
Soothe the Fight-or-Flight Response

Anxiety primes us for danger. Buzzing thoughts—excessive worry, rumination, or avoidance—kicks up our physical readiness for danger. Our feeling of anxiety primes us to scan and search our environment to find the threat and keep us safe. Sometimes anxiety fits the facts of the situation and prevents danger. But what about when anxiety isn't helpful, and is responding to non-threatening stimuli?

The following technique involves a number of self-soothing techniques with the goal of communicating: “it’s okay; we are not in danger” to your amygdala. Try several of these, and identify what feels most resonant and calming for you.

SELF-SOOTHING TECHNIQUES

1 One of the most impactful (and common) soothing techniques is diaphragmatic breathing. What’s different between this and taking deep breaths is that the focus is on expanding and contracting the belly, not the lungs or chest, and to exhale for longer than you inhale.

Example: Imagine yourself breathing in to inflate a balloon that’s in your belly. This breath moves through your entire body, reaching all the way down to your toes. As you exhale, imagine blowing out several candles, exhaling evenly and slowly out your mouth. This will likely feel awkward for a while, especially if you are not accustomed to attending to or changing your breath. Try it for a minute or so, and keep practicing every day.

2 Soothing through touch can be highly effective. This could mean massaging your

palms, your temples, your feet, or your sternum. It could also mean holding something comforting, such as squeezing a stuffed animal, hugging a pet, feeling a soft blanket, putting a hot compress on your shoulders, or holding a warm mug.

3 Checking the facts of the situation can help reassure your brain that you are indeed safe. Consider and name various facts, big or small. This can include your name, your date of birth, and other personal facts you know to be unchanging. It can also include details about your location– look around and name the room, building, city, and state of where you are, and also some of the items within the room. You can also name the ways in which your needs are met (for example “I have food and water; I have a place to sleep; I have electricity; I have friends and community; I have security in my home and work”)

4 Soothing doesn't have to mean fighting your thoughts. Your fight-or-flight response is intended to help you. It is trying to be helpful, as misguided as it may be. Try to acknowledge how your brain is trying to help, and thank it for its effort. For example, you could say to your brain, “I know you're trying to help me hold on to my close relationships. Thank you for looking out for me.”

Based off of DBT Distress Tolerance skills:

<https://www.guilford.com/books/DBT-Skills-Training-Handouts-and-Worksheets/Marsha-Linehan/9781572307810>