

Adult Mental Health Services
Stabilisation Workbook 2

Soothing and safety: Learning to calm and soothe yourself



Introduction

This workbook is all about learning ways to calm and soothe ourselves in times of distress. Learning to calm and soothe ourselves can help us to cope with overwhelming emotions, and support us to feel safer and more in control.

Growing up in a secure and loving environment, with people around to reassure and soothe us when we are frightened, teaches us how to do the same for ourselves and develop the skills to self-soothe in times of distress. If we have not had this kind of background, or if we have experienced difficult events or traumas in our life, our mind and body may be left in a state of fear or high arousal. In this case, we may need to learn and develop new skills in how to calm and soothe our mind, body and emotions.

We all have vulnerabilities and vulnerable parts of ourselves, which may lead us to feel overwhelmed and distressed at times. If we have had difficult experiences, we may have learnt to treat this side of ourselves in more negative or punishing ways. The vulnerable part of us needs love, comfort and soothing rather than punishment. This is especially important if we find ourselves in a state of crisis.

Exercise

1. What are some of the less helpful ways you may respond to yourself in times of distress, which you would like to change and do differently?
2. What are some of the more helpful strategies you are already using, which soothe, reassure and comfort you in times of distress?

Sensory soothing

Soothing strategies can be used at any time, but are particularly helpful for when we are feeling at our worst. Soothing techniques draw on all of the senses.

We have listed some examples that other people have found helpful below to get you started. Have a read through and see which ones may be helpful to you. Think about other ideas for soothing strategies that could also be helpful.

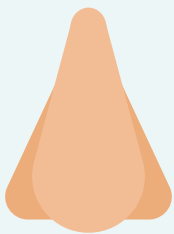


Sight

It may be helpful to hold in mind **comforting images**, perhaps of **people you know**, or a picture of your **favourite place**. You could look at photos of places or people that have **happy memories**.

You could go for a **walk outside** or in the garden if you have one, so that you can look at the trees, flowers and nature.

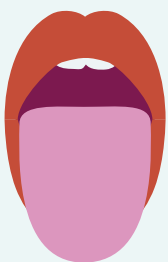
It may help to **watch television** or a **favourite film**. The child part of you may be comforted by children's films or TV.



Smell

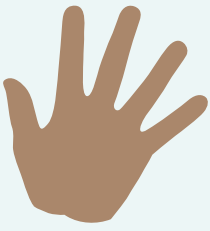
Different people find different smells soothing, so try to find one that suits you. This could be perfume or moisturiser, a scented candle, an essential oil like jasmine or lavender, a herb or spice like cinnamon, or perhaps a flower.

Some people like smells that remind them of **happy times** or of **people who have been comforting or safe**, such as the smell of baking cakes and biscuits. Others like the smell of nature and breathing in the fresh air, or the smell of coffee.



Taste

It can help to make a **hot drink** or eat a **favourite food**, such as one that you liked as a child. Savour the taste of a favourite treat by eating it slowly. You might want to suck on an ice cube or ice lolly and feel it slowly melt in your mouth, paying attention to the sensation of taste.



Touch

Touching objects such as a cuddly toy, soft blanket, or silky scarf can be comforting to the child part of you that needs reassurance. You may have a **special item of clothing** that belongs to you or someone you care about, such as your children or a relative, which can be used in this way. If you have a pet you can stroke or pat them.

Other people may want to take a warm bubble bath or put on comfortable clothes, or wrap themselves in a duvet.

Some people like to hold a **'grounding' object** like a pebble (see the workbook on 'Grounding') or release tension by squeezing a ball. Using a cold compress on your head or neck or snuggling a hot water bottle may also help.

Moisturising your face and body and combing or brushing your hair may feel soothing. Maybe you could slowly rub cream into your hands or massage part of your body. Some people like to do other kinds of beauty care, such as painting their nails.



Sound

Hearing certain sounds and music can be soothing. Some people prefer classical music while others like pop music or songs from their childhood. Perhaps you could **make a play list of all your favourite songs** to listen to when you are feeling upset. Others like to hum their favourite song to themselves or sing it in their head.

Sounds from nature such as birds, animals or the sea may be comforting. It may help to **talk to someone** who will reassure you, or to make a tape of their voice.

“Be creative and try out as many ideas as you can.”

Soothing box exercise

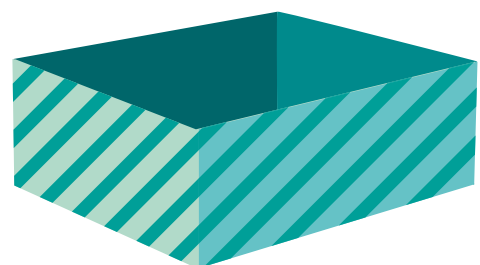
When we are very distressed, it can be difficult to think rationally and decide how to help ourselves. At these times, we may find ourselves resorting to more punishing and self-destructive behaviours. These may help in the moment but can cause other problems in the longer term.

It can be useful to keep a soothing box, full of all your soothing items and strategies, in a prominent and handy place. This way, when you are feeling overwhelmingly distressed, you can go to your soothing box and find something that will help you cope and feel better.

Use this space to make a plan of all the items you would like to put in your soothing box. You can use ideas from the handout on sensory soothing (pages 3 to 4) as well as come up with your own. For strategies that can't be placed in your box, write down prompts on a piece of card or paper and put these in the box, to easily remind you of what you can do.

My soothing box plan

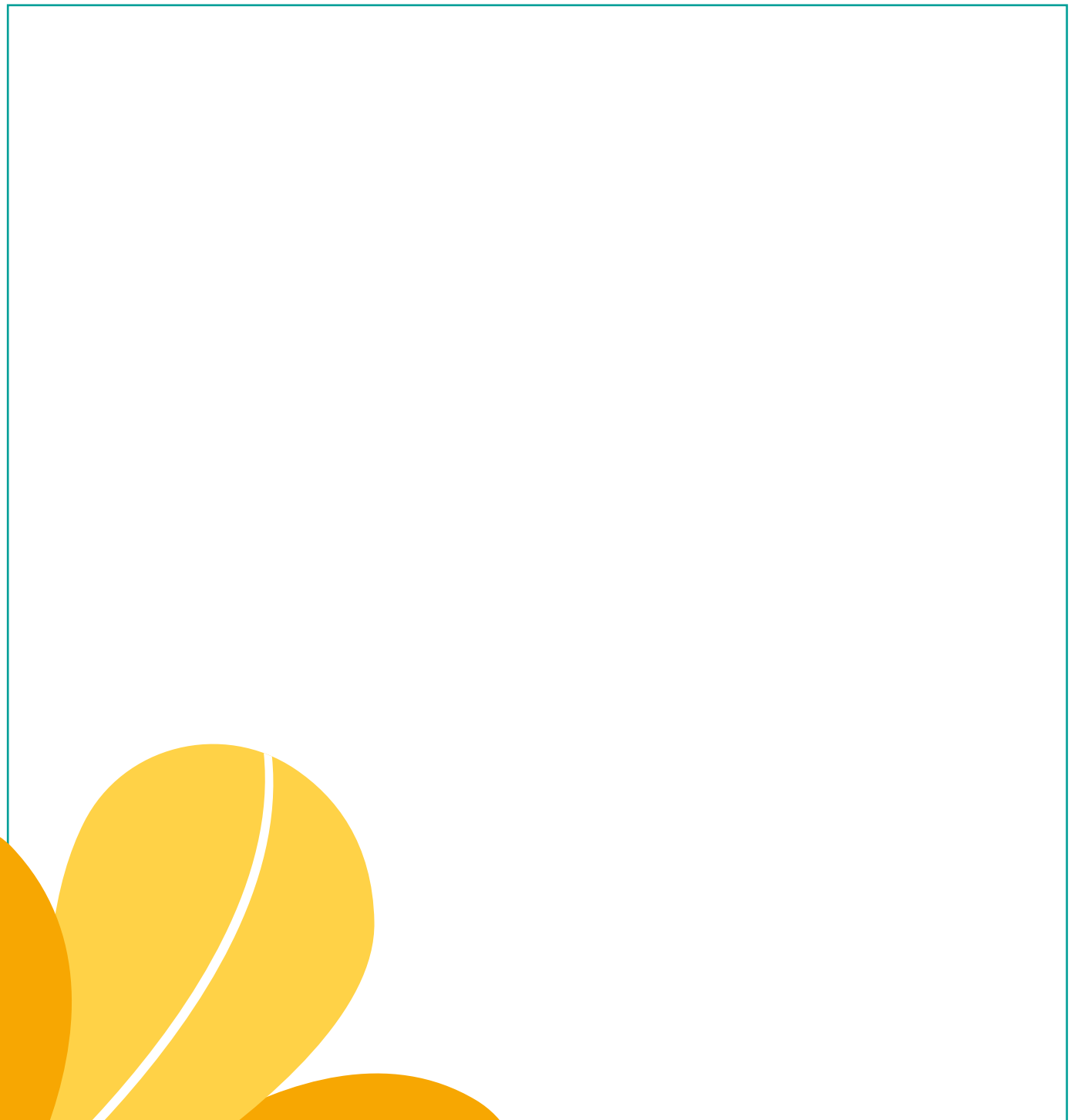
Remember to draw on the senses and include strategies of **sight**, **smell**, **taste**, **touch** and **sound**, along with any other helpful ideas.



Creating a place of physical safety exercise

When people have difficult memories, feel overwhelmed or distressed, they can often feel unsafe. Something that may help is making a place at home or where you may be staying where you feel safe. Your safe place might be on the sofa with a warm blanket around you, listening to your favourite music, or sipping a hot drink. Or it might be a corner of a room with your favourite photos on the wall or a peaceful view from your window. Wherever it is, try to make it as calm and comforting as you can.

Use the space below to draw or write down a description of your place of physical safety.



Creating a safe place in your mind exercise

Other people may find it more helpful to create an image of a safe place in their mind, which they can visit whenever they want or wherever they may be. This might be a real place where you have felt happy and secure, such as a beach or a wood, or it might be something imaginary. These are only suggestions and your safe place might be different. Below are some questions to help you to start to develop your imagined safe place.

1. What would you like your safe place to look like? What can you see all around, above and below you?
2. What can you hear in your safe place? Can you hear the sound of the waves or the gentle hum of traffic? Or is it silent in your safe place?
3. What does the environment feel like on your body and skin? Is it warm or cold? Is there a breeze?
4. Are there any smells you notice in this safe place? The smell of home baking, the salty smell of the sea or fresh crisp smell of being outdoors in the countryside?
5. How do you feel in your safe place? What emotions and bodily sensations do you connect with in this safe place?

Use the space below to write down a description of your imagined safe place. If you would prefer to draw your safe place there is a blank space overleaf for this. On page 9 you will find an example safe place script.

Creating a safe place in your mind exercise

Creating a safe place in your mind exercise – example script

Below is an example safe place script. Have a read through and practice using this script to visualise being in a safe place.

Ocean imagery script – adapted from www.innerhealthstudio.com

Imagine that you are near the ocean... just before sunrise. Perhaps you are on the beach... or a hammock... or a dock. The ocean is very calm. Most of the water looks very smooth, but you can see small ripples, where gentle, peaceful waves roll in toward the shore.

Take a few moments to imagine this scene.

Picture all the details of this relaxing place. The sun has not yet risen, but the sky is just starting to get light. The air is cool, comfortable, and pleasant. The temperature is very pleasant... a calm and comfortable morning. Imagine the feel of a slight, gentle breeze on your skin. The breeze blows just enough to move the leaves of palm trees gently back and forth. The leaves of the trees make a dark silhouette against the gradually lightening sky.

Imagine the fresh smell of the air... the smell of the clean water and sand. It is a refreshing scent.

Picture in your mind the sound of the water lapping against the shore. The sea is so calm, the waves are very quiet, but you can hear them as they move gently and calmly.

Hear the slight rustling of leaves as the palm branches sway gently.

It is early morning, and you are the only one here. This is such a calm, safe, pleasant place. Relax here near the gentle ocean.

Perhaps you are on a deck with wooden tables... umbrellas, closed for the night. They will soon be opened to provide shelter from the sun, but for now they remain with their cloth tops folded down, as if resting.

Small huts with grass roofs provide shelter for some of the tables. During the day, this place is bustling with activity, as people sit at the tables in the shelter of the grass huts, sipping cool drinks by the water. But now, all is quiet... peaceful... serene.

Notice that the sun is starting to rise. You can see a spot of light at the horizon, as if the sun is rising right out of the water. See the light growing as the sun begins to rise above the horizon. Small streaks of light shine into the sky, as the sky grows lighter and lighter with the growing dawn.

See the birds that are active early in the morning. Some fly overhead... some are already diving into the water looking for fish. Other birds simply sit quietly. They are enjoying the dawn as well.

You can see some peaceful waves as they break some distance from the shore. White peaks rise in a line out in the water, crashing on a stone breaker that keeps the water close to the shore peaceful and calm. See the waves crashing on the breaker. See the peaceful waves gently lapping at the shore. Washing gently onto the sand. The waves are very calming... they are so peaceful... so rhythmic. Watch the peaceful waves flowing like your breath... in... and out... in... out... continue to observe the rhythm of the peaceful waves, flowing with the rhythm of your breath.

As you relax, you can enjoy the beautiful sunrise. Pink and orange give everything around you a warm glow. The sun has risen above the horizon... still low in the sky... The breeze... the warm early sunlight... the gently lapping, peaceful waves... softly moving palm leaves... all of these create a calm and peaceful place.

Continue to relax for a few moments here... enjoying the peaceful waves and the remaining calm time at sunrise.

Soon this place will be busy with people going about their morning routines. Enjoy the last few remaining moments of solitude as the sun rises higher in the sky.

The sun is shining, brighter each moment. This has become a beautiful morning. You can see people in the distance, walking along the beach.

The waves become a little bigger, a bit more lively as the breeze increases.

Everything around you seems to be waking up. Getting ready for a lovely day.

When you are ready to wake up your body and your mind, and return to the present, give yourself a few moments to do so.

Return your awareness to your surroundings and notice the real environment you are in.

Let your muscles wake up by opening and closing your hands, shrugging your shoulders, moving around a bit.

Keep with you the feeling of peace and calm you had while you were relaxing, as you open your eyes and sit quietly for a moment.

When you are awake and alert, you can return to your usual activities, knowing that you can return to this place in your mind whenever you want to relax.

