

## Introduction to the Self Soothe Skill

Living the Life I want to Live, revolves around living a life that is in line with our true core values and beliefs. When we know what this looks like, and we set up our lives to live this way in the areas that are important to us, the only thing that gets in the way is when a story from the past activates an overwhelming emotional experience, which kicks in an automatic behavioural response designed to cope with the unwanted emotion. This automatic behavioural response is an attempt to soothe the part of our personality that is experiencing the distress in our system. This is why learning how to Self-soothe in a healthy way is an incredibly important aspect of the behaviour change process.

In my own journey, it was extremely clear that I'd developed a version of Self-soothing that was not in line with my true core values and beliefs. Using a variety of different substances and several behavioural processes to soothe the parts of me that were sad, lonely, guilty, and ashamed was a way of life that I adopted for a significant period of time. The intention of these behaviours was to remove my emotional pain. In actuality, the impact of these behaviours was to increase the pain I was experiencing as the behaviour, while effective for a short period of time, only intensified the level of emotion I was trying to escape from in the first place. It also had me compromising my values of respect for self, honesty with others, and integrity for the way I wanted to live my life. All of these behaviours left me sitting a space of guilt, shame, sadness, and loneliness, which as I said before, were the exact same emotions I was running from to begin with.

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~Steven Morris RP.

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Self-soothing is all about using our senses in a way that calms and relaxes the discomfort and distress that's active in our system. For example, if I'm performing my regular self check in, and I feel a sense of anxiety in my system that's away from my normal baseline, I can start with practicing the deep breathing exercises that help alleviate anxiety, and at the same time, activate my sense of smell with an aromatherapy exercise that uses specific scents that work for me to soothe my emotional system and calm things down. Learning how to activate our senses to soothe our emotional system is an extremely effective skill to develop, and at the same time, it takes practice to bring it to a level of effectiveness that can meet the emotional need.

If you're anything like me, you're probably used to using Instant Gratification to alleviate your emotional pain. However, short term solutions to long-term problems are not effective when we are trying to Live the Life we Want to Live, whatever that life may look like for you personally. Instant Gratification, and the short cuts we take to achieve it, keep us stuck in all of the old behaviours we are trying to change. When practiced on a regular basis, Self soothing through our senses can quickly reduce the level of intensity we feel in the negative experience of an emotionally overwhelming situation. The following is a list of our senses with some examples of how we can activate them to effectively practice this skill.

### 1. Sight

- Activate your vision to focus on something else around you. try counting how many places you can see a certain color in the room or focus on the texture of an object you are holding. You can also pull out your phone and scroll through some of your favorite photos if this doesn't create a distraction that is ineffective for what it is you're trying to achieve. Using your sight can also help to ground you in the moment, paying attention to what's happening in the environment can bring you into the moment when done from a mindful perspective.

### 2. Hearing

- Listening to songs that can change the emotional experience we are having, playing a podcast or a particular comedian we like that can shift out feelings into a different place, or paying specific attention to the sounds around us, any sounds at all, are all effective ways of using our sense of hearing to soothe our emotional system. Try listening to the sound of the gentle breeze in the trees, or see if you can hear the birds chirping, the steady rumble of the traffic outside, or even the sound of a Clock ticking in the background. What ever works for you to calm things down and alter the current emotional experience.

### 3. Taste

- Taking a small treat can give you something pleasurable to focus on while you're getting through a difficult moment. You don't need to prepare and eat a full meal, a piece of gum, some dried fruit, or a few mints will do the trick. Taste is one that some of us do have to be careful of though. If you're anything like me, sugary sweet food was one of the things I used in an ineffective way to soothe my system when I first stopped using substances to do the same thing. We have to pay attention to the way we use taste for Self soothing, and only use this particular sense if it's effective for you to do so in a healthy way.

#### **4. Touch**

- Try to embrace your sense of touch by noticing how a pen feels in your hand, running your fingers through your hair, or turn your focus towards a coin, keys, or anything you happen to have on your person. When appropriate, you can wrap yourself in a blanket or take a warm bath. Our sense of touch can be used to Self-soothe by using things like stress balls, feeling stones, or anything else that calms our system through touch.

#### **5. Smell**

- Our sense of smell is one of the strongest connections we have to memory. It is also one of the most effective ways to practice Self Soothing through our senses. Find those smells that make you feel warm and connected to a time in the past that has good memories for you. If you want to use your sense of smell for grounding, focus on the smells in your environment. Whether it's good or bad, focus on whatever the current scent is in the air. See if you can identify the smell or break it down into its components. Or, for easy access to a scent you find calming, put a few drops of your favorite essential oil onto a cotton ball and keep it with you in a plastic bag, then use this when you find yourself in an emotional experience that needs to be soothed in a healthy and effective way.

#### **6. Movement**

- While technically we only have five physical senses, in DBT we introduce the sixth sense of movement. Our emotional state can be altered by the movements of our body, so use this knowledge to practice Self-soothing by literally moving around. Take a walk around the block or dance around to your favorite song! Whatever it takes to soothe your emotional system away from a place of emotional distress that could lead to ineffective behavioural coping mechanisms, into a place of emotional peace and tranquility, one that's conducive for accessing our own state of Wise Mind.

Our senses are a tool you'll always have with you to reduce the intensity of any situation. Try focusing on only one sense at a time to incorporate your practice of mindfulness into the self-soothing skill and make a list of the ways you use this skill effectively on the worksheet provided on the following page.

### Self Soothing Worksheet

#### Sight

List the things you can look at that help calm your emotional system.

#### Hearing

List the things you can listen to that help soothe your emotional system.

#### Taste

List the tastes that help soothe your emotional system.



**Touch**

**List the things you touch that help you to soothe your emotional system.**

**Smell**

**List the scents that help calm your system.**

**Movement**

**List the ways you can move to help you soothe your emotional system.**