



Feeling Disconnected or "Unreal": Gentle Grounding When You Drift Away

An explainer and personal grounding menu · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Feeling foggy, numb, far away, or like the world isn't real is a common response to stress and overwhelm.
- It is the mind's way of creating distance from too much, and it usually passes.
- Grounding gently brings you back to the present through your senses and body.

What this experience can feel like

Many people experience moments of disconnection, sometimes called dissociation. It exists on a spectrum, from everyday "zoning out" on a familiar drive to feeling detached from your body (depersonalization) or as if the world is dreamlike or flat (derealization).

- Feeling like you're watching yourself from outside
- The world looking foggy, flat, or far away
- Feeling emotionally numb or "on autopilot"
- Losing track of time or chunks of a conversation
- Your body feeling unfamiliar or not quite yours

Why it happens

Disconnection is a protective response. When stress, fear, or overwhelm becomes too much, the nervous system can shift into a shutdown state. It is common during intense stress, sleep deprivation, panic, and after traumatic experiences. It is not a sign of "going crazy," even though it can feel frightening.

Fear of the feeling can make it stronger. Responding with curiosity and gentle grounding tends to help it pass.

What the research says

Trauma-informed approaches use sensory and body-based grounding to help people stay within a tolerable range of arousal (Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006).

Clinical guides for trauma-related dissociation emphasize grounding, orientation to the present, and gradually building safety and stability (Boon, Steele & van der Hart, 2011).

Tool: My Grounding Menu

Try a few options to discover what works for you, then circle your favourites.

Type	Grounding options
Orient	Look around slowly and name where you are, today's date, and three objects you see. "I'm in my kitchen. It's Tuesday. I see a blue mug."
Senses	Hold something with texture, smell a strong scent (peppermint, coffee), sip a warm drink, or listen to a familiar song.
Body	Press your feet into the floor, push your palms together, wrap yourself in a blanket, or stretch slowly.
Movement	Walk and notice each step, rock gently, or tap alternating knees.
Words	Say aloud: "I'm here. I'm safe right now. This feeling will pass."
Connection	Text or call a safe person, or hold a pet.

My personal grounding kit

Three objects I can carry or keep nearby:

A phrase that reminds me I'm safe right now:

A person I can reach out to:

Strategies to try

- **Go gently.** Pushing hard to "snap out of it" can increase distress. Small, steady steps work better.
- **Notice patterns.** Track when it happens: tiredness, stress, certain places, or reminders.
- **Look after the basics.** Sleep, regular meals, and lower stress widen your capacity.
- **Reduce shame.** This is a protective response. You did not cause it by being weak.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Hunt for a colour.** Find every blue object in the room. This simple search pulls attention outward into the present.
- **Try the butterfly hug.** Cross your arms over your chest and gently tap your shoulders, left and right, slowly. This rhythmic, bilateral tapping is used in trauma therapy for calming.
- **Create a safety scent.** Choose a distinct scent, like a specific lip balm or hand cream, and use it during calm moments. Over time, it can become a cue that helps you return.
- **Check today's date.** Look at your phone's lock screen and read the date and time aloud. Orienting to "now" reminds your brain the past is not happening.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

When do I tend to feel disconnected? What is usually happening before?

What does my mind seem to be protecting me from in those moments?

Which grounding options brought me back most gently?

What helps me feel safe in my body?

When to reach out for support

If disconnection happens often, lasts a long time, causes gaps in memory, or is connected to past trauma, please speak with a therapist experienced in trauma. With the right support, these experiences can become less frequent and less frightening.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Boon, S., Steele, K., & van der Hart, O. (2011). Coping with trauma-related dissociation: Skills training for patients and therapists. W. W. Norton.

Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy. W. W. Norton.

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