

5. Distraction

Hi! For the next few minutes, we will focus on "distraction" as a strategy to contain difficult thoughts and feelings related to the traumas of the past.

Distraction is usually defined as the process of diverting ones attention and actions away from a desired focus and from that which was the primary goal. Distraction is also often associated with being absent-minded, confused, and forgetful. Therefore, we usually evaluate everything that "distracts" us as negative.

In a psychological context however, for example in a trauma therapy, distraction can help to contain trauma-related distress, such as depressive thoughts, negative self-evaluation, and intrusive trauma memories. In this context, distraction is about directing one's attention away from unhealthy intrusive thoughts, feelings and impulses related to the trauma.

This means that distraction can be used as a strategy to avert the urge to give in to unhealthy impulses and actions, actions that may have served as a coping strategy in the short term - but became destructive in the longer term.

People often experience that it is not helpful to push away such trauma-related reactions and impulses, as they then usually become stronger, but rather that one accepts their presence, while also drawing attention to something else. If one manages to shift one's attention away from such impulses and short-term solutions, one can better endure and resist the urge to act on these impulses.

Distraction in this context is a strategy to cope in a healthier way with the destructive impulses, and distraction strategies are chosen by you and something you have control over self-chosen. It is important to remind yourself that it is a temporary solution, i.e. that you promise yourself to return to the traumatic memory - when the timing is right.

Distraction techniques are concrete, they can be anything - it is important that they engage your mind enough to distract you from the traumatic material, and make your trauma-related feelings, thoughts and impulses less intrusive. In other words, the distraction techniques are not practiced in a state of being absent-minded, in contrary they require your attention and present mind.

Distraction techniques activate the parts of the brain that are involved in actions related to the present, the parts or action systems that are engaged in daily life activities, which you may have heard of in your trauma-therapy. They involve mental capacities like: curiosity, our ability to explore, plan, organize, play – like in sport – be creative, humoristic, our capacity to care, and not least our ability to connect socially in everyday life. For a distraction technique to work, it is a prerequisite that what is "distracting" is something you consider positive.

Simple distraction is probably the most widely used strategy to contain trauma memories, whether one is conscious about it or not. It is not uncommon for people to engage in excessive activity following traumatic events to keep the mind busy, to avoid the intrusion of the trauma-memories. Continuous use of distraction is not recommended. Non-stop activity without breaks and proper periods to rest in addition to the constant fear that the trauma-memory may intrude, may lead to secondary anxiety and other problems. However, well-considered use of distraction and other containment skills can help deal with emotional distress, so that one can balance in everyday life, and so that one can address the trauma at a later stage, when one has the sufficient mental capacity to do so.

So how do you find techniques that can “distract” you from the trauma memories? - What qualities should they have? – As mentioned previously, the idea is to shift attention to something that engages the mind - something that is stimulating and compelling rather than something that is calm and only requires passive attention. One should avoid activities that allow the mind to walk away from the activity. For example: PC games are often more suitable than a TV movie, and a conversation with a good acquaintance is better than reading a book, unless you are gripped by the book's content. Both watching TV and reading a book are activities that allow the mind to wander - or possibly enter the state of daydreaming. Active participation in an external activity is usually more effective to help one being distracted from the preoccupation with inner disturbing memories and emotions.

It is also recommended that you choose an activity that matches what you feel, i.e. if you are upset, a quick walk or run may work well; if you are sad a soothing and comforting activity may be helpful. If you have "parts" (dissociative personality parts, dissociated self-states), it is recommended to choose an activity that the "parts" agree on.

It is also recommended that the activities are not things that come to you automatically, i.e. the ‘(your) auto-pilot is switched on!’ The activity must require a certain level of dedication and presence. I want to get the message across clearly that the activity must be “experienced” and be engaging, in order to have the desired “distraction effect” for the persons who will use it.

Some examples:

- It is not for nothing that I stand here by the climbing wall. Climbing requires a presence, concentration and focus in the here and now, etc. For those of you who enjoy climbing, it may be thought of as a good distraction technique. Other examples are:
- PC games and other games, crosswords, yatzy
- Knitting - with some demanding pattern
- Call an acquaintance, talk about nice and non-trauma-related things
- Do or think something that is amusing, stimulates your sense of humor, watch an amusing or funny TV- program or movie.
- Work with your creativity, which requires mental activity.
- Listen to music that you engage in (not relaxing), e.g. singing along to the words, dancing to the music.
- Drive a car, follow a planned route
- Walk or run a quick walk, go cycling, possibly with a scheduled task (e.g. plan to notice things you see, etc., or maybe bring your camera
- Other physical activity, which requires presence, maybe with someone to engage socially
- Play and interact with children, or play and interact with dog, pet
- Use a recipe to bake a cake or make a dish - that you cannot do on "autopilot".
- Other practical tasks: clearing and cleaning, which is not done on autopilot (for example, have different procedures and orders from time to time)

I also should remind you that the activity should not be too demanding. It should not need more mental capacity than one has in the situation. One can expect that one's capacity is less in such difficult times than otherwise.

An example: a person experienced that the baking of a cake helped her distract from unhealthy impulses. However, it was too demanding for her to go to the store to shop the ingredients she needed to bake the cake. Therefore, she always made sure that she had the ingredients lying in the house at a certain place, so she could go straight ahead to the baking of the cake, when needed.

Another suggestion is that you include some moments on ordinary days to do something that you experience as positive, regardless of whether you are activated or not - to get used to having positive things in life, and that it is good to have some "time off" from hard trauma-work.

Towards the end, I remind you again that distraction as a containment strategy is temporary. These techniques are chosen by you self-chosen, and distraction in this context is an activity that is perceived as positive for the person who is going to use it.

If the technique does not distract you from unhealthy impulses at the first or second try, it does not necessarily mean that it is not an appropriate technique for you. Here again, the key is to keep trying, and do experiments in order to develop the skills that work specific for you. Keep trying and you will succeed!

You may wish to start by thinking about if you already use some distraction techniques, perhaps without even thinking about it? What experience do you have with these strategies and in what situations do they help?

Then, what activities could you think of trying out in the future to help you distract from distressing trauma-memories?

Using "Safe place", whether in the imagination or going to a concrete safe place in the present reality is also an example of distraction. In that context distraction is combined with something soothing. "Safe Place" is in focus in a separate video. Thank you for now!

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