Self-Soothing Handout

When you feel flooded, allow yourself a break. It takes action to be willing to accept the life preserver so you can stop furiously treading water inside and let the waters subside. When you become overwhelmed by a conversation, a task, your current emotions, or the negative self-talk tape running endlessly in your head, you are more likely to engage in an unhealthy response.

This post explores when distraction is not avoidance. To set yourself up for success, you want your body to be calm before you make decisions. Alternatively, distraction as avoidance involves doing anything you can to ignore the needed confrontation, negative emotion, or "perverse" thoughts.

Healthy distraction is a thoughtful, time sensitive method. Use of healthy distraction for about 20 minutes creates the pause necessary to be able to sit and work with the matter at hand. This matter could be situational, discussion-oriented, emotional, or cognitive.

In contrast, avoidance encourages you to run from whatever the stressor is that caused the flooding. The avoidance disallows you from receiving evidence that you will be okay. Avoidance can be the act of compartmentalizing the negative emotions, pushing away the thoughts thus granting them more weight, passively or aggressively dealing with conflict, or use of a substance to numb (e.g., alcohol, high-fat high-sugar food, drugs). Often avoidance leads to a temporary relief and your body learns that this is the best way to navigate the world despite frequent subsequent shame and other consequences.

Let’s now try something different.

One way to calm down when flooded is to focus on one of the senses. Really feel your feet touching the floor. Really pay attention to the sounds coming into your ears (equivalent to the thoughts that enter and leave your head and just as transitory). Listen to music that calms you. Call or text a friend. Carry around a swath of fabric that has a calming texture and rub your fingers along that fabric. As Thich Nhat Hanh discusses in his book, Anger, cook the raw potatoes before you serve them. Gently look at your part. Observe your constellation of reactions with non-judgmental curiosity before you respond.

Pause before action.

Before you implode (often exhibited by depressive symptoms) or explode (often exhibited in anger), consider a meditation. The deep breathing helps trigger the parasympathetic nervous system, putting the breaks on arousal. It will help you to step out of the restrictive and exhausting freeze, flee, fight modes of action.
1. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on your back.

2. Focus on your breath and close your eyes or soften your visual focus. You know you are breathing deeply when your belly is expanding in and out. Just like it is necessary to engage in the 2-foot drop from head to heart to experience emotions, it is a requisite to jump from lung to abdomen in breath.

3. Relax your muscles. One at a time, tightly squeeze the muscle groups that seem tense (often your forehead, jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, and or back). Hold for two seconds and then release.

4. Let the tension flow out of each muscle group and get that muscle group to feel heavy by imagining that it is.

5. Let the tension flow out of each (now-heavy) muscle group, and get that muscle group to feel warm. One way is to keep your eyes closed and focus on one calming vision or idea. Consider a forest, a lake or a beach or anywhere you feel safe.

6. While engaged in the visual imagery, use all of your senses in order to make the experience as vivid as possible. For example, if you are on the beach: smell the salt in the air, feel the hot sand squish between your toes, hear the seagulls, see the waves crash. Be there.

**Once calm, return to what is at hand**

The self-soothing is not an act of avoidance. Once your heart rate as slowed, once the negative thoughts have quieted, look directly at what is occurring. Talk the argument out calmly, focused on shared goals. Look at the underlying emotions of the sadness or hopelessness or hurt or anger: often fear of losing what one’s has or fear of not getting what one wants. Look at the thoughts and remember that your brain is a train depot. While you cannot control the trains that come into the station, you can control whether you decide to get on board. Now that your body is soft again, in that quiet place, the answer for the next right action is more likely to come to you. Last, think consciously of your personal value system and what action takes you in a direction that is aligned with your mission.