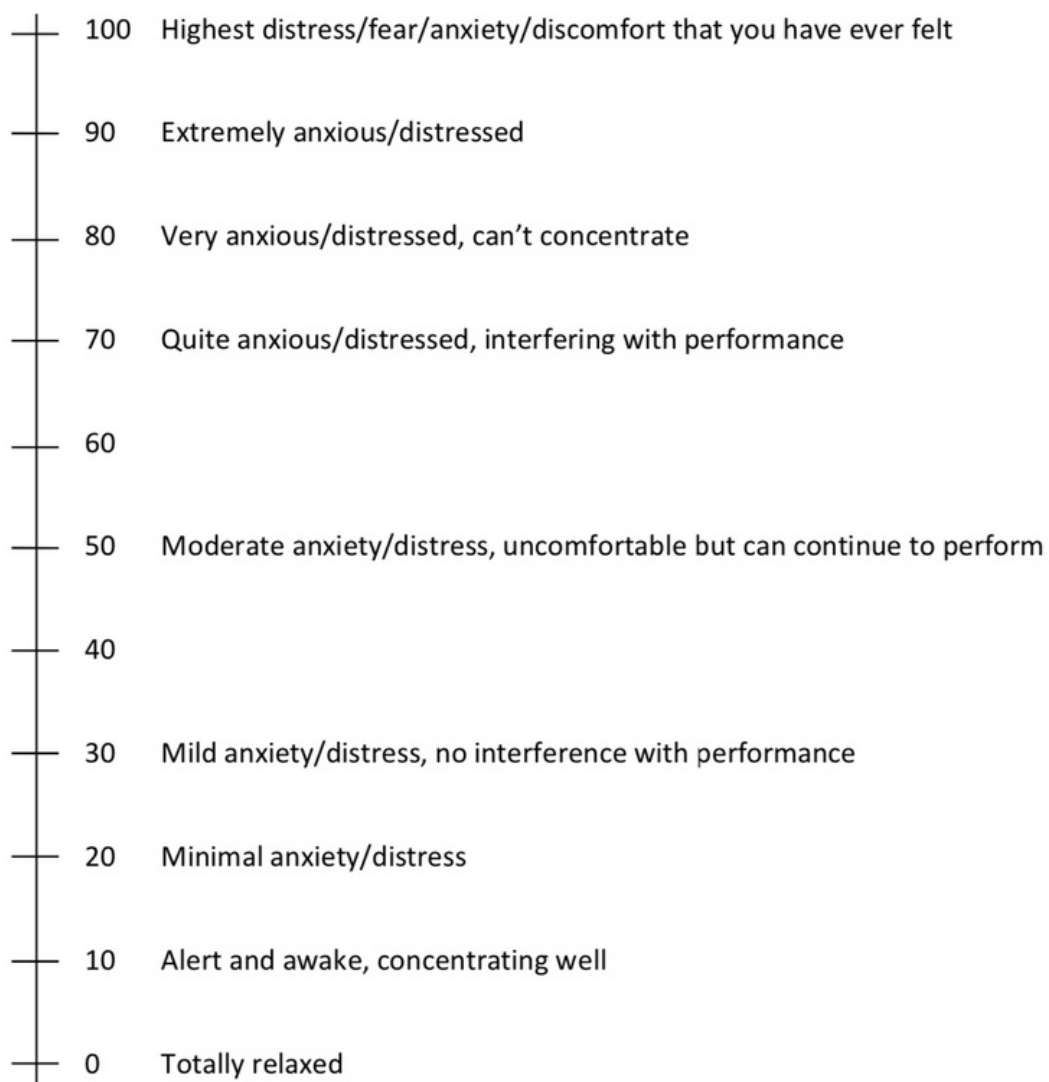




THE DISTRESS THERMOMETER

SUBJECTIVE UNITS OF DISTRESS SCALE (SUDS)

Try to get used to rating your distress, fear, anxiety or discomfort on a scale of 0-100. Imagine you have a 'distress thermometer' to measure your feelings according to the following scale. Notice how your level of distress and fear changes over time and in different situations.





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SUBJECTIVE UNITS OF DISTRESS SCALE (SUDS)

The SUDS Scale

The SUDS scale, short for Subjective Units of Distress Scale, serves as a tool to assess the intensity of internal experiences such as anxiety, anger, agitation, stress, or other distressing emotions. These experiences are often linked to the release of adrenaline in the body. Throughout the day, it is normal to experience a certain level of adrenal arousal, which motivates us to accomplish tasks, meet deadlines, and adds to the excitement we feel when engaged in thrilling or enjoyable activities. In the example on these pages, a SUDS scale ranging from 0 to 100 was utilised.

Feel free to select a suitable range that works for you, such as 1 to 10, 0 to 25, or 0 to 5. The purpose of the scale is to enable you to gauge the intensity of your emotions, ranging from none or almost none, all the way to the highest or most intense level of that particular emotion you can imagine. It is irrelevant whether you have previously experienced the highest intensity or if you cannot recall a time when a specific emotion was less intense for you. Through consistent use of this scale to measure your emotions and regular mindfulness practice, you will most likely witness a shift in the intensity of your emotions.

The Tolerable Level of Arousal (TLA)

TLA refers to the threshold of adrenal arousal that you can handle while remaining mindful and present. It allows you to remain aware of your surroundings (or internal bodily sensations) and think through appropriate responses to the situations you encounter. Ideally, it is beneficial to maintain a tolerable level of adrenaline-induced arousal, which typically ranges between 3 and 7-8 on a scale of 10 (i.e., 3 to 7/10 or 8/10).

Dropping below 3/10 can lead to boredom unless you deliberately choose a relaxing activity, like lounging on a beach chair or resting at home. Prolonged periods at this low arousal level can become uncomfortable, particularly when circumstances offer little choice.

As arousal reaches 7/10 or 8/10, the brain becomes overwhelmed, and individuals tend to resort to habitual coping mechanisms. Five common coping strategies that people often rely on when overwhelmed are:

1. Top-down management: Ignoring or downplaying emotional and bodily sensations to engage in rational thinking. While this strategy can be useful during emergencies or crises, relying on it extensively for long periods is not beneficial.



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2. Intense emotional experience: Feeling consumed by powerful emotions, such as extreme anger or panic attacks. At such high intensities, clear thinking is significantly impaired, making it unhelpful to reason with someone "seeing red" or telling someone experiencing a panic attack to simply calm down.
3. Circular thinking: Thoughts that repeatedly cycle through the mind, making it challenging to think clearly or develop effective approaches to address triggering events or situations.
4. Agitation: Physical restlessness, often characterised by pacing or an internal sense of restlessness.
5. Dissociation: A range of experiences, from brief mental blanks and difficulty thinking to feeling disconnected from the world or observing oneself going through motions, or even experiencing time loss.

When we surpass our TLA, we find ourselves on an emotional roller coaster, requiring self-care until our feelings subside. The more frequently we exceed our TLA and become overwhelmed, the more our brain adapts and becomes prone to escalating arousal (such as stress or anxiety). Our baseline shifts, making it easier to become overwhelmed with less stimulus, potentially leading to chronic stress or anxiety.

Regularly utilising the SUDS scale to assess the intensity of our emotions enhances our ability to identify and take action when our feelings are less intense. This empowers us to regulate our emotions and effectively address the events triggering our emotional experiences.

Disclaimer

Although great care has been taken to ensure the accuracy and overall relevance of the information presented in this article, the author and Andrea Walmsley Counselling make no guarantees regarding its applicability to the reader's specific circumstances. This article is intended to offer general information only, and readers are advised to assess its suitability for their individual needs. If necessary, it is recommended to seek personalised professional advice that directly pertains to their personal situation.

Copyright: This article and its content are based on a scale developed by Joseph Wolpe in 1969. Versions of the SUDS scale are widely used in cognitive-behavioural treatments, especially for anxiety disorders. This version is adapted by Andrea Walmsley

To the best of our knowledge no copyright exists in relation to this scale and you may freely copy and use this version.

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