

EMDR

CREATIVE ARTS THERAPIES

Arts-based Scale of Presence

This Scale of Presence is both an arts-based and telehealth adaptation of the Back of the Head Scale. The Back of the Head Scale was developed by Jim Knipe¹ (2018) as a tool for decreasing the risk of dissociative abreaction during EMDR treatment, and is used as a resource and assessment tool within the Method of Constant Installation of Present Orientation and Safety (CIPOS). The adapted Scale of Presence integrates the creative arts as a way to help clients with complex trauma increase their awareness of how it feels to be fully present (such as connected and calm) on one end of the scale, and how it feels to be fully disconnected (such as highly activated or dissociated) on the other end. Inviting the client to explore and visually represent how they experience being on both ends of the spectrum makes the scale more personal and concrete, rather than an abstract concept, thereby enhancing their ability to effectively assess their level of presence.

In this arts-based adaption, the client can use their artwork to create a visual scale that can be placed in front of them for external reference.



The benefits of using this scale before and after COME BACK activities provides comparative information to both the client and therapist on how useful and effective the activity was in bringing them into the present moment and into their body. It also strengthens self-observation skills and present-moment orientation through practice and repetition, allowing them to internalize the scale as a resource. When clients are able to observe where they are along the Scale of Presence, they can catch their attention shifting towards disconnection, overwhelm, or dissociation, making it easier to identify when to use a stabilization strategy to come back to the present moment.

¹ Knipe, J. (2018). EMDR toolbox: Theory and treatment of complex PTSD and dissociation. Springer Publishing Company.

For better use over telehealth, the Scale of Presence runs from side-to-side instead of front-to-back. The client creates their scale by moving their hand from left to right, with their artwork acting as a visual reference for both ends of the scale (either by placing their images to the left and right of their screen or even on the floor to the left and right of their feet). This way, when the client moves their hand from side-to-side to indicate their level of presence, their hand moves across the front of the screen, making it easier for the therapist to see where the client is on their scale.

Using gesture and movement also makes this scale an effective tool for clients to communicate dissociation or overwhelm during reprocessing work, when levels of activation might make accessing speech difficult. This is especially important in trauma reprocessing over telehealth, where we want to ensure that clients have the skills to communicate if they are losing dual attention or are outside of their window of tolerance. Giving clients the skills to assess and communicate their level of presence means we can be collaborative with our clients and rely on them for information such as when to slow down or use stabilization strategies during online reprocessing.

Script for Scale of Presence

Introduction: *I would like to share a scale with you that you can use to explore and assess how present you're feeling at any given moment. Have two pieces of paper and some artmaking materials ready.*

Psychoeducation: *Sometimes we feel very alert and present, and other times our attention drifts away, like our body is here, but our mind is somewhere else: maybe in a memory somewhere in the past, or anticipating something in the future, or sometimes feeling nowhere at all, just blank or numb. Our level of presence naturally shifts along this spectrum, from being fully here [therapist brings one hand all the way to the edge of the screen] to being fully somewhere else [therapist moves hand to the other edge of the screen to demonstrate the full spectrum of the scale], and that's completely normal. Creating and using this scale will allow you to build more awareness as to where you're at on that scale at any given moment.*

Demonstrating the scale: [To adapt this activity to an in-person session, the word "screen" can be replaced with "body" to give the client the option of creating their scale from one side of their body to the other, rather than one side of the screen to the other.] *You can use your hand to show me where you are on your scale. Having your hand all the way to one side of your screen shows me that you are fully here and present in this moment. When you are over here, you are aware of the here-and-now, you can notice the things around you, how you're feeling, and can listen to cues from your body, like if you're hungry or uncomfortable. Go ahead and bring your hand all the way here, to one side of your screen. Okay, great, having your hand here shows me that you are fully here.*

Okay, now move that hand all the way to the other side of your screen. Having your hand there shows me that you're disconnected from the present moment - your awareness is fully somewhere else, perhaps back in a memory, so it feels like you're back in that time, or perhaps nowhere at all - like being numb or shut down. From here, it can be hard to be aware of the things and people around you and to listen to your body. Okay, now bring your hand somewhere in the middle of the screen. [Therapist demonstrates this with their own hand.] Having your hand here shows that you are in the middle - kind-of here, and kind-of somewhere else. From here, you may have an awareness of your body and your surroundings, but at the same time, you might feel like you're starting to get pulled into the past, maybe

getting overwhelmed by thoughts or feelings from that time, or you can feel your body starting to shut down or disconnect. This is the Scale of Presence.

Art directive: *It can take some time to know what it feels like to be at different points along this scale. One way to explore this is through artmaking. If you'd like, you can create your own scale to have in front of you while you practice the skill of coming back to the present moment. Begin by noticing how you experience being all the way present in your body - how do you know you are present? Can you think of an experience or an activity that makes you feel grounded, present, and connected? How do you experience that in your body? See if you can represent being fully present using color, shapes, symbols, lines, words, or in any way you'd like, on one piece of paper. There is no right or wrong way to do this - this is just for you. [Therapist leaves time for the client to complete their image.] Now place your image on the side of your screen that will represent being fully present. You can place it wherever you would like on that side. [The therapist gives the client time to place their image where they would like.] This marks one end of the scale.*

Now we will explore the other end of the scale on a separate piece of paper. Begin by noticing how you experience being disconnected from the present moment and fully somewhere else, like back in a memory, overwhelmed or shut down? How do you know if you are all the way over here [therapist brings their hand to the side of the screen that indicates disconnection]?

See if you can represent being fully somewhere else or disconnected using color, shapes, symbols, lines, or words, on that piece of paper. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to do this. [Therapist leaves time for the client to complete their image.] Now place your image on the other side of your screen, the side that will represent being fully disconnected, fully somewhere else. This is the other end of the scale. Notice these two images in front of you, one on each side of your screen - this is your scale of presence.

Gesturing the scale: *Experiment with moving your hand along your scale of presence, from being all the way present to fully somewhere else, moving your hand from side to the other. Notice where the middle of your scale is. Where are you now on your scale? [Allow time for the client to self-assess.] Remember that it is a scale so we naturally move along it. Sometimes you might feel fully here and other times you might realize, "Oh, where have I been?" as if you were somewhere else. When you catch yourself all the way over there, that's great noticing, because then you can take actions to reconnect with your body and your surroundings using the COME BACK skills that we will practice together.*

Applying the skill: *You can use this scale at the beginning and end of each activity to notice if the activity was helpful in coming back to the present moment.*

Script from *EMDR and Creative Arts Therapies* (Davis et al, 2022)
Inviting the Body, Movement, and the Creative Arts into Telehealth:
A Culturally Responsive Model for Online EMDR.

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