

An ACT Approach to Self-Soothing

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9 MIN READ APPROX.

ACT Tips and Insights for Mental Health Practitioners



Self-Soothing

To soothe means to calm, comfort, or provide relief from pain. Self-soothing involves learning to do this for yourself rather than relying on others. There is much overlap between self-soothing and self-compassion. (A simple definition of self-compassion is: acknowledge your suffering and respond with kindness).

Acceptance-Based Self-Soothing

When we include self-soothing in ACT, we want to ensure it is acceptance-based, not avoidance-based. In many models, the primary aim of self-soothing is to provide relief and comfort through reducing or removing pain, or distracting yourself from it.

In ACT, the aim of self-soothing is quite different. We bring it in as part of a broader agenda of acceptance and self-compassion. The primary aim of self-soothing in ACT is to provide relief and comfort through:

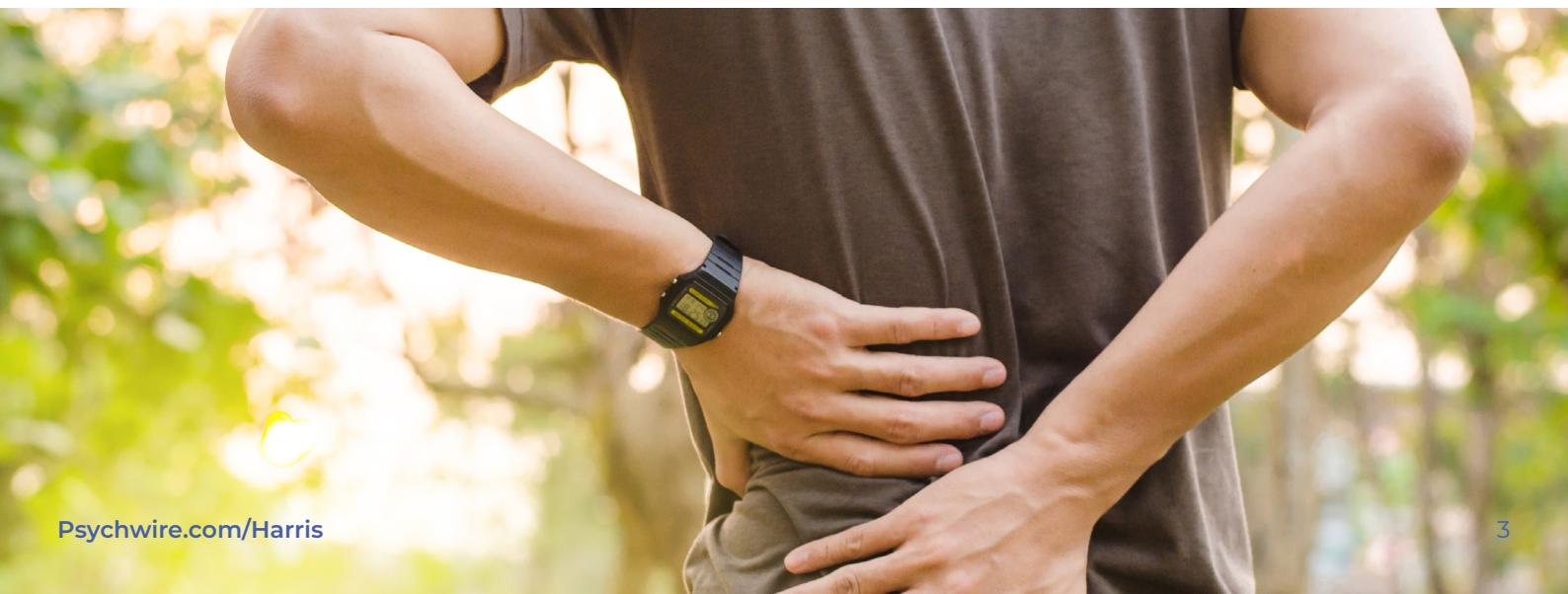
- a) Accepting your pain and treating yourself in a kind and caring manner,
- followed by
- b) Engaging in calming, comforting values-guided activities

Pain Relief

The word 'relief' comes from the Latin term 'relevare', which means 'to raise or lighten'. Pain is a burden, and naturally we strive for relief from it. We want to 'lighten the load', 'raise ourselves up' from underneath the burden.

Many people assume that relief from pain means removing, avoiding or distracting from the pain. But mindfulness-based approaches offer a different form of pain relief: the huge relief that comes from dropping the struggle with pain, stepping out of the battle and making peace with it.

The Pushing Away Paper Exercise dramatically conveys the instant relief that comes from dropping the struggle with pain. That's why it's a good precursor or adjunct to any acceptance work.



Is Avoidance-Based Self-Soothing Bad?

There is nothing ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ about avoidance-based self-soothing (i.e. doing activities with the primary aim of reducing, avoiding, distracting from pain). Often, such activities are very helpful.

Remember, ACT does not target all experiential avoidance. ACT sees experiential avoidance as normal, not pathological. ACT ONLY targets experiential avoidance if and when it is so excessive, rigid or inappropriate that it becomes problematic and gets in the way of a rich and full life.

However, if the primary aim of self-soothing is to reduce, avoid, get rid of pain there are times that this simply will not work. So in this sense, acceptance-based self-soothing is ‘superior’ - because we can practice it whether or not pain reduces. (Of course, very commonly, pain reduces significantly as a by-product of acceptance. That’s not the aim, but it’s a lovely bonus, and we can certainly appreciate it when it happens.)

When is Avoidance-Based Self-Soothing Problematic?

Many self-destructive experientially-avoidant behaviours - including the inappropriate or excessive use of drugs and alcohol, overeating, gambling, and even, in some contexts, self-harming - can be viewed as avoidance-based attempts to self-soothe.

It's often useful for the therapist to reframe such behaviours as forms of self-soothing, for the purpose of fostering self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-compassion. (We don't have to use the term 'self-soothing', of course.)

Basically, we want to validate the adaptive functions these behaviours have had in the past. For example, we might say: "These things have helped you in the past. They were good strategies, in the sense they helped you to get through all the bad stuff that was happening, and cope with those painful feelings."

And then we'd go on to compassionately and respectfully look at the long-term costs, if these behaviours continue. (In ACT textbooks, this kind of work is often called 'creative hopelessness' or 'confronting the agenda'.)

Once the client reframes these behaviours as unworkable (i.e. they work in the short term to avoid pain, but they don't work long term to build a rich and full life), then we can segue into alternative, more workable behaviours.

A Quick Recap

So, we can define self-soothing, from an ACT perspective, as:

"Calming and comforting yourself through a) first accepting your pain and treating yourself in a kind and caring manner, and then b) engaging in calming, comforting values-guided activities."



A First Step In Self-Soothing

‘Soothe’ is derived from the old English word ‘sooth’, which means ‘truth’ or ‘reality’.

A first step in self-soothing is often simply to acknowledge to yourself the truth or reality that in this moment life is painful and you are hurting. And the aim is to do this with a kind, caring, supportive inner voice. (This is also often the first step in self-compassion.)

From here we can segue into any type of acceptance and/or self-compassion work. And then, after accepting the pain, the next step is self-soothing.

Self-Soothing Activities

Any mindfulness-based activity can function as a self-soothing process. This can include formal meditative-style mindfulness exercises such as:

- Mindful body scans
- Mindful breathing
- Self-compassion meditations

Clients can also create self-soothing activities through mindfully exploring the five senses and physical activity.

We might ask clients to consider what they find comforting, calming or soothing to:

- Look at
- Listen to
- Smell
- Touch or be touched by
- Taste, eat, drink
- Do





Sight

What have you ever found comforting, calming or soothing to look at? Consider: movies, paintings, sculptures, architecture, fashion, the sky and the weather, animals, plants, the 'great outdoors', theatre, dance, and so on.

How can you create self-soothing activities that draw on sight? For example, could you consider watching movies, going to an art gallery, going for a walk in nature?

The key to making these self-soothing is to engage fully in the activity; give it your full attention (while allowing your feelings to be as they are).



Sound

What have you ever found comforting, calming or soothing to listen to? What types of music, favourite songs, sounds of nature, voices of particular people, prayer or chanting, religious hymns?

How can you create self-soothing activities that draw on sound? For example, could you consider listening to favourite music, joining a choir, singing favourite songs, praying or chanting?

The key to making these self-soothing is to engage fully in the activity; give it your full attention (while allowing your feelings to be as they are).



Smell

What have you ever found comforting, calming or soothing to eat or drink? Consider favourite types of food, drink (that are life-enhancing rather than self-destructive when you consume them).

How can you create self-soothing activities that focus (in a healthy way) on eating and drinking?

For example, could you consider eating or drinking a favourite food or drink slowly and mindfully, and truly savouring the experience (instead of doing it rapidly and mindlessly, without savouring it).

The key to making these self-soothing is to engage fully in the activity; give it your full attention (while allowing your feelings to be as they are).



Taste

What have you ever found comforting, calming or soothing to eat or drink? Consider favourite types of food, drink (that are life-enhancing rather than self-destructive when you consume them).

How can you create self-soothing activities that focus (in a healthy way) on eating and drinking?

For example, could you consider eating or drinking a favourite food or drink slowly and mindfully, and truly savouring the experience (instead of doing it rapidly and mindlessly, without savouring it).

The key to making these self-soothing is to engage fully in the activity; give it your full attention (while allowing your feelings to be as they are).



Touch

What have you ever found to be comforting, calming or soothing ways to touch or be touched?

Consider: brushing hair, massage, stroking a dog or cat, cuddling or hugging or snuggling up against loved ones, having your back rubbed or your head stroked, running your fingers through grass, walking barefoot on the beach, warm showers, hot baths, etc.

How can you create self-soothing activities that draw on touch?

The key to making these self-soothing is to engage fully in the activity; give it your full attention (while allowing your feelings to be as they are).



Other Activities

Are there any activities you have ever found comforting, calming or soothing?

E.g. yoga, meditation, prayer, dancing, singing, hot baths, playing sports, arts & crafts, woodwork, fixing up the house, tinkering with the car, writing, reading, acting, getting out into nature, physical exercise, cooking, visiting museums or galleries, gardening?

How can you turn these into self-soothing activities?

The key to making these self-soothing is to engage fully in the activity; give it your full attention (while allowing your feelings to be as they are).

If the questions/explorations covered above reveal that clients have little or no prior experience of self-soothing to draw on, we can ask them to experiment with a range of activities and actively notice what happens as they engage in them.

Self-Soothing and Relaxation

In ACT, committed action includes skills-training. If clients do not have the necessary skills to live their values and effectively pursue their goals, the ACT therapist would either teach those skills in session or help the client find a way to learn those skills outside the session.

Relaxation skills are no exception. In ACT, we may well teach relaxation skills in the service of self-care. However, if we do teach relaxation skills, we need to be crystal clear that they are radically different to the core ACT mindfulness skills of defusion, acceptance, self-as-context and contact with the present.

How so? Well, relaxation skills are in the service of experiential avoidance: their primary aim is to reduce, avoid or get rid of unwanted feelings of anxiety, stress, etc. And this is the very opposite aim to the core ACT mindfulness skills. So if we aren't crystal clear with clients about the difference, we can expect confusion and mixed messages.

The good news is, most self-soothing activities can readily be turned into relaxation strategies. If we encourage clients to do this, then (as with any relaxation strategy) we want to:

- a) Emphasise it won't always work, and
- b) Clarify when it's most likely to work (in non-challenging, non-threatening, low-demand situations), and
- c) Clarify where it almost certainly won't work (in challenging, threatening, high-demand situations).

'It's Not Working'

If your client is practicing a self-soothing exercise and they say 'It's not working', always ask what they mean. Usually they will report that the pain is not reducing or going away.

This indicates they have understood self-soothing as a way to escape or avoid pain. (I.e. they are treating it as an avoidance strategy.)

If so, we'd need to explain that: "While self-soothing often reduces pain, it won't always. It's a way to support yourself, comfort yourself, be kind to yourself, in the midst of your pain. If the pain reduces, as it often does – enjoy it, appreciate it; but please don't make that your main aim, or you'll soon be disappointed."

When Avoidance Creeps In

Despite our best intentions, many clients will do self-soothing activities with an avoidance agenda – primarily to avoid/escape/distract from pain.

This is often NOT a problem. However it can become a problem when:

- a) The client thinks 'It's not working' because their pain isn't reducing
- b) The client's trying so hard to avoid pain, she is unable to engage fully in the activity

How to Enhance Self-Soothing with Other ACT Processes

We can enhance any self-soothing activity with defusion, acceptance, contacting the present moment, and values.

- **Defusion**

Unhooking from thoughts that would otherwise ‘pull you out’ of the activity.

- **Contacting the present moment**

Engaging fully in the activity, focusing attention on what is relevant.

- **Acceptance**

Making room for the pain that is present and allowing it to come and go.

- **Values**

We can further enhance any self-soothing activity by explicitly linking it to the values of self-kindness, self-caring, self-nurture, self-support. As we do this, we see huge overlap between self-soothing and self-compassion.

And That's Not All, Folks

I hope you've enjoyed this eBook. It's based on materials from my online course: ACT for Trauma.

The course also includes:

- How to incorporate polyvagal theory and attachment theory into ACT
- How to do formal exposure to traumatic memories
- How to work mindfully with flashbacks
- How to work with emotion dysregulation, dissociation, and hypoarousal
- And a whole lot more!

There's just so much more to ACT with trauma than you can get from textbooks or chapters. To find out more, [visit the online course](#).

Well, that's it for now.

Good luck with it all,

Cheers,

Russ



About Russ Harris

Internationally bestselling author, medical doctor, psychotherapist, life coach, and consultant to the World Health Organisation. Russ Harris has directly trained over 80,000 psychological health professionals in the ACT model. He provides exceptional learning experiences on Psychwire.com.

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