

AS OUTLINED IN THE INTRODUCTION, THE SIX CRITERIA FOR DIAGNOSING SIMPLE PTSD INCLUDE:

- A. experiencing an event in which the life, physical safety or physical integrity of the client was threatened or actually harmed, resulting in feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror
- B. continuing to re-experience the traumatic event after it is over
- C. seeking to avoid reminders of the event
- D. exhibiting signs of persistent arousal
- E. symptoms last more than one month
- F. disturbance causes significant distress in important areas of functioning.

(Reprinted with permission from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition. Copyright 1994 American Psychiatric Association.)

The remainder of this chapter presents tools to deal with criteria B, C and D.

Criterion B: Re-experiencing

This section presents clinical tools to use for re-experiencing or intrusive reactions (the second criterion of PTSD). The responses to be managed are nightmares, dreams, flashbacks, dissociation and memories.

Containment strategies

Containment strategies are the skills that first need to be developed to control intrusive memories and sensations.

(See “Containment Skill,” page 158, for a complete discussion of the application of containment.)

How to help clients with dissociation and flashbacks

Grounding is the most important therapeutic approach for dealing with any form of dissociation or flashback.

THE GOAL OF ANY GROUNDING TECHNIQUE IS TO HELP:

- reconnect the person to the present
- orient the person to the here and now
- connect her to her body and personal control and
- connect her to the therapist and the safe context of the therapy room.

When a client dissociates (which is what happens when a flashback “takes over” and the past becomes the present), therapists can reorient the client by guiding her back to the present situation with their voice. Remember, this technique or intervention is established with the client before actually using it to ground her. The therapist speaks slowly and calmly. Avoid whispering; many perpetrators may have whispered to the client during the original abuse.

Directed awareness (Rothschild, 2000).

Our five senses anchor us in our bodies and surroundings. Clients can reconnect by shifting their awareness from their internal (past) focus to aspects of the external (present) setting. This strategy should be developed collaboratively with the client, using her own words.

Say to clients:

- ▶ **Use your visual senses by looking around the room. Name what you see.**

Auditory clues are helpful. You can say to the client:

- ▶ **Listen to my voice. I am _____, your therapist. You are in my office. Can you hear my voice? Nod your head if you can hear my voice.**

Together with the client, have a “grounding brainstorm” — brainstorm together to develop ideas for grounding. With clients who often have trouble with flashbacks or dissociation, it is helpful to anticipate this and to suggest making a list of helpful techniques.

Grounding skills

Grounding skills are interventions that help keep a person in the present. These skills usually occur within two specific areas:

1. sensory awareness
2. cognitive awareness.

The following exercises can help clients with grounding skills.

Sensory awareness grounding skills

Spritz your face (with eyes closed), neck, arms and hands with a fine water mister.

Put your feet firmly on the ground.

Listen to soothing music or familiar music you can sing along to. Dance to it. How does it make your body feel?

Rub your palms; clap your hands. Listen to the sound. Feel the sensation.

Hold something that you find comforting. It may be a stuffed animal, a blanket or a favourite sweater. Notice how it feels in your hands. Is it hard or soft?

Carry something meaningful and tangible in your pocket that reminds you of the present. Touch it to remind yourself that you are an adult.

Try to notice where you are and your surroundings, including the people present.

If you have a pet, touch its fur and speak its name out loud.

Exercise. Ride a bike, stationary or otherwise. Lift weights. Do jumping jacks.



Cognitive grounding skills

Reorient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

- Where am I?
- What is today?
- What is the date?
- How old am I?
- What season is it?
- Who is the country's political leader?
- What is happening now; what is the context?

The following are examples of behaviours to use for reorientation to place and time:

- Pick up a newspaper or pull up the daily newspaper on your browser. Notice the date and read a current article.
- Call a friend and ask the person to talk with you about something you have done together recently.
- Step outside and determine the temperature. Is it warm? Is the sun shining? Is there a cold breeze? What season is it?

Create a grounding techniques resource list

Therapists can write down grounding techniques that they find useful and would feel comfortable suggesting to a client. Have the client develop a list of grounding techniques, making a large copy for the wall at home and a small copy for her wallet.

Other strategies to strengthen a client's sense of control and choice

Dolan (1991) suggests that the therapist use the following probes to strengthen the client's coping abilities:

- ▶ • **How did you get past those feelings/flashbacks the last time you had them?**
- **What would be the first small sign that you were calming down? That you were able to handle the flashbacks?**
- **What do you think the next small sign might be, or has it already happened?**
- **What did you learn that could help you if you ever felt (or experienced) the feeling/flashback again?**

Managing trigger events

Another approach to help clients experience more control is to plan ahead and find ways to deal with triggers before they occur and result in a flashback. Clients need to be reminded that it is important to control their own inner experiences rather than try to avoid everything that triggers their automatic responses.

Some ways to manage triggers include:

- developing a list of triggers that lead to flashbacks or to the unpleasant feelings associated with trauma
- doing relaxation exercises
- doing breathing exercises
- distracting or grounding
- using appropriate medication
- establishing contact with supportive others.