

What else is here?

Practice

One of the encouragements in Somatic Experiencing (SE) is to come closer to our experience, to the felt sense of this moment. Sometimes this is delicious, full of pleasant sensations and aliveness. But as we all know, that is not always the case. As part of everyday life we can find ourselves suddenly feeling anxious or blue, we can feel heavy and dark inside, or our stomach is tight or churning and we don't know what to do; it feels unbearable and can send us into anxiety or even panic. What then?

First, let's outline the survival strategies that many of us employ. There are three main patterns that are a limited in their helpfulness and they correlate with our autonomic nervous system patterns for dealing with perceived threats. We may find we try to wrestle (fight) the uncomfortable, unpleasant, painful sensations in our bodies or we aim to get away from them (flight and freeze). Sometimes we do all at once and that gets very chaotic.

What might these patterns look like?

Trying to escape the sensations is common. And there are a thousand ways, but here are a few: keeping busy and distracted, alcohol and drugs, comfort eating, bingeing on TV, falling asleep, doing tasks that keep us in our thinking mind and out of our body. Fighting the experience is more likely to see us delving in, trying to figure it out, find the reason or the story. This can lead to getting all tangled up or even more distressed. We may feel stuck in some kind of vortex. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) this is fight response way is called 'fusing'. I think it is a useful term because it so accurately describes how we glom onto the 'problem' and get stuck and lost in trying to fight and fix.

So if these ways are not very helpful, though very understandable, what other strategies might we use?

A favourite of mine comes from SE and from ACT:

1. When we catch that we are feeling some kind of distress, we pause and take a moment to notice what is going on.
2. We then name what we notice. Eg. "I can tell I feel distressed, there's a dark and tight in my solar plexus, it feels like anxiety or fear maybe."* The invitation is to not try and change this, but to just notice and name.
3. *See what else is here.* There's the distress, but what else, where feels better? What feels easier? For severe distress, arms and legs are pretty safe places to put your attention; feeling your feet on the floor can be very beneficial.
4. See what happens as you do this, what changes.
5. If nothing changes or you can't find anything inside that helps, bring your attention to looking around you: what do your eyes land on that lets you feel a bit better inside?
6. You may want to move your attention back and forth between what feels tough and what feels better (or inside and outside). You may want to roam your attention around your body (or room/outside) and see what else is there.
7. Maybe pause the internal exploration and take a moment to notice what is around you (or check more closely inside). For example: the feeling of the breeze on your skin, what the light is like or something specific in your surroundings that appeals, notice what sounds you hear, or smells, or if your clothes feel comforting on your skin.

8. Hang out with all this, moving between what is pleasant what's harder until you notice that you feel in some way better, more balanced, a bit calmer, more open and relaxed.
9. Step forward into the next part of your day noticing how you feel better.

This practice can help us come closer to what is happening *in a way that is manageable for our system*. This means we don't have to try escape or fight what is unpleasant. It helps us keep out of stories about why we are feeling this way and just allows us to rebalance.

To have ways that allow us to feel safer in our own skin are vital, because experiencing a sense of 'threat' from within is about as scary as it gets; there is no true 'escape' from our own selves and being at war inside is intensely distressing. Practices like this can help us develop more of a sense of mastery and of safety.

And. It can take courage to try this. It is disrupting survival strategies that may be deeply embedded. It can feel scary to come closer *or* to shift your attention from the tough stuff. You're going against the grain. But if you can be gentle, just try it a bit at a time, feel into how you can do this in a way that feels manageable for you, you might find that there is much more available to you in this moment. You may discover that your system is just waiting for this small chance to regain equilibrium and take an easy breath.

If this practice does not work for you, do what you know, or seek further help. The most important thing is to rebalance as best you can in the moment. This is just an offering and may not suit you at this time or every situation you find yourself in.



* NOTE: It is **very useful** to get to know your indicators of distress. For some it is a craving for cake or scotch, for others it is a body awareness of feeling yucky in some way, many find they snap at those around them for no particular reason or isolate, and so on. Whatever your indicators are, when you catch one, name it and then see how you can notice the distress showing up in your body. Then the steps and see...

This information sheet was prepared by Chantal Jackson, September 2018.
It is based on understandings derived from Somatic Experiencing trauma therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

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