


When Relationships Hurt

Emotional Regulation & Stabilisation in Pictures

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COUNSELLING & PSYCHOTHERAPY



Research has shown that the therapeutic relationship is the most important factor in successful trauma informed therapy. Our bodies and brains are continuously scanning for micro cues of danger and so our nervous system is regulated when we feel safe in our physical and social environment. Therefore the therapeutic environment required to heal from trauma and insecure attachments, needs to facilitate the individual to regain a sense of safety, trust, consistency, connection, a feeling of equality in power and control, which raises the person's self-esteem.

This is aided by validation, space, empathy, being given permissions, being believed, being accepted, where you can share your thoughts and feelings no matter what they might be.

The neuroplasticity of our brains (the brain's ability to adapt and change to new experiences), means we make new neural pathways, which get strengthened over time with repetition and consistency. It is through this where we heal and make long-lasting change via relationships. Therefore, in relationships, where we feel safe and valued, we will naturally heal and calm our nervous system and learn to regulate our emotions. This is not solely through the therapeutic relationship, it is also via the relationships we have with the people in our lives.

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ALL EMOTIONS ARE GOOD EMOTIONS

All our emotions are there to help us...

- Sadness – to process the past and signal the need for help from others
- Anxiety – to protect us from danger and predict danger in our future
- Anger – to escape from dangerous situations and problem solve
- Happy – to enjoy the past, present and future

Try not to discount any of them, they all come and go.

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As a society we have a belief that any other emotion other than happiness is bad or negative. However, sadness, anger and fear are adaptive, helpful and healthy. They all serve a well intentioned function. They can get 'stuck' if the emotions are misdirected, out of proportion or based on misinterpretations, and these would therefore need working through.

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When you try to suppress a ball under
water it never stays down!
Neither does trying to suppress your
emotions!
Let them float!



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A common reaction when we're fearful of emotions, whether that is sadness, anxiety or anger, is to try and push those emotions and bodily sensations away. We bury them, distract ourselves, use 'Racket Feelings' (more 'acceptable' feelings instead of the disapproved of or scary feelings, e.g. anger to cover feelings of sadness). However, it rarely works for long, we explode later, it manifests as pain, chronic fatigue, emotional disorders, obsessions etc.

Our feelings will pass in time and when we allow ourselves to feel them we heal. It's OK to feel!

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ACCEPTING DISTRESS

Firstly, what acceptance isn't... it's not having to like the distress, wallowing in it, or accepting this is what it'll always be.

What it is... an acceptance that it is normal as a human-being to feel all emotions and that they come and go, usually there with an intention to aid our survival.

It is a change to how we pay attention to the emotion – allow the feelings to be there without trying to judge them, change them or get rid of them. Just allow them to pass whilst being compassionate to yourself.

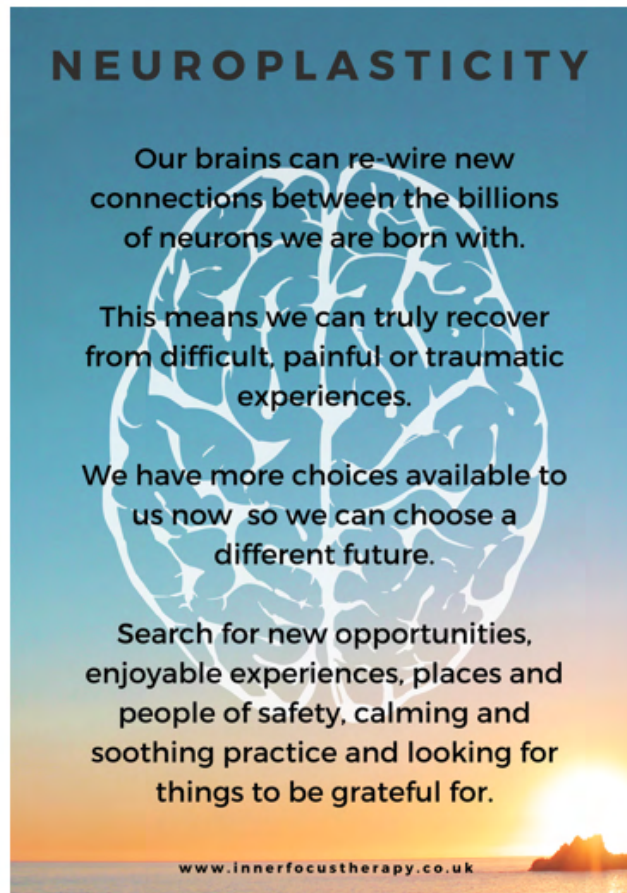
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In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, one of the basic premises is we need to accept distress as 'fighting' it or trying to avoid it will intensify our distress in the present or increase it in the longer-term. Therefore, as part of emotional regulation we need to learn to accept our emotions, that they will come and go and will not be permanent. It is not to try and control our emotions, but change how we respond to emotions (and thoughts, urges, beliefs etc.) – notice our emotional state, name what's happening without judgement, whilst being supportive and compassionate towards ourselves.

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NEUROPLASTICITY

Our brains can re-wire new connections between the billions of neurons we are born with.

This means we can truly recover from difficult, painful or traumatic experiences.

We have more choices available to us now so we can choose a different future.

Search for new opportunities, enjoyable experiences, places and people of safety, calming and soothing practice and looking for things to be grateful for.

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The great news is that we can change! Recovery is possible! This is due to the neuroplasticity of our brain - our brain can be re-wired through new learning, processing the past, acting differently, breaking habits etc etc. We can feel safe again and feel back in the present.

Polyvagal Theory

Our Autonomic Nervous System, activates different states to promote survival:

Sympathetic Nervous System - 'fight or flight'

Parasympathetic Nervous System (Dorsal) - 'freeze'

Parasympathetic Nervous System (Ventral) - 'rest & digest'

Activating our Vagus Nerve can restore a state of calm, allow us to become socially connected, compassionate and enables us to think clearer.

Our vagus nerve reaches from our brain, through to our ears, throat, lungs, heart, stomach, intestines to our colon (as well as some other organs on the way), so we can activate it from various parts using 'Bottom-Up' Processes.



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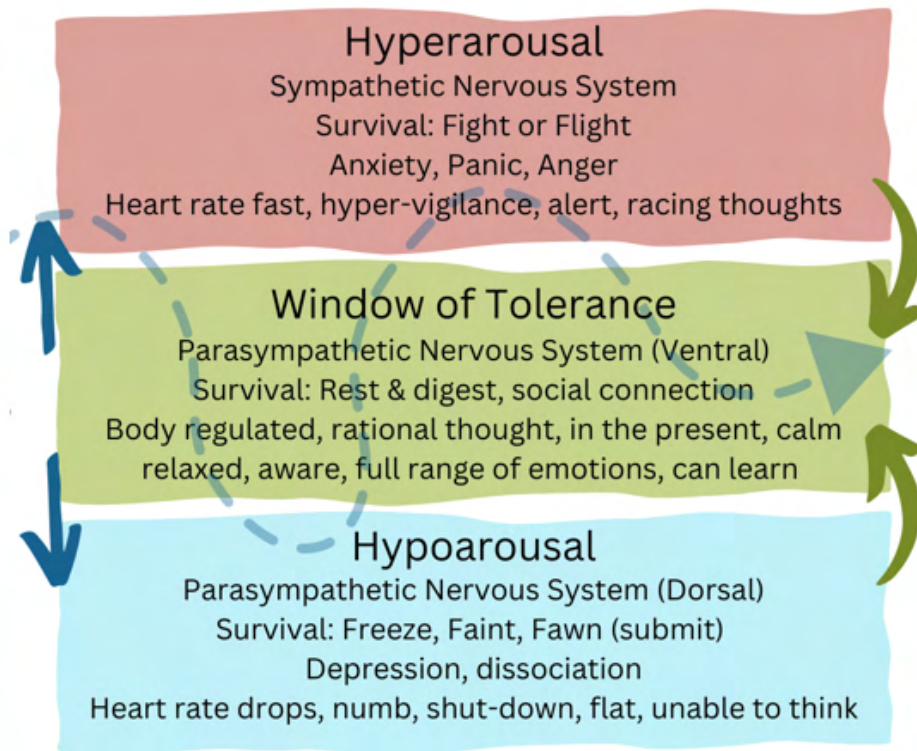
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Polyvagal Theory was introduced by Stephen Porges in 1994, the theory centres around an understanding that the vagus nerve plays a particular role in emotional regulation, social connection and the fear response, which is the way the body responds under threat and can get 'stuck' following trauma.

This means we can stabilise ourselves when triggered by directly targeting our body so we can move back to the Ventral Vagal Nerve.

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Window of Tolerance



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The Window of Tolerance is a way to explain the amount of emotional distress we can tolerate and cope with, and how we respond when we're triggered outside of the window. One person's window may be bigger or smaller than another person's, and it can also be dependent on how many other stressors are going on in our life already 'filling up' our window. As such, stressors we can usually manage may be more difficult when we're already close to the top of our window.

When we're in the green window we can rest, digest food, feel calm, attend to the present moment, connect with others socially, think rationally and can learn.

When we're in the red hyperarousal state, we have gone out of our window of tolerance and into fight/flight (panic).

When we're in the blue hypoarousal state, we have gone out of our window of tolerance and into freeze / dissociation / depression.

We need to learn ways to regulate our emotions so we can stay within our window, as well as how to stabilise when we're out of it, so we can get back to 'rest and digest'.

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STABILISATION

<p>Top-Down Therapy</p> <p>Begins with how the mind is interpreting information</p> <p>Grounding, positive imagery, STOP technique, container technique, spot the difference</p>  	<p>Bottom-Up Therapy</p> <p>Begins with what we feel from the body's sensations</p> <p>Body work, butterfly hug, hand on heart, meditation, yoga, sighing, yawning</p>  
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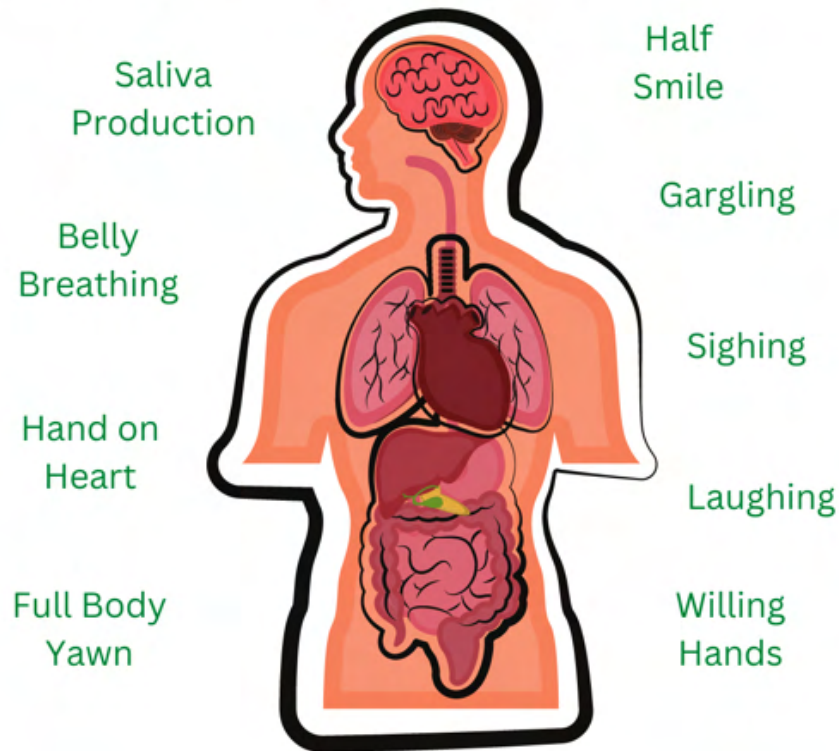
Stabilisation can be as part of a top-down approach (cognitively) or bottom-up (from the body). Signals go both down and up, from and to the brain, to help us stabilise. Stabilisation is the process of calming down *after* we have become dysregulated (out of our Window of Tolerance). Regulation is the process of staying in our Window of Tolerance. Both are important in the Safety and Stabilisation Phase of EMDR.

Bottom-Up Approaches



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Polyvagal Theory - Bottom Up Processes



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There are various ways to access the vagus nerve when we are in freeze or fight / flight in order to activate the Vagus Branch of the Parasympathetic Nervous System – to ‘switch on’ the ‘rest and digest’ system where we can feel calmer and connect socially. The processes for these are explained in the ‘Bottom Up’ slides.



Self Soothing Box – this is a way to access healthy coping methods when we need them; to have sensory objects which can help ground us in the present, evoke positive memories, help us be compassionate towards ourselves, or to do something which might make us feel pleasure or satisfaction.

Anything can go in the box or bag. But it is important to try and include things for different senses:

- visual – photos of people who make us feel good or of special times
- auditory – music
- olfactory (smell) – lavender oil or coffee
- touch – a soft blanket or teddy
- activities – games, a colouring pad
- other – affirmations, a journal of positive qualities, positive words or memories from friends or loved ones. The list is endless.

Keep it somewhere easy and accessible for when it's needed.



Soothing Grounding – When we feel bad about ourselves, we are often very critical of ourselves or giving ourselves impossible or unfair inflexible standards. Instead, we can be more compassionate to ourselves – as we would be to our friends or children, in order to foster good self-esteem. These are some ideas of how we can do that.

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Butterfly Hug – when we're triggered we know self compassion helps, as well as bilateral stimulation, like in EMDR. The butterfly hug can help with this.

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belly breathing

Place one hand on your upper chest
Place your other hand on your tummy just above
your belly button

Breathe in slowly through your nose
You should feel your belly rise and the hand on
your chest should stay still

Breathe out through your mouth

Let your belly relax

Exhale slowly through slightly pursed lips
Repeat a few times until you feel calmer



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Belly Breathing – the vagus nerve runs through our lungs, so belly breathing is a technique which activates our calm rest and digest state.



Music



Music can help you shift your emotional state – upbeat music can help your brain produce our “happy hormones” such as dopamine and serotonin. Calming music helps relax the body and mind.

Our vagal nerve, which activates our “rest and digest” calm system, passes through our vocal cords and inner ear, so vibrations, humming and singing along, helps produce a calming effect.



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Music has the ability to switch our emotional state, use different music playlists for different times, if you need lifting up from a hypoaroused state play something upbeat and happy, if you need to be calmed down from a hyperaroused state then use something slower and calmer. Be creative for what types of music work for you. Note – when you’re feeling down and low, don’t play sad slow music unless it’s helping you release suppressed sadness, when you’re feeling anxious, angry or worked up, don’t play music which will fuel this state.

Full body yawn

Yawning or stretching disturbs our body's threat response and forces our calm 'rest & digest' system to act, this restores our body to a resting state.

- Stretch your body with arms stretching out behind you.
- Spread your fingers as far apart as they can comfortably go.
- Scrunch up the muscles of your face.
- Start to yawn on purpose.
- Bend your body to your left at your waist, and stretch out your right hip, leg, foot and toes.
- Repeat on the other side.
- Keep yawning as you stretch.



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A Full Body Yawn can also directly access the vagus nerve, bringing a state of calm.

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 **SALIVA** 

When you're anxious or stressed your mouth often dries because part of the stress emergency response is to shut off the digestive system.

When you start making saliva, you switch on the digestive system again & the relaxation response.

There are a couple of ways to produce saliva:

1. Rub your saliva glands – these are just under your jaw bone where it opens.
2. Gently bite several times on the sides of your tongue with your back molars.



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Producing more Saliva can also directly access the vagus nerve, bringing a state of calm.

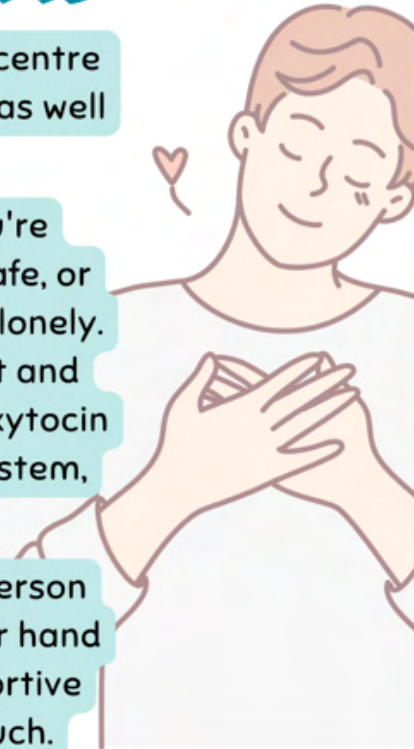
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hand on heart

Physical contact is at the centre of feeling safe and secure, as well as cared for.

This can help when you're triggered and don't feel safe, or when you're feeling sad or lonely. It helps activate our "rest and digest" system, releases oxytocin and calms the nervous system, regulating stress.

You don't need another person for this, you can place your hand over your heart for supportive self-compassionate touch.



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Hand on Heart is a way to treat our body compassionately and help us feel safe and secure.

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Half Smile

Half-smile uses our body to teach our brain that we're safe, which then regulates our whole system.



1. Relax the muscles in your face, from your forehead down to your jaw and chin.
2. Allow the corners of your mouth to turn up ever so slightly.
3. Adopt a peaceful facial expression.

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Half Smile is another way to treat our body compassionately and help us feel safe and secure.

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Willing hands

Willing Hands uses our body to teach our brain that we're safe, which then regulates our whole system.

Whether you are sitting, standing or lying down you can do this technique.

Place your hands with your palms up, fingers relaxed, as if you are receiving something.



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Willing Hands is a further way to treat our body compassionately and help us feel safe and secure.

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Gargling

Gargling stimulates the vagus nerve by activating the muscles in the back of the throat while exhaling slowly.

Get a glass of water and gargle for as long as you can manage.



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Gargling is another easy way to activate your parasympathetic nervous system and bring a state of calm to the body.

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LAUGHING OUT LOUD

A full belly laugh stimulates the vagus nerve and is contagious!

This resets your system and tells our body and brain we're safe.

After all you can't laugh when you're in danger!



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Laughing when we feel threatened may seem counter-intuitive, but when we are in a safe situation and can laugh it helps regulate our body and make us feel safe. Think about a time when you have been with a friend and they have made you laugh, you can feel instantly better. Save a list of videos or funny stories on your phone so you can access them when you need them.

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SIGHING

A deep sigh is your body-brain's natural way to release tension and reset your nervous system.

Studies have shown that a deep sigh returns the autonomic nervous system from an over-activated sympathetic state to a more balanced parasympathetic state.

Simply breathe out fully with a long exhale.

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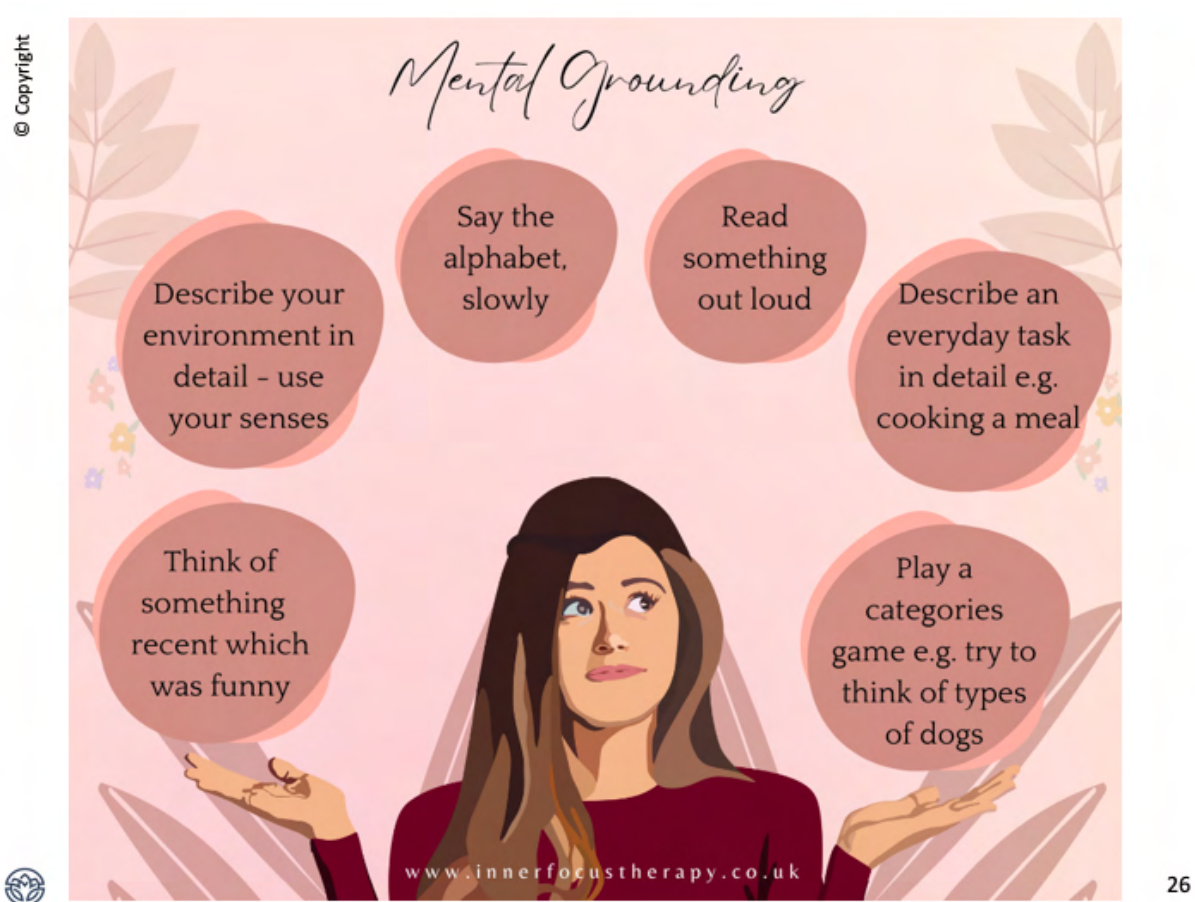


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Sighing, is similar to breathing exercises, but can be quicker. The exhale activates the vagus nerve and return us to a state of balance.

Top-Down Approaches





Mental Grounding – these are some ways to bring you back into the present and get your thinking brain back online when triggered.

Describing your environment in detail using all your senses is particularly helpful as you learn your environment and the present is safe and is not your past, which in turn reduces the threat response, the reptilian brain and gets us back in our window of tolerance.

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5,4,3,2,1 EXERCISE

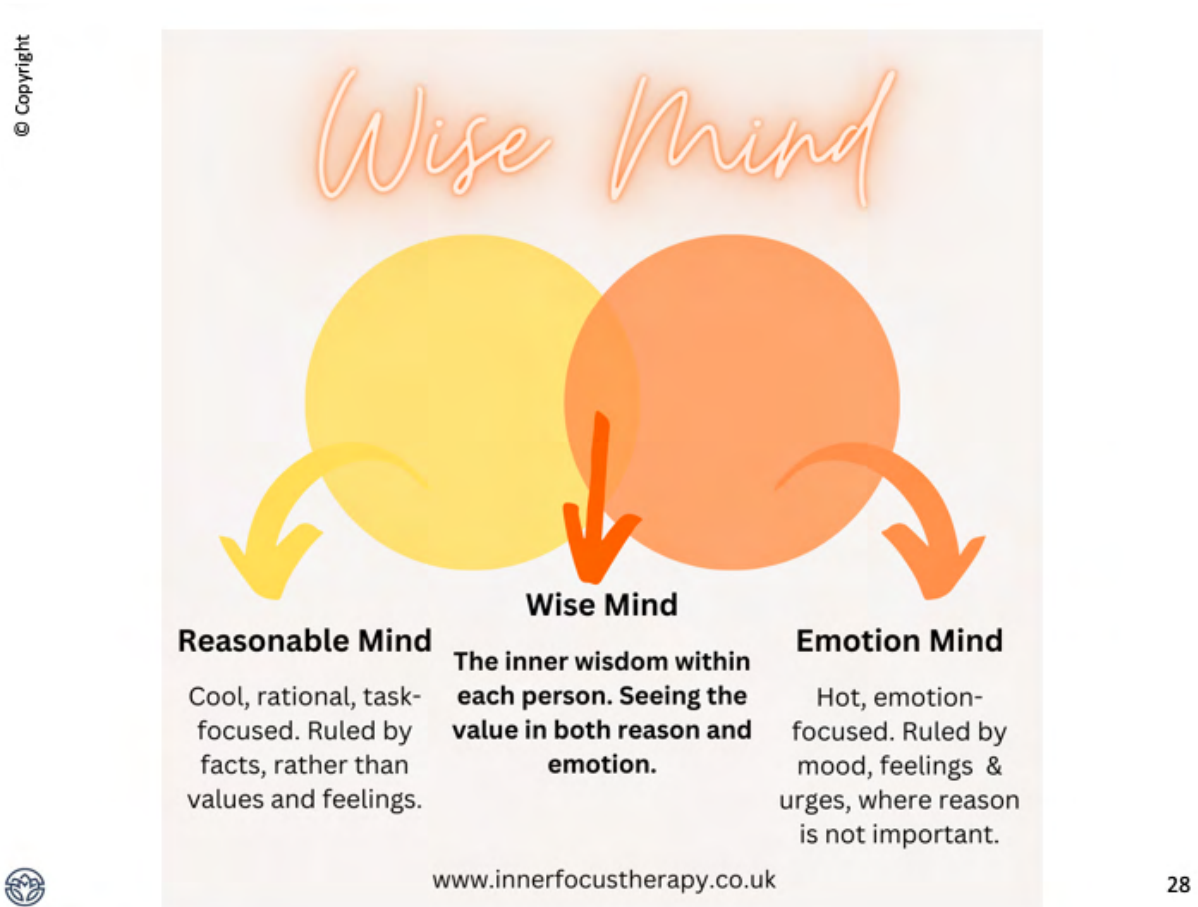
- look for **5** things you can see
- listen for **4** things you can hear
- touch **3** things you can find
- smell **2** things you like
- take **1** slow, deep breath

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The 5,4,3,2,1 exercise is a mental 'Earth Element' grounding technique to help clients reconnect with their present surroundings in order to feel safe in the present and generate an external focus.



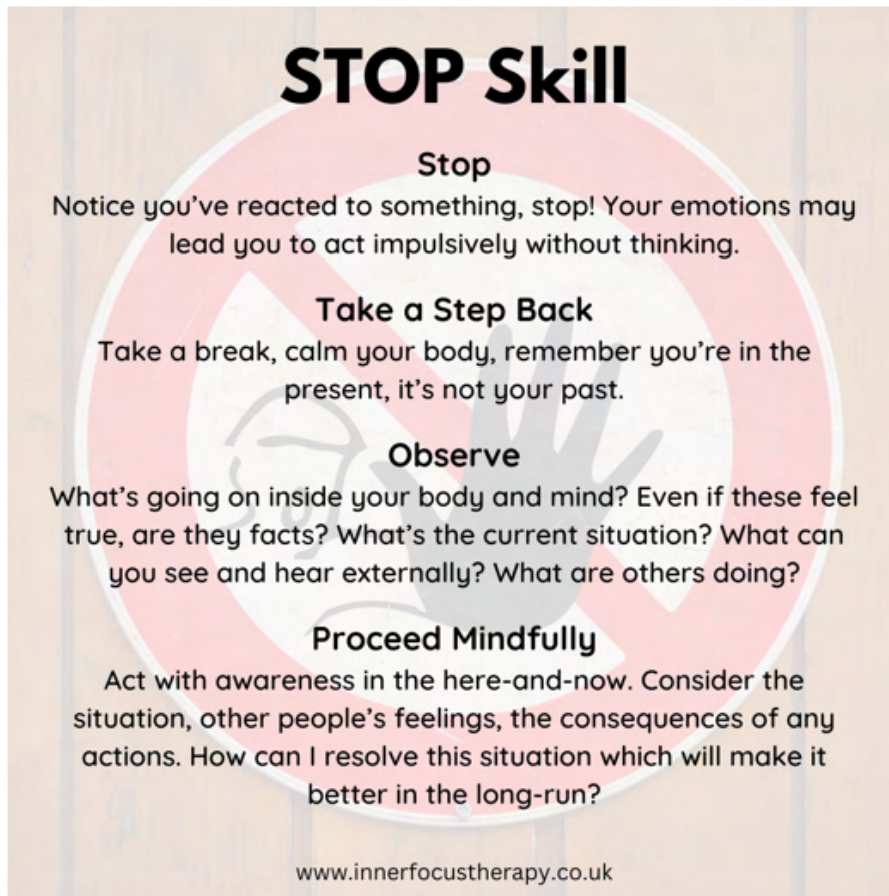
Wise Mind – this is a Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) concept. The concept describes us having two different brain processes:

- Reasonable Mind, which is cool, rationale, task focused and ruled by facts.
- Emotion Mind, which is hot, emotion focused and ruled by our mood, urges, our past memories, core belief systems.

Both of these Minds can cause us problems; shutting off our emotions versus being ruled by emotions. Instead, we need a balance of both Minds – our Wise Mind – where we can acknowledge both aspects and respond, make decisions and choices from a place of inner wisdom within ourselves, based on how we feel and what's rational.

For example, a sense of rationally knowing we're not to blame when someone shouts at us (Rational Mind), but feeling and acting as if we are to blame, making us feel shame and as a result we avoid (Emotion Mind). Wise Mind would acknowledge how we're feeling, whilst also acknowledging what we know to be true in the situation. This allows us to accept the distress but act in a way that helps in the long-term, e.g. not avoiding and not apologising when we haven't done anything wrong, reminding ourselves we're OK.

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STOP Skill

Stop
Notice you've reacted to something, stop! Your emotions may lead you to act impulsively without thinking.

Take a Step Back
Take a break, calm your body, remember you're in the present, it's not your past.

Observe
What's going on inside your body and mind? Even if these feel true, are they facts? What's the current situation? What can you see and hear externally? What are others doing?

Proceed Mindfully
Act with awareness in the here-and-now. Consider the situation, other people's feelings, the consequences of any actions. How can I resolve this situation which will make it better in the long-run?

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STOP Skill – this is a Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) technique used to stop and think before acting in habitual, unhealthy or impulsive ways. To create some distance before reacting.

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When we're triggered, have a flashback, an intrusive image or memory from our past, we can feel like we're back there reliving it.



Spot the difference between then and now



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Spot the Difference Technique – When we're triggered (e.g. by a smell, something we see, hear, feel, sense), we often relive the past, experience a flashback or feel like we 'rubberband' back to the past feeling like we did back then.

A way to ground ourselves back in present safety is to play spot the difference – look around our current environment and see what is different now; what's present in the room, who is with me, am I alone, what can I see / hear / smell / touch / taste that is different?

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NOTICE AND NAME

Emotions, negative thinking, and stressful experiences are hard for all of us to manage and deal with. Avoiding or obsessing about these can get us caught in unhelpful vicious cycles. Instead, Notice, Name & Nurture...

Notice – what am I noticing in my body, emotions, thoughts, urges?

Name – "I notice I'm feeling anxious" or "I notice I'm having an intrusive thought"

Nurture – focus on what you need until it passes.

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Notice and Name – based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Mindfulness – we need to create distance between what we are thinking and feeling and act more like an observer, so we don't act or believe every thought and feeling we have is a fact. With the addition of being compassionate towards ourselves whilst we do this so we are caring for our needs in that moment.

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Positive Imagery

Visualise a positive memory or
imagine a happy time.
What can you see, feel, hear, taste,
smell, sense in your body?
Take time to enjoy this for at least
30 seconds.



We can feel happy, strong or empowered when
we think of something positive, whether it was in
the past, present, imagining the future or even a
fantasy. If you spend at least 30 seconds doing
this, our brain will store this as a memory which
you can draw on time and time again.

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Positive Imagery includes the Safe Place exercise used in EMDR. Our brain is wired to look for negatives and signs of danger to ensure we survive. Therefore we don't instinctually look or notice positives, and it takes a much longer time to store positive experiences as memories (milliseconds for negative events and 20-30 seconds for positive events). So we have to work much harder to balance this.

Our brain cannot tell the difference between real and imaginary danger, this means we react with anxiety towards worry and low mood when we are self-critical. The good news is that this also works with positive visualisation and imagery too – when we recall an experience, hold it in mind for 20 seconds, and use our senses to think about it in detail, it will strengthen it as a positive memory. This will also work with positive imagery, even when it is totally imaginary – using positive visualisation for something we are preparing for in the future and when we want to feel good about ourselves for example.

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The Anxiety Equation

What makes Anxiety worse?

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{Over-estimating } \underline{\text{likelihood}} \text{ something bad will happen} \quad \times \quad \text{Over-estimating the } \underline{\text{awfulness}} \text{ of that bad thing (catastrophising)} \\
 \hline
 & \text{Under-estimating } \underline{\text{our ability to cope}} \text{ in the situation} \quad + \quad \text{Under-estimating other sources of } \underline{\text{help}}
 \end{aligned}$$

What makes Anxiety better?

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \text{How likely is this to happen?} \quad \times \quad \text{What's the most realistic outcome?} \\
 \hline
 & \text{How have I coped in the past? What skills do I have to cope?} \quad + \quad \text{Is there anything else or anyone else who can help?}
 \end{aligned}$$

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The Anxiety Equation – the more we engage in the thinking styles in the black text equation the more anxious we will feel:

- Overestimating the likelihood of something bad happening
- Overestimating how awful it would be if that bad thing happens (catastrophising)
- Underestimating our ability to cope
- Underestimating other people and resources that can support us

To reality test our thoughts and reduce our anxiety, we can challenge these thinking styles (questions in the blue text), which in turn can then help us make choices about how we would prefer to act in the here and now.

Sources

Disclaimer – I have been a therapist for many years and thus cannot reference where I have learned all theories and aspects that I have covered in this book, however, I have listed key texts and sites which have shaped my thinking.

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- Images and graphics – Canva www.canva.com

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