

Introduction II: About Containment and Grounding

Containment and grounding are key regulatory skills. It is recommended that such skills are acquired early in trauma therapy. Once you have learned some of these skills, you can use them in difficult times and your arousal curve is heading towards over- or under-activation. They will help you to “flatten the curve”, follow the green curve within the window of tolerance, so that you avoid the destructive peaks, involving being overwhelmed and dissociating.

First, a little about the terms:

Containment is about – “to contain”. In psychological terms, containment has been defined as the ability to experience emotional expressions without being destroyed or hurting others. It is then also about establishing strong boundaries that will not disappear easily. Such a boundary is to separate the past from the present. Since traumatized people are often overwhelmed by flashbacks and strong emotions, and tend to repeat the trauma experiences in destructive ways, with severe impact on daily functioning, containment skills are important. Containing the traumas does not mean denying them. The skills both acknowledge the memories while creating distance to the memories. A prerequisite for direct trauma memory work is that one can "contain"- them. - We can divide containment into internal and external containment. Examples of inner containment are: visualization and imagery techniques, ‘safe place’ techniques, establishment of "containers" for trauma memories - such as a ‘safe’, box, writing diary, drawing, painting, etc. Examples of external containment are: the therapy contract, frame of therapy, boundary agreements, agreement on contact between sessions, length of therapy sessions, pace of therapy.

Grounding techniques are sometimes categorized as a sub-type of containment. As grounding strategies are core-strategies in a trauma therapy - as well as in the everyday life of most of us - they will receive special focus here.

Grounding has been defined in several ways, including:

- Connecting to the ground, which may make us think of electricity, which must be ‘grounded’ in case of overload.
- Grounding has also been described as "the ability to direct the physical energy to the ground and direct attention to the legs and feet, to increase the experienced sensation and sense of physical support.

- Others describe grounding as the process to be psychologically present, or to connect with the present reality in the "here and now".

As we then see, grounding can be categorized as a 1) cognitive, mental awareness, and 2) sensory, physical awareness, or more simply: as mental and physical grounding. Examples of mental grounding are to orientate oneself to the here and now: what day is it today, weekday, date, month, year? - Examples of physical grounding are: sensing the contact between the feet and the ground, changing body position, for example from sitting to standing.

The goal of containment and grounding techniques is to help you be more present in the here and now, which also means that you are within the tolerance window. It is also important to practice these skills in a paced manner, step by step, gradually allowing oneself to being present here and now. All of this should be done within the window of tolerance. Many traumatized people feel that being here and now means being visible, being noticed, and assertive, and that was dangerous and unsafe. Then naturally there will be an inner conflict or resistance to "connecting to the here and now". It is important to spend time in therapy to resolve any internal conflict or resistance as it may otherwise stop progress. If you have 'inner parts' (dissociative personality parts), the focus is to ground yourself to the reality of parts that are oriented in the current reality. Furthermore, it is recommended that you listen inward to check how much and for how long it is okay for all parts that you are "present within the here and now". If a few seconds are what you can tolerate by now, it is a very good start! When this is tolerated by all the parts you can negotiate to expand by a few more seconds, and so on. Your personal window of tolerance is your guide and if you follow it – the window of tolerance will gradually expand! The clinical experience is that "Slow is faster!" - the slower you proceed, the faster you reach the goal!

In the next videos you will find concrete examples of different skills in grounding and containment. Choose the one or ones that are best for you, and practice with the therapist. Don't forget to practice on a daily basis, on regular days, outside of therapy sessions. If you are going to have the skill ready to use when you need it in difficult situations, then it is important that you have it "in stock", integrated, i.e., in that it becomes a natural reflex that has been learnt and practiced it in peacetime. You may plan short practice sessions during the day, maybe just 5-10 minutes at a time.

It is important to constantly evaluate - also with the therapist - whether a skill is effective: does it help you to feel more connected to the moment here and now? On a scale of 1-10: does

the technique help you to increase your sense of being present with at least 1 point? If not, what adjustments can you make to the exercise so that it becomes helpful? How do you get helpful, effective technique and strategies specific 'designed' for you?

Three principles are important for effective learning: 1) Motivation - 'Yes, I want to learn this! I have a choice. Its my choice!' 2) Concentration and focus as you practice the technique. If you can only focus for a few seconds, it's a great start! 3) Repetition – 'Repetition is the mother of memory!'

If you do not feel success the first time practicing a new skill, do not feel unsuccessful. It is natural that the techniques do not work during the first attempts! It takes time for the brain to learn new habits and heal! – As you continue to try - you will experience increased mastery and competence! It's never too late to start healing and learn new skills. As a trauma-survivor has put it: 'It's always too early to give up!' – At least it is something to think about.

Thank you!

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