

Specialist Mother and Baby Mental Health Service



Ideas for soothing

Stress, anxiety, traumatic experiences

Our brains are very alert to try to keep us safe. Parts of our brain are focused on detecting threat and then taking action to keep us safe. A part of our brain which is part of our threat system is called the amygdala. It alerts us to danger and sets off the alarm in our body if it detects any danger. This alarm triggers our flight, fight, freeze system, which helps us to take the action we need for our safety. Sometimes our amygdala detects threat when there is none, but our alarm system is still triggered.

Fight, flight, freeze

Our amygdala can sound the alarm in our brain:

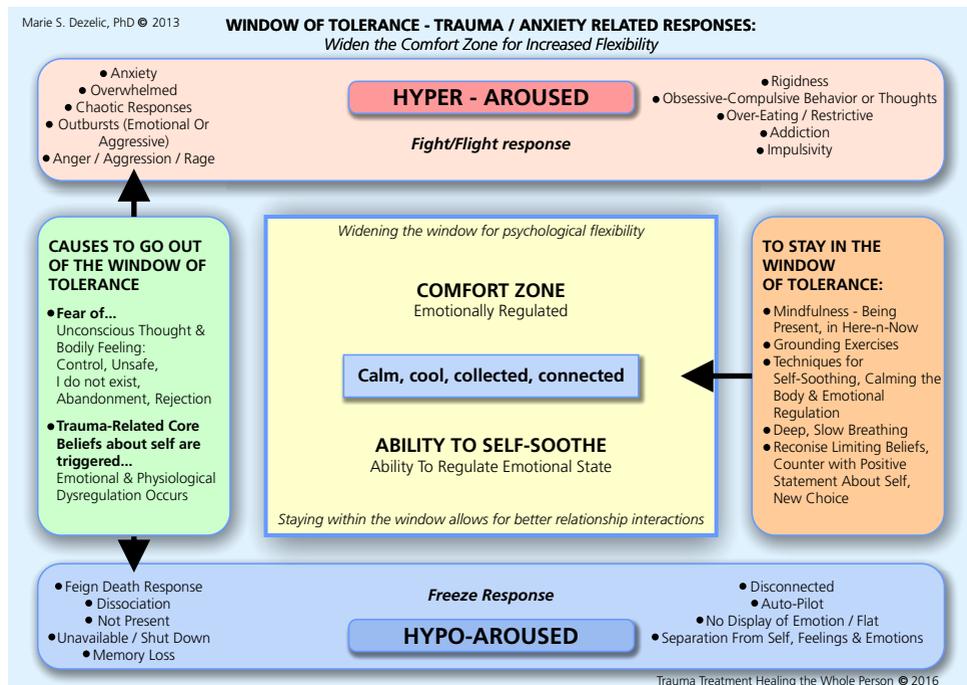
- to save us from very serious threats
- but it can also sound the alarm; when we are stressed,
- when we have worrying thoughts or relationship stresses, when we are worried about not belonging in a group,
- by things our brain has learnt to associate with a trauma, like a particular smell or sound, if we notice a strange physical sensation,
- and sometimes we just don't know what sets it off, after all every body's brain makes plenty of mistakes!

When our brains have detected a threat, our brain is so focused on our safety that sometimes other parts of the brain don't work so well. For example, a part of our brain called the hippocampus is involved in the storage of memories, but when we are experiencing a threat, it sometimes does not work so well, so that our brains may not process the memory. Instead the sense of danger, the emotions attached to this, keeps it alive, the hippocampus isn't able to date stamp it and file it and we may not be able to work through it. Later, when we remember an experience that was a threat - a memory - sometimes it feels like it is happening again, rather than it being clear that it was in the past and we are safe now. This memory seems to stay present, and bothers us when any part of it is activated. We may try not to think about it, and this in itself means we think about it. We might react physically to the memory and the memory can start to influence our behaviour, usually encouraging avoidance.

If you are feeling stressed because of a trauma there are therapeutic interventions that can help. There are also strategies that you can use to help soothe your brain and relax your body.

For some people, their flight, fight, freeze safety system will be set off because they are feeling stressed, because they are experiencing lots of worries, or lots of change. There are interventions which can help manage anxiety. There are also strategies which you can use to help to soothe your brain.

Window of tolerance



We each have a window of tolerance. We are in our window of tolerance when we feel safe enough. When we feel safe, we feel calm. We can manage problems as they crop up and they pass.

But people can only cope with a certain amount of stress at any one time. We only have a certain amount of resilience. People can cope with different amounts of stress, some of this is genetics, some of this is about the amount of support they have, some of this is about the types of stress, some of this is about the strategies they can use and some of this is about how safe their brain and body generally feels. For example, some one who has experienced lots of trauma may have a brain that already feels less safe than someone who has not experienced lots of trauma. It as if, because they have needed to use their alarm system so much, their alarm system is more sensitive and so will sound easily.

When we are hyper-aroused, we may feel anxious, overwhelmed, angry, we may be chaotic, impulsive, have outbursts, we may have habits that are not healthy for us but that we use to help us feel less scared, or more in control.

When we are hypo-aroused we may feel numb, disconnected, unemotional, disassociated, flat, not present, and our memory may not work so well, we may feel like we are on auto pilot.

We can try and calm our brain in different ways to help us get back into our window of tolerance.

Ideas that can help you soothe your brain

This leaflet contains some ideas for you to use to help to soothe your brain.

Everybody is unique, different things work for different people. Have a go and work out what feels better for you – then practice it.

Sample activities to decrease arousal include:

- Diaphragmatic breathing (deep and slow tummy breathing).
- Drinking from a straw.
- Throwing a ball at a blank wall.
- Jumping on a trampoline or mini trampoline.
- Warm water.
- Shaking or stomping out excess energy.
- Heavy work (lifting, pulling, push-ups, wheelbarrow races).
- Music (soothing and calming music and sounds).
- Comforting food (hot chocolate or something chewy but smooth).
- Hot water bottle.

Sample activities to increase arousal include:

- Anything that stimulates the senses!
- Smelling essential oils (smell is the fastest way to the thinking brain - where our strategies are!).
- Chewy crunchy food.
- Movement.
- Jumping on a trampoline or mini trampoline.
- Gently sitting and bouncing on a therapy ball (simulating rocking motion) or using a rocking chair.
- Finger painting.
- Water play with a straw (blowing through the straw).
- Dancing and music.

Controlled shake and breathing exercise

Helping your brain know that right now you are safe

Step one

Controlled shaking to help soothe anxiety

When you feel very anxious, stressed or fearful, you may notice that you start to shake or that you feel agitated, like your body is telling you to move.

What to do: controlled shaking ideas

If you are sitting, tap your feet and bounce your knees more than you normally would. If you are alone, stand and shake your body out. Shake your hands and arms. Sit down and shake your legs. Give your torso a wiggle. Move your head side- to-side.

Even better, put on some music that gets you dancing. Shake each leg and bounce on your toes like you see sprinters do before a race.

Shake it out, shake it off.

Why: shaking out anxiety

Shaking from anxiety is nature's way of de-stressing.

In the wild, when an animal has just avoided an attack, it will shake intensely for several minutes and then return to eating grass as if nothing has happened – it's part of the fight or flight response.

This shaking allows it to release the build-up of stress hormones that occurred during the anxiety attack.

We often suppress shaking and tense up instead – it is as if we keep that energy locked in when it wants to get out by movement.

Shaking is a part of the fight-or-flight response

When you're extremely anxious, your body activates a **fight-or-flight response to danger**, even when no real danger is present.

This response triggers a **rush of adrenaline, which feeds your body with energy**, arouses your nervous system and prepares to be able to fight or flight.

Shaking is a sign that your body is releasing energy. It happens when your fight-or-flight response winds down.

By choosing to shake your body you can discharge this energy faster. Exaggerate shaking.

Step two

Safe brain breathing

What to do: a gentle, longer breath out

Pause.

Just gently breathe out. Take a moment. Don't breathe out fast and hard. Imagine you have a line of birthday candles in front of you and all you want for your out-breath to do is gently bend the flames of these candles. You are not trying to blow the candles out.

Pause again.

Repeat a few times.

By breathing out in a gentle way you are helping your breathing to begin to balance out. If you were running away from a sabre-toothed tiger you would not be breathing gently out! This gentle breath helps trick your brain into thinking you are safe.

Why: flight and fight breathing to safe breathing

When we are in danger our breathing changes. We breathe quickly so we get lots of oxygen into the body to help us be ready to run from the danger. You may find your body is telling you that you need to get more oxygen.

Sometimes you may become very attentive to your breathing – usually we breathe outside our awareness and by paying lots of attention to it we alter the rhythm and start to over-breathe.

Even though you are over-breathing your body is so focused on danger that it tells you that you need to breathe more oxygen in and so you keep over-breathing.

You may notice these symptoms:

- Rapid heartbeat.
- Chest pains.
- Light-headedness/feelings of faint.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Shortness of breath.
- Weak or tingling limbs.

These may worry you and so you feel more in danger and over-breathe more.

A gentle slow breath out helps your brain feel safe.

Step three

Build the habit of telling your brain that you are safe

Get into the habit of doing step one and two.

Your brain may be in the habit of telling yourself you are in danger. You are building a new habit of telling your brain you are safe. You can tell yourself out loud that you are safe when you start and finish step one and two.

Building habits takes repetition so try a reminder on your phone to do the steps or try to do them before you have a cup of tea, or after you have done a regular task like changing a nappy.

By building a habit of telling your brain you are safe the anxiety doesn't build up and catch you out, rather you soothe your brain.

Progressive muscle relaxation

- Sit in a comfortable chair (or lie on the floor, or on a bed). Ensure you will not be disturbed by other noises. If you become aware of sounds - just try to ignore them and let them leave your mind just as soon as they enter.
- Make sure the whole of your body is comfortably supported - including your arms, head and feet (Rest your arms on the arms of the chair, with your feet flat on the floor - if sitting!).
- Close your eyes. Feel the chair supporting your whole body - your legs, your arms, your head. If you can feel any tension, begin to let it go. Take two slow and deep breaths, and let the tension begin to flow out.
- Become aware of your head - notice how your forehead feels. Let any tension go and feel your forehead become smooth and wide. Let any tension go from around your eyes, your mouth, your cheeks and your jaw. Let your teeth part slightly and feel the tension go.

- Let your shoulders lower gently down. Your shoulders are wider, your neck is longer.
- Notice how your body feels as you begin to relax.
- Be aware of your arms and your hands. Let them sink down into the chair. Now they are feeling heavy and limp.
- Think about your back - from your neck to your hips. Let the tension go and feel yourself sinking down into the chair. Let your hips, your legs and your feet relax and roll outwards. Notice the feeling of relaxation taking over.
- Think about your breathing - your abdomen gently rising and falling as you breathe. Let your next breath be a little deeper, a little slower.
- Now, you are feeling completely relaxed and heavy. Lie still and concentrate on slow, rhythmic breathing.
- Then you want to count back from five to one and open your eyes. Wiggle your fingers and toes, breathe deeply and stretch. Pause before gently rising.

Grounding exercise

GROUNDING WITH YOUR FIVE SENSES

What are

5

THINGS YOU CAN SEE



Ideas

SUN
PICTURE ON THE WALL
PEOPLE WALKING

4

THINGS YOU CAN FEEL



WIND BLOWING
FEET ON THE FLOOR
PENCIL IN HAND

3

THINGS YOU CAN HEAR



BIRDS CHIRPING
CLOCK TICKING
CAR HORNS

2

THINGS YOU CAN SMELL



FOOD FROM THE CAFETERIA
LAUNDRY DETERGENT ON CLOTHES
FRESH CUT GRASS

1

THING YOU CAN TASTE



MINT
Breakfast
TOOTHPASTE

Four elements

Spend a moment doing the four elements exercise.

Firstly, think about the element earth starting with your feet notice how they feel placed firmly on the ground, and then notice the chair supporting you under your bottom, and take a moment to land and take some time out to be in this moment, now, not thinking about the future.

Then look around and notice three things:

- What Can You Hear?
- What Can You Smell?
- What is the temperature of the room?

Now, focus on the element air, just notice your breathing. Take a slow breath in through your nose, letting the air go all the way in to fill you, count to four as you breathe in, one, two, three, four and gently hold this to a count of two - two, one and then gently breathe out to a count of four - one, two, three, four.

Next focus on the element water is your mouth dry or do you have saliva? When you are anxious or stressed your mouth often dries up but when you are making saliva it is a sign that you are relaxing. Take a moment now to make more and more saliva, sometimes it can help to imagine you are sucking on a lemon, just imagine this for a few moments and see if you can make some saliva as you do this, notice how you become more focused and in control of your thoughts and your body.

Now with your feet on the ground breathing more deeply and slowly, making more and more saliva, **move to the fourth element which is fire or light** and bring up in your imagination an image or a place or a situation that helps you feel calmer and safer, maybe draw this on a piece of paper in some way to represent this good place, it can be a symbol or some words, notice what you feel when you connect to that place and how you feel it in your body. Keep noticing how you feel in your body when you focus on your safe or calm place and give this place a name.

Change your brain chemistry: to reduce extreme emotions fast remember these skills:

Tip the temperature of your face with cold water (to calm down fast)

- Holding your breath, put your face in a bowl of cold water, or hold a cold pack (or zip-lock bag of cold water) on your eyes and cheeks.
- Hold for 30 seconds. Keep water over 10°C (Only suitable for adults)

Intense exercise (to calm down your body when it is revved up by emotion)

- Engage in intense exercise, for a short while: running, walking fast, jumping, playing basketball, lifting weights, etc.

Paced breathing (pace your breathing by slowing it down)

- Breathe deeply into your belly.
- Slow your pace of inhaling and exhaling way down (on average, five to six breaths per minute).
- Breathe out more slowly than you breathe in (for example, five seconds in and seven seconds out).

Paired muscle relaxation (to calm down)

- While breathing into your belly deeply tense your body muscles (not so much as to cause a cramp).
 - Notice the tension in your body.
 - While breathing out, say “relax” in your mind.
- Let go of the tension. Notice the difference in your body.

Positive statements

Positive affirmations

Using positive statements can help us develop a new attitude to ourselves and our situations. Choose a statement from those below, or make one that means more to you, and repeat, repeat, repeat throughout the day, every day, of every week, of every month. You might want to make or print out a card with your affirmation and carry it with you.

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits (www.getselfhelp.co.uk/unhelpful.htm) and think negatively about ourselves and situations. For the positive affirmations to work, you must use it whenever you notice you have that negative thought – immediately turn it around by using your affirmation.

Use a statement that starts with “I” and use the present tense. See the examples below – choose one, adapt one, or make up your own. Make it something broadly realistic, even if you don’t believe it right now.

- I have inner strength.
- I am doing my best and that is a strength.
- I am a good enough mother.
- I am determined.
- I am a worthwhile person.
- I am confident and competent.
- I hold my head up high.
- People like me – I am a likeable person and I like myself.
- I care about others.
- I am needed and worthwhile.
- I am a loving person.
- I am proud of these things I have done such as _____ .
- I make wise decisions based on what I know.
- I have set my goals and am moving towards them.
- I accept myself as a unique and worthwhile person.
- My life has meaning and purpose.
- I am in control of my choices.
- I have many options and can make wise decisions.
- Things are getting better day by day, step by step.
- I am calm and relaxed.
- I am noticing the many positive things this day has to offer.
- I live a healthy and positive lifestyle.
- I know that I will get better at skills if I keep practising.
- I have my wise mind – I can seek inner guidance whenever I need to.

Pause

When we are feeling overwhelmed or anxious it might be a good time to **STOPP**. Why don't you give it a go?



Stop

Take a breath

Observe – describe the feelings, images, thoughts, body sensations, triggers.

Pull back / put in some perspective. What's the bigger picture? Take the helicopter view. Is this fact or opinion? How would someone else see this? Is there another way of looking at this?

Practise what works. What is the best thing to do right now – for me, for others, for the situation.

Managing difficult moments with a baby

When we are stressed we are less able to empathise with others and less good at seeing others' perspective. It is important to remember that babies and children cannot understand what you are experiencing and cannot know what to do for you.

Babies and children need sensitive, good enough parents. Babies and children often want to be close to their parent. They are very good at picking up other people's stress and although they do not understand it, it can worry them. When a baby or child is worried, they feel stressed and their alarm system may be set off too. Then they may be in their flight, fight, freeze system too – both of you are in your alarm systems! This often results in more frustration.

Babies and younger children don't have the brain development to manage their own emotions and they need you to soothe their brain. For example, talk calmly or sing, give your baby skin to skin, hold them close, have a warm bath, go for a walk outside. As children get a little older, some of the exercises in this leaflet may be helpful for them too.

If you feel that you are unable to cope or you are becoming angry with your baby or child, take a moment:

- Move away from your child if necessary and practice STOPP.
- Remember your baby does not mean to upset or anger you.
- Try to understand their perspective and experience.
- Ask a friend or relative for some support.
- Soothe your brain and soothe their brain. Use some exercises from this leaflet.

Contacting the Specialist Mother and Baby Mental Health Service

The team's contact number is **01274 221180**, please ask the call handler to put you through to Specialist Mother and Baby Mental Health Service. If you have anything important that you want to share, please use this number.

If you experience a mental health crisis, please call First Response on **0800 952 1181**.



Ready to Relate – Bradford District Care NHS Foundation Trust provides information to help you understand your baby and develop your bond with them.

<https://readytorelate.bdct.nhs.uk/> - or use this QR code

