



Self-Soothing Strategies

Be willing to track your experience and monitor your level of upset. In this way, you can begin to interrupt the upset before it gets out of control. Here is a recap of some ideas to help you develop the ability to effectively monitor your internal states and intervene:

- ✦ Once you've learned how to breathe when you're upset, practice as often as you can.
- ✦ The more often you manage to remember, the more likely you will be to remember again. And no matter how upset you are, you can always return to the safety of the breath. Specifically, you might want to practice kumbach (breathing technique): Take a breath in gently. Hold it for just a moment. Slowly exhale until you're nearly empty. Hold the breath out for a moment. Slowly take a breath in until you're nearly full. Hold it. Repeat. (You can also try holding only on the out breath, or only on the inhalation.)
- ✦ It can be really helpful to stop talking, stop thinking about the story, otherwise we often find ourselves telling the same story over and over again! Resisting the urge to keep telling the story will help "de-fuel" the escalation of upset and lower your heart rate. Many people find the exercise of Separating Facts from Feelings to be most helpful at this point.
- ✦ If you haven't been able to slow yourself down while in the presence of what's upsetting you, consciously take some space. If that level of upset and activation happens in an interaction with another person, let him or her know that you will be back in 10 minutes...or a half hour (whatever makes sense in the situation). Take some time away from the heat to regain some equilibrium.

NOTE: Taking time out during an upset in a close relationship is not the same as leaving the relationship.

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- ✦ Practice relaxing the muscles that are holding tension. Sometimes people tense their bodies in an attempt to keep unpleasant sensations and feelings away. They become “armored.” Notice if that’s true for you.
- ✦ Remind yourself that any kind of inner experience can be befriended. Talk to the feelings that are threatening to overwhelm you at the moment. If this were a beloved friend, lover, or child, what would help make it possible for you to befriend their feelings?
- ✦ When you feel anxious, bring your energy down into the body instead of following the energy out of the body. Feel your spine, legs, feet. Notice the sensation of touching the floor, the ground, or the chair.
- ✦ Remind yourself NOT to take life so personally (much easier to write this than live it!). Life is not out to get you. Notice how frequently you take what happens as a personal affront, or as proof about what’s wrong with you. Those reactions are based on the past, on old stories.
- ✦ Are they what you want to believe now? Be gentle with yourself as you explore these questions. Sure, the reactive patterns are familiar, but they probably don’t represent the kind of life you want. You may just not know what the options are.

Ask yourself: What are some possible alternatives to the experience I’m having? Calmness? Steadiness? Clarity? Warmth? Connectedness?

Ask whatever is so upsetting inside if it will relax and make some room for a more centered part of you.

If you weren’t collapsing or attacking right now, how else might you respond to the situation?

- ✦ How have others that you admire managed in situations like this?
- ✦ Even if you don’t know what it is to be compassionate with yourself, engage yourself in the question: What might compassion be like?
- ✦ Call on your observing self. Notice how these very issues come up in other areas of your life. When have you successfully handled this kind of situation in the past?



What helped then? How might mastering this situation now facilitate ease in other situations down the road?

- ✦ Even if your physiology is out of whack, practice inching toward taking charge. Imagine what it would be like to know you were in control of your life experience. Neither your feelings nor your physiology has to control your life...or your relationships.
- ✦ Master the ability to shift perspective. Remind yourself: This will change; the feelings will ease; my physiology will return to a state of equilibrium.
- ✦ Behave in ways that you will later respect.
- ✦ Separate the facts from the feelings. State the facts. Restate the facts. What feelings do you have about those facts?
- ✦ Separate the past from the present. Look around, what do you see? How old do you feel? If the situation feels overly charged, it probably involves being triggered by associations to the past. The pull is strong, I know, but you don't have to go there!

There are simple statements that can preempt the tendency to regress. If you couple the statements with a determination not to re-traumatize yourself, you can (with practice) avoid a great many painful moments.

- ✦ Try refusing to escalate or act out. As wonderful and satisfying as it may seem to act out, remind yourself of all the ways acting out backfires. It almost always keeps you spinning in pain longer than you need to.
- ✦ Control acting out by finding pleasure in calm, strength, and self-determination, rather than getting pleasure from being perverse, going one up or one down, or being tough and uncaring. Control escalation through refusing to catastrophize, to become outraged, or to indulge in self-righteousness. Comments (to yourself or others) such as "I can't believe this!" "This is unacceptable!" "You're a complete idiot!" may feel satisfying in the moment, but they usually don't bring about a better quality of life for you.

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- ✦ Develop nurturing friendships, hobbies, and physical activities. Learn to play and have fun. Actively search out events, situations, and people that draw out the best in you.
- ✦ Refrain from turning to food, relying on substances, over-exercising, or indulging in endless catharsis (“feeling your feelings”). These are not forms of self-soothing. Unfortunately, they will not take you off the hamster wheel of overreaction, or toward a calmer, more genuinely happy state.
- ✦ Learn all the sneaky ways you defend yourself, bully others, collapse, become a victim, and deflect what’s true—all so you don’t have to face yourself. When you can stand in the truth of your life, even when it’s to fully understand how absolutely hard it is sometimes, then you become less fearful of being truly alive. It also helps to build compassion, which is the essential ingredient of healing.

Four Key Statements:

- ✦ The danger is NOT happening now.
- ✦ Something old is being triggered.
- ✦ This is about the past.
- ✦ I will not allow my history to keep me from living the life I want now.

