

EMOTIONAL PROCESSING EXERCISES

If I have asked you to do an exercise which may help you to access and process difficult emotions attached to a particular experience, the various exercises are listed below. It is possible that you have a tendency to suppress difficult emotional content and although this can be a helpful coping strategy in certain situations, it will limit the degree to which we can work through and move on from difficult content. Suppression will tend to incubate rather than dissipate difficult content.

As we will have discussed in session, emotional work is not quite as neat as our cognitive work – we can't so easily put our feelings into neat categories, nor can we always access our emotions whenever we wish. These are not easy exercises and there may be some occasions when you do not feel able to access the emotions attached to the experience you are working on. If this is the case, do not fight this, put the exercise aside and come to it another day – without pressure and without being overly prescriptive about what you should be experiencing as this will tend to further inhibit your ability to access this content.

Preparation

Ensure that you will not be disturbed and have any materials you need to hand – paper/pen, photos if you have been advised to use these, any music that you feel might be helpful.

Remember

Allow the process to be what it is. These are processing exercises so the crucial point is that you are feeling some emotion as you do the exercise – if you are purely with your thoughts without feeling emotion, there is very limited processing occurring.

If you can, park any judgement of your 'performance' and simply follow the process. Keep these exercises time limited – 20-30 minutes is usually advisable. Remember you can do the exercises multiple times. After completing the exercise, do something that brings you back into the present (a grounding or mindfulness exercise, a self-soothing exercise or a controlled breathing exercise).

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Anger letter

When we are not able to communicate our anger to someone that has hurt us or violated our rules, it can be helpful to process this in order to be able to move on. Write an uncensored letter to the individual concerned detailing how they hurt you, what it has been like for you to experience what happened, what you feel towards them and what you think of their behaviour. Do not over-think this, connect to the anger you feel. We are not attempting to formulate a well-crafted letter – you can repeat yourself, parts may not make a lot of sense and you can use whatever language you wish; the key point is that you can connect to the anger you feel in response to the situation.

When you have completed the letter, symbolically destroy it – burn it, rip it up or do whatever fits for you.

Grief work/bereavement

Create your quiet space.

Remove any expectations you have about what you should feel.

Use music, photos or other cues to remind yourself of the individual.

Consider what you miss about the person – what made them special; consider what they brought to your life and how your life is different without them.

What would you like to say to the person if you could speak to them now?

The emotion is likely to come in waves – mood-surf, tolerate the discomfort, ride the wave of this emotion and allow it to subside naturally, it will. Over time the intensity of the pain will start to reduce but we need to ride the wave many times to allow this to happen. Again, although it is counter-intuitive to approach painful emotions, we know that by approaching difficult content we can diffuse the intensity of these feelings over time.

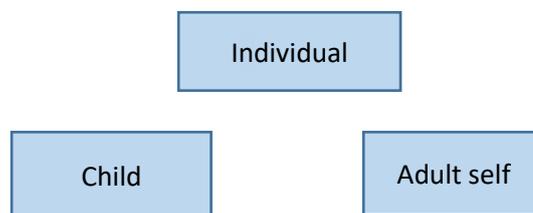
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Inner child work

Child-Adult Dialogue

Although some people find this quite a challenging exercise and may struggle to imagine themselves as a child, this can be a helpful exercise in working with childhood trauma and wounds which can reappear in adulthood when we are reminded of certain experiences. Even when we do not remember the details of certain events, certain experiences become imprinted in the amygdala's emotional memory which become reactivated when we perceive similar threats or losses in adulthood. We will set this exercise up in session.

You may wish to listen to the inner child meditation to assist in this work.



Imagine a dialogue between these parts of yourself. Remember that the role of the adult is to validate the feelings of the child and respond to the child's needs with care. The role of the child is to express the feelings that arise when triggered by a particular experience – this can be recognised by the intense emotional response which is disproportionate to the situation. The role of the individual is to mediate between the two giving a voice to both child and adult.