

Learning to Self-Soothe

What to Know

There are many things that can upset you to the point where you feel emotionally overwhelmed and even out of control. When you feel this way, the emotional part of your brain takes over, and the rational or thinking part of your brain takes a back seat. Calming your emotions—also called self-soothing—is an important lifelong skill everyone should learn.

There are three different factors that can make a particular activity more soothing:

Familiarity. Activities that are associated with pleasant memories from the past will be particularly helpful in soothing your feelings. For example, one woman said that sipping hot chocolate with a marshmallow on top from a large blue mug made her think of happy afternoons from her childhood.

Involvement of multiple senses. Our emotional brain responds best when activities are multisensory—that is, they involve sound, sight, taste, touch, and smell. Typically, pleasant activities that involve two or more senses are most soothing. An example of a multisensory activity might include walking in the woods, smelling the flowers, feeling the breeze, and hearing the wind rustling the trees.

Repetitive motion. Studies suggest that repetitive motion, such as chewing gum, knitting, or rocking in a chair, can produce serotonin in the brain. Our bodies are naturally inclined toward repetitive motion, like pacing, when we are agitated.

What to Do

When you perform any of the activities in this worksheet your brain will be producing serotonin, a biochemical that gives you a sense of calm. Review the list and check off the things you think might soothe your emotions. Everyone is different, and certain activities will seem more appealing to you than others.

The list is divided into three types of activities, and you can add your own ideas on the blank lines:

1. Activities you can do immediately when you are starting to feel emotionally overwhelmed:

_____ Take five cleansing breaths

_____ Self-massage

_____ Chew gum

_____ Sip a soothing warm drink (preferably one without caffeine)

_____ Wear familiar perfume or cologne

_____ Suck on hard candy

_____ Stretch

_____ Sit in the sun

_____ Take a walk

_____ Other things you can do:

2. Activities you can do when you are anticipating situations that will make you feel emotionally overwhelmed:

_____ Take a warm shower or bath

_____ Get a massage

_____ Wear your most comfortable clothes

_____ Enjoy a favorite meal

_____ Burn scented candles

_____ Exercise

_____ Arrange and smell flowers

_____ Listen to quiet music

_____ Other things you can do:

3. Activities you can do every day to develop the habit of self-soothing: (It's worth noting that when you practice self-soothing on a regular basis, preferably daily, calming yourself down when you are more upset will be much easier.)

_____ Take care of a pet

_____ Cook or bake

_____ Meditate or relax in a quiet place

_____ Rest or nap

_____ Get plenty of sleep

_____ Read a book

_____ Listen to quiet music

_____ Watch a funny movie or show

_____ Work on a hobby _____ (write in the hobby)

_____ Rock in a chair for ten minutes

_____ Exercise

_____ Garden

_____ Journal or write

_____ Other things you can do:

Write down the self-soothing activities you want to try. After you have tried each, write down the date, and then rate how successful they were in reducing your emotional distress, where 0 = not helpful at all, to 7 = very helpful. Write down any thoughts you have.

[illegible]

Activity	Date	Success rating (0–7)	Thoughts about this activity

What activity was most helpful in reducing your distress and calming yourself down?

What activity was least helpful?

Overall, did you find that you were less distressed when you engaged in a self-soothing activity? Why or why not? Explain.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
