

PRESENCE





WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

The basis of good therapy – conducted inside or outside – is being present and paying attention, that is, really listening to what the other person has to tell you. Sometimes this is communicated through words, and other times not. Sometimes it is relayed via embodied language – the energetic sense of things, the words that are left unsaid. It begins with the first email, or the moment you shake hands, and continues throughout the work as you get to know each other.

Increasingly, I have noticed clients saying in clear words, through gestures, expressions, or conversely by articulating all the things they are not, that they want to feel *grounded*. In my experience, very few people are looking for cures for loss, change, suffering or death – there is an understanding that these are the existential necessities of life. Instead, most people are looking to alleviate the symptoms of these realities – for a way to *live with* the fact of loss and the presence of pain and to become calm, balanced and centred within the experience of their lives. In short, they are looking to weather the storm: to cope. People who are stressed; people who are anxious; people who are depressed; people who are confused. People who are fraught, forgetful or floundering. People who find themselves emotionally on the edge, and nowhere near the calm centre of themselves. They are all asking in many different ways: 'How can I live with life?'

Occasionally they might say, 'You seem very grounded. How do you do it?'. With time, I have come to understand that only a few are asking for the basic instructions for grounding (though this is a start, and where we begin). What they are really asking for is the secret to becoming more present, resilient, calm, balanced (and many more things besides) within the broad context of their whole lives. They are looking for a solution to the problems of stress, anxiety, worry, busyness, responsibility, loss, loneliness, disconnection, pain, or constant change. They are looking for purpose, meaning and direction. They are looking to hold on to a sense of themselves when everything else is awry. They are looking for the best part of themselves. They are looking to feel safe and secure enough to commune joyfully with what *is*. They are looking for what we are all looking for.

'The world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet, and learn to be at home.' Wendell Berry

Putting your feet on the ground. Sitting or standing up straight with a sense that your weight is pushing downwards into the earth. Perhaps moving one foot in front of the other in a slow walk. These are the simplest ways of making contact with both yourself and the rest of nature – of grounding. *Making contact* is the most direct way to be connected – to be in a *relationship* – with yourself and the living planet. Grounding is a physical act, a technique, a method, a practice in pursuit of a particular destination. To be grounded is to have arrived at a solid place in the present. To be grounded is to come home – to yourself; to nature.

Being grounded is a concept that encompasses a nebulous range of qualities that we might attribute to a person who is approaching, living and experiencing their life in a particular way. It is something you can be in the moment, but also something you can practise your whole life. It is a difficult concept to describe in theory, being more easily recognized in person – either by its absence (see the story of my early

adult years above) or by bringing to mind someone you know who embodies grounded qualities.

To be grounded is a way of being – a *gestalt* – that encompasses our emotional states and responses, our relationships with others, our beliefs about the world and ourselves, and our approach to living. It is no doubt more besides. You can understand 'being grounded' as a facet of our general wellbeing. Just as being grounded describes the holistic solidity of a person and their life, the concept of wellbeing seeks to describe an overall sense of physical, psychological and social wellness that goes beyond the simple absence of illness or disease. In 2008, the New Economics Foundation highlighted five key actions linked to wellbeing that also correlate with the pursuit of becoming grounded: *connect*; *be active*; *take notice*; *keep learning*; and *give*. You will notice in this book that grounding through nature also touches on these areas of wellbeing. By connecting with nature, we become more connected to ourselves.

Becoming grounded is about taking a broad look at the whole landscape of our lives, as well as focusing on the specific terrain. It is about going beyond purely intellectual insight and making discoveries that are felt in every part of our bodies. It is recognizing that the feeling of being grounded comes from attending to all of the ways we are left ungrounded by the life we are living.

This need not be as daunting as it sounds. Becoming grounded is less about perfection in a few specific areas than achieving 'enough' in a variety. Being grounded is less about specific accomplishments, and more about how you *are* in any given situation. Being grounded is everything that you are, whatever happens.

To be grounded is to return time and time again to the present, because the present, and our ability to stay within in it, continually shifts. Most of us find it incredibly hard to stay psychologically in the present with deep awareness for any length of time without defaulting to worrying or wishing. By its nature, the present is fleeting, ephemeral, shape-shifting; paired with minds and bodies that are also restless, prone to agitation

and distraction, it is no wonder that being grounded is a state that develops over time though the continual practice of *coming back*. You will undoubtedly wander away: there may be hours, day, weeks or even years of disconnection and feeling ungrounded. I know this. It is not a reason to be hard on yourself and compound your suffering. The invitation is simply to come back; time and

again. To reconnect with what is in front of you to be experienced, felt and lived. Nature shows us how to do this and offers us a place to *be* and *become*.

If you have completed the activities above, you should now have a list of the qualities you want to embody, and a list of things that prevent you from feeling grounded. This is where your project begins. We have a better sense of the landscape already.

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WHAT DOES A 'GROUNDED' PERSON LOOK LIKE?

- Has healthy control of their emotions.
- Can manage themselves in relationships with others.
- Not easily influenced; unlikely to conform.
- Carries life's mishaps and quandaries lightly.
- Operates with a sense of perspective.
- Demonstrates resilience and robustness.
- Possesses a sense of safety in the world.
- Maintains balance and stability in many aspects of life.
- Active rather than reactive.
- Has a high tolerance for stress or is seemingly less affected by stress.
- Reliable and trustworthy.
- Relatively unshakeable and calm in a crisis.
- Content in their own skin.
- Communicates a healthy sense of self-worth.
- Able to tolerate and work with their weaknesses and perceived failures.
- Appears to embody a sense of peace; others feel calm around them.
- Often humble and willing to hand attention to others.
- Respects themselves and others in words and actions.
- Encouraging and supportive of others.
- Boundaried but not inflexible and closed.
- Rooted but open to possibility and debate.
- Has a sense of what's 'right' – an inner moral compass.
- Lives and works with a sense of purpose and direction.



HOW GROUNDED ARE YOU?

1. Looking at the 'grounded' list on page 26, how many of these qualities do you recognize in yourself? Be generous, no one is grounded all of the time. Are there any other grounded attributes that you could add to your own list?
2. Make a note of the qualities you would like to develop as single, simple words. You might like to journal thoughts that arise as you consider the qualities that appeal to you. Time spent reflecting upon the words you have noted will give you some direction for the type of thoughts and behaviours you might need to develop to express these qualities more fully in your life.
3. There are things that can make us feel ungrounded too. Make a list of five things in your life that leave you feeling ungrounded. Be specific. It might be a relationship, the job you're doing, the events that are unfolding around you, experiences you have had in the past.

BEGIN WITH THE SIMPLE ACT OF GROUNDING

This book is an exploration of how a connection with nature can foster the long-term practise of being grounded. My approach advocates going outside more and bringing what you've experienced inward. But there are many ways to ground yourself. Enjoying the company of good friends can be grounding; so too, time in the gym, cooking a meal, or using essential oils, to name just a few routes. You do not have to be outside to do something that grounds you, and neither is connection with nature the only way.

A grounding activity in the truest sense is one that invites you to notice what is happening inside you, and

around you, and that brings you into contact with the present through your senses and your breath. It makes use of your human nature; so, taking nature out of a conversation about grounding is impossible. To be grounded is, by simplest definition, to be in contact with the ground, which is a basic way of being connected or in a *relationship*. Gravity keeps us here and does half the work. Contact is already made; all you have to do is add more awareness.

The link between body and earth provides a practical, foundational basis on which to start our training. It encourages us to arrive in the present moment; everything else builds upon it.





Throughout your time with this book you can use or adapt this simple technique as often as is useful in your journey to becoming grounded. When you feel yourself becoming ungrounded, feel your stress or anxiety levels rising, or simply

wish to mark the start of a day outside, then this simple exercise is perfect for the job. Grounding yourself is a healthy and subversive act of disruption in a busy world that will always be conspiring to distract and unground you.

ARRIVE AT THE GROUND

I like to do this simple activity barefoot on compacted ground or grass. You may prefer sand, mud or shallow water. You may prefer to keep your shoes on, or to

sit down instead of stand. You may wish to use your hands instead of your feet. Your choices might be dictated by mood. Be playful.



Start by reading this activity through once or twice to familiarize yourself, and then begin:

1. Standing with your feet hip-width apart to create a solid stance, take a few moments to 'arrive' in the physical space. Close your eyes if this feels appropriate and safe; invite your breath to become deeper and slower.
2. As you breathe to a depth that feels comforting and soothing, turn your attention inwards away from the noise around you and notice any sensations within your body without judgement. Breathe into those places if you can and breathe out.
3. Ensure your feet are in as much contact with the ground as they can be. Spread your toes so that you can feel the ground across all of the soles of your feet. Notice the sensations in your feet and lower legs; see if you can send these downwards with your breath.
4. Now spend some time inviting a feeling of solidity and strength into your body and sending that energy downwards as you breathe in and out, pulling the in-breath up through your feet to the top of your head, and then sending it back down again. Envision this as a rope running down from the air above you, through your body and deep into the earth.
5. Bring your attention to the contact your feet are making with the earth and see if you can imagine and feel the weight of the earth coming up to meet your feet. Understand that this is contact.
6. Take as long as you wish to feel relaxed in this activity, enjoying your free-flowing breath and the feel of your body on the ground. Visualize yourself as a tree grounded in the earth or a favourite plant in the soil.

This is a simple way of connecting physically, energetically, psychologically, and perhaps even emotionally and spiritually, with the planet you are living on. The practice can be as quick or as slow as you wish. There is no rush.