

## First Aid Kit

### Part 3- Regulating, soothing ourselves, handling emotions- Using our Bodies and Meditation

Hi again everyone!

As I said last week I know how difficult it can be at times when our emotions and feelings take over and overwhelm us. But it is really is beneficial to try to accept these emotions without judging them or being afraid of them - I know- easier said than done!! But if we could see them instead as messengers bringing us information then we could begin to resolve things in our lives that need to be resolved- things that may be going on right now or things that are coming up from difficult times in our past.

Just to acknowledge again, emotions, can, at times seem overwhelming and terrifying- but with practice we can begin to change that. Viewing them in a positive, friendly way is the key to beginning that change.

A good way to for us to practice allowing the emotions to be there is called 'titration' <sup>1</sup>

#### **\*\*Titration**

Is a method of allowing emotions to be there, in a controlled way- to drop in little by little-

- Imagine allowing a tap to drip very slowly and gently and then turning off the tap when its enough- This is titration - allowing as much of the emotion as we can handle and then turning off the tap when the emotion gets to be too much.

So we expose ourselves to as much of the emotion as we can handle in that moment- (it could be 10 seconds)and with practise we build up out tolerance of it until it no longer frightens us.

NB.

Please note that if you have gone through traumatic experiences in the past your body may well react very strongly to this, so a very slow build up is required- I do advise that in this case, working through with a suitable trauma informed professional would be best.

When we feel unsafe or threatened (don't forget that our own thoughts and interpretations of situations can needlessly make us feel unsafe at times) we react emotionally- we can go to a place of arousal and from there into fight or flight or we can go to a place of depression which is like a shut down or collapse.

And remember this is our body and brains' way of protecting us- so no judgement!!

I mentioned the window of tolerance last week- it is the place we need to get to in order to feel safe - a place where emotions are not too high (anxiety etc.) and not too low (depression, feeling very down).<sup>2</sup>



Adapted from - Siegel, D. (2009). Mindsight - The New Science of Personal Transformation. NSW, Australia: Scribe Publications.

When our emotions become too much for us to handle we can try using certain techniques to bring us into the 'Window of Tolerance' which is the place where we are in control, where we are able to manage our emotions. When we are able to manage our emotions we feel safe!

Last week we went over the ways our mind can help us do that and today I'm going to outline some ways we use our body to do that.

It is best to practice these activities on a regular basis- when we do this we bring our nervous system to an overall calmer place and so when something happens to throw us off kilter we don't go so far from our window of tolerance- we are at a calmer place to begin with and can get back there faster too!

### So lets get to the activities-

keep in mind practice makes much better so do keep practising, knowing that you might be terrible to start (like everyone who starts something new!) but you will get better as you go along.

### Mindfulness Meditation<sup>3</sup>

Mindfulness is usually described as a practice which encourages us to focus attention on our moment-by-moment experience. We try to do that with an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance and very importantly- non-judgement!

Practising mindfulness is simply experiencing the present moment, without trying to change anything. We can focus on external things like sights, sounds and smells and we can also attend to internal processes such as thoughts, feelings, pain physical sensations.

Mindfulness is a secular activity meaning it is not a religious activity- it was adapted from Buddhist teachings by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the late 70's/early 80's in the University of Massachusetts Medical School who developed it to create a stress reduction programme in order to help patients deal with stress as well as physical pain.

Mindfulness has been shown to help us function better in many many ways- it is shown to be very beneficial for anxiety and depression, to improve attention and memory, pain management, insomnia, functioning in relationships, impulse control. <sup>4</sup>

### \*\*Science bit

What's important here is that regular practice of mindfulness meditation has been shown to reduce activity in the amygdala and increase activity in the pre-frontal cortex- remember from the first two weeks- this is the key to controlling stress and our emotions! <sup>4</sup>

I would not be able to successfully teach you Mindfulness here but if you look on line, on Youtube there are so many free resources to get you started. I would recommend Jon Kabat-Zinn himself, Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, but you will find your own that you prefer I'm sure. Also there are many apps to get you started such as Headspace, Mindfulness Guided Meditation- I suggest that you play around until you find the one you like!

NB- if you have experienced difficulties or trauma in the past, meditating can possibly be very difficult and triggering and so I recommend you do this a little at a time - like titration above. If you still are not able to feel safe while doing it, it may be better to try the more active Mindfulness techniques like being aware of what is around you, noticing sights and sounds, smells, people. These are the informal techniques of Mindfulness and are also a way of being present in the moment but in a way which may feel safer for you.

### Focused Breathing

Breathing in a slow and focused way is a fantastic way to slow things down for us and particularly to bring us out of the fight or flight stress reaction. If you wish you can sit or lie in a comfortable position and just focus on the in-breath and then the out-breath in a Mindful way.

There are many breathing exercises out there which are very valuable in helping us regulate ourselves and relax, but one which I practice with clients and recommend is where you breathe in for a count of 4 seconds and allow the out-breath extend to 7 seconds. The long out-breath allows our heart rate to reduce which sends a signal via the vagus nerve<sup>5</sup> to the brain telling it that all is okay in the body- this allows the brain to calm also, furthering that loop I talked about in the first week.

NB- Again- if you have experienced difficulties or trauma in the past, breathing like this can possibly be very difficult and triggering and so I recommend you do this a little at a time - like titration above. If you still are not able to feel safe while doing it, it may be better to try the more active techniques like exercise to regulate yourself- there is nothing wrong with your reaction- it is just your body, again trying to protect you. If you are able to start work with a psychotherapist or psychologist they will hopefully be able to allow you to work through the past and gradually feel safe while doing breathing exercises.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise is basically lying in a comfortable position and purposefully tensing and relaxing different parts of our body- It is widely used in therapy to promote relaxation and fight stress.

I have provided a script for you to follow, which can be found accompanying this piece- it is also available on [TherapyAid.com](https://www.therapyaid.com)

## Yoga

Yoga is recommended by many top psychologists as a tool for emotional regulation, dealing with trauma, dealing with stress, anxiety and depression <sup>6</sup>. Studies have shown that it directly helps with emotional regulation, helping us to reduce the fight flight, faint or freeze response to stress and threat. There are many different yoga practices and they cater for different abilities and experience- A very popular practice of yoga called Hatha Yoga combines body poses, meditation and focused breathing all of which I have mentioned as part of this emotional regulation piece. Pranayama yoga breathing exercises is also very valuable <sup>5</sup>.

At the moment in the absence of classes you can go online and find a wealth of yoga practices which you can follow from your own home- enjoy!!

## Exercise

Exercise and dance have also been shown to regulate our nervous systems, calm and soothe us and help us in times of stress. Regular, moderate exercise for 20 minutes or more is very beneficial for us, producing endorphins and dopamine, all happy transmitters and hormones which help the body and brain in times of stress and perceived threat.

## Other simple ways to regulate-

**Nature-** get out into nature even if its watching birds in your garden- its really important and very valuable- recent studies found that just being in green spaces is very beneficial for mental health, and to help against anxiety and depression <sup>8</sup>

**Self hug-** our brain doesn't know its ourselves giving the hug and it creates a safe boundary around ourselves where we can feel safe <sup>1</sup>

**Rubbing and interacting with a pet-** This calms and regulates our nervous system <sup>5</sup>

Humming and singing - soothes the vagus nerve as it travels back up to the brain bringing with it a message of calm <sup>5</sup>

### Finding your own way!!

I believe it is really important to find your own way to regulate and soothe yourself in times of difficulty, and it is important to test different methods until you find the ones which suit you. On certain days a tried and tested method may not work and so it is beneficial to have a few in the bag which you can call on to help you- on a given day it might just be a cup of tea or snuggling under the duvet, on another it might be taking a walk in the woods or chatting to a friend- you find what suits you!

### References

- 1- Look up Peter Levine
- 2- Look up Dan Siegel
- 3- Look up Jon Kabat-Zinn
- 4- Look up

<https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-brain-research-neuroscience/>

This page is great- it lists many studies which have researched and found the benefit of Mindfulness for a list of issues.

- 5- Look up Stephen Porges
- 6- Look up Tara Brach, Bessel Van der Kolk, Stephen Porges, Janina Fisher
- 7- Look up research by Nogle, Nogle, Gard & Wilson and Haden, Hagins, Papouchis & Michael Ramirez (2015)
- 8- Look up- Article by Pearson & Craig-  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01178/full>