of 4 and release it through their mouth for a mental count to 8.
 - There are GIFs and phone apps that provide an image to focus on and time the breath.
 - Repeat this exercise as needed for the survivor to become more present.
- Ask the survivor to **notice how their body feels** and focus on parts of their body as you guide them. (Cautionary note: this is not a technique to use for

adult survivors of child sexual abuse who cope through distancing and disconnecting from their body.)

- o Ask them to focus on their feet and notice how their feet feel on the floor.
- o Ask them to focus on their legs and how they feel against the chair they are sitting in.
- o Ask them to focus on their back and how their back feels against the back of the chair
- o Ask them to focus on their arms and how their arms feel on the chair.
- The part of the mind that is focusing is only in the present moment, and is only noticing. You can explain to the survivor that no matter how big their emotions are or no matter how bad the flashback might be, there is a part of their mind that is only in the present moment.
- Ask survivors to **notice their senses** and ask them questions based on their senses.
 - o **Sight** – look around; name some present-day sights that are a particular color or shape and then connect with them. “I see a red ball. I squeeze this red ball when I get nervous.” They can also look at objects in their environment that help them reconnect to the present. You can ask them to identify 3 blue objects in the room, 2 square things that they can see, and connect to them by asking whose are those things? Or for example, “This is my shirt. It’s an adult size shirt. That means I am an adult now.”
 - o **Sound** – listen for present-day sounds and name them. What is that sound connected to in your life now? For example, ask what the noise is – a dog barking – and whether they know the dog’s name or owner.
 - o **Taste** – give a survivor a candy or gum they like (they can carry this with them as part of a grounding kit) or you can give a survivor a cup of tea or soda. Ask them what it tastes like or how it tastes.
 - o **Smell** – use comforting smells like scented candles or incense and ask the survivor what it smells like to them and how do they like it?
 - o **Touch** – Ask a survivor to run their hands under cold water, hold a fuzzy blanket or pet a cat or dog and describe how it feels. Emotional support animals are perfect for this sense. You can continue this grounding exercise by asking the survivor “who’s is this?”

Facts about the present day can help ground a survivor who is experiencing a flashback. Invite them to look at a calendar or clock and note the day and time. You can also ask survivors the date and if they remember where they are and if they remember who you are.

Focus skills that distract can help after these grounding exercises if survivors are still struggling. Advocates can use the alphabet to help survivors focus, by asking survivors to identify objects in the room that start with each letter of the alphabet or name a country, state, city or town for each letter of the alphabet. The kind of focus required to do this can help survivors release the remnants of a flashback, dissociative state or keep their focus away from something they are trying to avoid.

Tips to consider:

1. Practice grounding techniques with other advocates, friends, or family before helping a survivor.
2. Worry stones and beaded bracelets are great objects for survivors to use that allows them to fidget with, focus on, and feel in an effort to ground themselves in the present. Providing these to survivors (or making them together!) would be a great strategy to help survivors ground themselves on their own and as a reminder of the support they are getting to you program.
3. A grounding kit might also be helpful for the survivor to create and carry with them. That way they have belongings with meaning that enable more connection for the survivor. Items that might be included in the kit might be a cell phone for sight or sound, scented lotion or essential oils for smell, candies or gum for taste, a stone or ball for touch. These should all be things the survivor has positive connections to. Remember to take into account the survivor's physical abilities when guiding them through the development of a grounding kit.
4. It's important when working with survivors that you remain as present and attentive as possible. These grounding exercises can be helpful to you before or after you've been working with survivors throughout your day to manage your emotions.

5. Survivors can use this technique on their own. We've developed a tip sheet for survivors to walk through these grounding techniques. [\[Link to Grounding tool for survivors\]](#). It might be helpful to walk them through the tip sheet before they use it on their own.

Survivor Guide: Grounding Exercises

What is grounding and why is it helpful?

Grounding is the feeling of being present and connected in the here and now.

Grounding is helpful when you are triggered, and re-experiencing parts of a traumatic incident. In that moment you are caught in the past and grounding limits the distress of flashbacks and helps to bring you back into the present. If you are having a hard time calming yourself down during a flashback, you can call your local crisis line and ask for help getting grounded. You may want to find the number of your local crisis program and have it handy should you need to call. It also might help to call and check to make sure you feel comfortable talking with them when you aren't in distress. That way you know what to expect if you call when you need to.

Grounding is also be a helpful tool for managing a situation that could be triggering. By diverting your attention away from the potential trigger, you are able to minimize the impact of it. For example, you could use grounding techniques to focus on other aspects of an examining room during a gynecological exam in order to get through the exam, a potentially triggering experience.

Grounding is also helpful when dissociation begins to happen outside of your control. After years or decades of coping with the trauma of child sexual abuse, you may have effectively used dissociation as a coping mechanism to numb yourself, so you don't experience the terror and the horror of trauma in the moment of the abuse. Years after the abusive incidents have ended, dissociation is still a great coping tool when you feel overwhelmed or unsafe. However, dissociation, can reduce present day awareness of your surroundings. Grounding can help you be more present, have here and now awareness and utilize present-day resources.

How to ground yourself?

There are a number of things that you can do to be more present and connected. We have provided a number of examples below for you to see which feel most helpful for you given your circumstances. You don't need to use them all. Just find

the one that helps you best and practice it often so that you have experience in using it when you need it.

Using Breathing for Grounding

- Notice your breathing. Don't judge it or control it, just notice.
- Take a slow deep breath through your nose and hold it for 2 to 3 seconds and release your breath, slowly through your mouth.
- Once you feel you are focused on your breathing, breath in through your nose to a mental count of 4.
- Hold your breath for a count of 4.
- Release your breath, slowly, through their mouth for a mental count of 8.
- Repeat this exercise as needed to become more present.
- If you like, you can find GIFs and phone apps that provide an image to focus on and time the breath

Feeling Present in your Body for Grounding

- Notice how your body feels and focus on parts of your body.
- Focus on your feet and notice how they feel on the floor. Notice from your toes to your heel. If you are able to, wiggle your toes and move your feet from front to back and back to front.
- Focus on your legs and how they feel against the chair you are sitting in.
- Focus on your back and how it feels against the back of the chair.
- Focus on your arms and how they feel on the chair. If you are able reach your arms up and stretch them and back down.
- Repeat this exercise as needed to become more present.

Using Your Senses for Grounding

- Notice your senses identify what you can see, hear, smell, taste and/or touch in your surroundings.
 - **Sight** – Look around; name some present-day sights that are a particular color or shape and then connect with them. "I see a red ball. I squeeze this red ball when I get nervous." You can also identify 3 blue objects in the

room, 2 square things that you can see and connect to them by asking yourself whose are those things?

- o **Sound** – Listen for present-day sounds and name them. What is that sound connected to in your life now? For example, identify what the noise is – a dog barking – and whether you know the dog’s name or owner.
- o **Taste** – Put a candy or gum you like (you can carry this with you as part of a grounding kit) or drink a cup of tea or soda. Ask yourself what it tastes like or how it tastes.
- o **Smell** – Smell something you have with you or in the room. Try to use comforting smells like scented candles or incense or essential oils. Notice what it smells like and whether you like it?
- o **Touch** – Run their hands under cold water, hold a fuzzy blanket or pet a cat or dog and notice how it feels. Describe it to yourself. Emotional support animals are perfect for this sense. Ask yourself “whose is this?”

Other Exercises to Shake of Remnants of Flashbacks or Dissociation

If after these grounding exercises you are still struggling to stay in the present, **use the alphabet to focus**. Identify objects in the room that start with each letter of the alphabet or name a country, state, city or town for each letter of the alphabet.

Ask yourself what day it is and where you are. Think back to what you are doing there. The kind of focus required to do this can help you release the remnants of a flashback, dissociative state or keep your focus away from something you are trying to avoid.

Tips to consider:

1. Practice these grounding techniques as much as you can. The more familiar you are with them the more helpful they will be for you.
2. You might want to create a grounding kit to carry with you. Familiar, comfortable items will be much more effective when you need them. You could include items like a cell phone for sight or sound, scented lotion or essential oils for smell, candies or gum for taste, a stone or ball for touch. These should all be things that have positive connections for you.

3. You might want to tell close friends, family, and advocates you are working with about the most effective grounding exercises for you in case they need to help you at some point. It might also be good to practice with them to make sure they understand how to best help you when needed.