

The Safe/Calm Place Exercise (a state change exercise)

The objective is for the client to create a safe/calm/relaxing/peaceful place in their imagination before processing begins. Many clients have never had the experience of feeling “safe” and may have difficulty with the word “safe” place. For these clients it is recommended that you use the word that your client is most comfortable with. An example would be a “calm” place or a “relaxing” place.

This emotional safe/calm place can be used for a temporary rest or reprieve during processing, as an aid to closing down the disturbance in order to close down a session, and/or as a way to deal with disturbing material that may arise between sessions.

It can be helpful to ask the client a scaling question regarding their experience of anxiety in the moment. You can then follow up with the scaling question at the end of the safe place exercise to help the client appreciate his or her own change in state. **“On a scale of zero to ten, with ten being the most you have ever felt and zero being the least, how would you rate your current level of anxiety right now?”**

Step 1: Image. The clinician and the client identify an image of a safe, calm, relaxing or peaceful place that the client can easily evoke and that creates a personal feeling of the emotion the client best identifies (safe, calm, relaxing and/or peaceful).

Step 2: Emotions and sensations. The clinician asks the client to focus on the image, feel the emotions, and identify the location of the pleasant physical sensations.

Step 3: Enhancement. The clinician may use soothing statements to enhance the imagery and affect such as **“notice what you hear”** or **“notice what you can smell”** or **“notice what you can hear.”** The clinician should take care to convey a sense of safety, calm, relaxation and/or peace for the client.

Step 4: Eye movements (or other Dual Attention Stimulus - DAS). The positive response is further expanded by including a series of bilateral eye movements (or other DAS in the form of taps or tones). The clinician should use the direction and speed of movement that the client has identified as most comfortable and should state **“Bring up the image of a place, real or imaginary, that feels safe, calm, relaxing, or peaceful. Concentrate on where you feel the pleasant sensations in your body and allow yourself to notice them. Now concentrate on those sensations and follow my fingers with your eyes.”** At the end of the set the clinician asks the client, **“How do you feel now?”** If the client feels better, the clinician should do four to six more sets of DAS. If the client’s positive emotions have not increased, try alternative directions of eye movements until the client reports improvement. Sets are kept short, 6 to 12 movements each.

Step 5: Cue word. The client is then asked to identify a single word that fits the image (e.g., relax, safe place, calm, beach, what ever works for them) and to rehearse it mentally during the next set of eye movements. Encourage the client to allow themselves to notice the pleasant sensations and sense of emotional calm.

Step 6: Self-cuing. The client is then instructed to repeat the process on their own, bringing up the image and the word and experiencing the positive feelings (both emotional and physical), without eye movements. When the client has successfully repeated the exercise independently, the clinician points out how the client can use it to relax during times of stress.

Step 7: Cuing with disturbance. To emphasize the preceding point, the clinician asks the client to bring up a minor annoyance and notice the accompanying negative feelings. The clinician then guides the client through the “safe/calm place” exercise using bilateral stimulations (eye movements, tapping, auditory) until the negative feelings have dissipated.

Step 8: Self-cuing with disturbance. The clinician then asks the client to bring up a disturbing thought once again and to follow the same exercise, this time without the clinician’s assistance, to its relaxing conclusion.

Instruct the client to practice the safe, calm, relaxing or peaceful exercise (without EMs) or other relaxation techniques (such as belly breathing) at home daily.