

### Exercise 5.2: Imagining your soothing place (pages 146-7)

Images can be very powerful and rapidly activate various systems in our brain. Certain images can stimulate the parts of our brain that help us to feel soothed and safe, and at the same time tone down other emotional systems (especially the threat system). People sometimes think that when we try to create images in our minds they should be like photos – clear and sharp. In fact, they don't have to be anything like that. Sometimes imagery only gives us a 'sense' of something, and we never see anything clearly. So, imagery doesn't have to mean fully formed pictures – very often it consists of just fleeting impressions.

Some of us, when we are distressed, naturally conjure up images of being in a better place, maybe somewhere we remember from the past or somewhere we hope to be in the future. Now, of course, we may do this simply to escape or avoid difficult feelings or situations. However, we can also use this tactic to help us cope with difficult situations without avoiding them, because it can help us to learn ways of containing and creating soothing feelings within ourselves.

The 'soothing place' exercise builds upon this natural way that people activate their soothing system. The feelings of safeness and calmness it encourages are useful in activating our soothing system; and when this system is engaged it becomes easier to think about our difficulties from a more compassionate perspective and also to experiment with new ways of coping. Developing a soothing place does not mean that we either accept or ignore bad things happening to us, or that we do not try to change things in our life. It is simply a step towards feeling calm enough to tackle these things without resorting to overeating as a way of coping with difficult feelings that may arise.

It is important to distinguish between safety (feeling safe from harm) and safeness (feeling calm, content, cared for and welcome). If people have experienced a lot of threat, particularly from others, they often imagine a place that protects them (for example, a castle with guard dogs and watch towers that no one can come into) or a place they can hide in where no one can find them. That does not mean that being safe from harm is not important, and we often need to do this before we can develop our soothing system.

Safeness is a physical and psychological state associated with soothing, where we feel calm, content and able to rest, and is a step towards connecting with ourselves or others.

You can use Worksheet 2 to help you create your image. I suggest that you try to work out what you think will be soothing for you on paper before you try to imagine it. This has a number of advantages: it will give your mind time to explore options before committing to a specific image; and it can help you review the image you have chosen to make sure that it does not have any baggage that will move you out of soothing (for example, building it on a memory of a place in the country you used to find soothing in real life but has now been turned into a housing estate!).

Use the worksheet to jot down any ideas you have. Your soothing place is not fixed in tablets of stone, and you can change it whenever you want. Some people like to

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create multiple soothing places, so they can choose what feels right for them on the day.

Some like to have an actual picture of their soothing place to focus on this while they do the exercise. Others like to have smells or sounds around them that they associate with their soothing place. These kinds of associations can be helpful in activating your soothing system in day-to-day life, as you may be able to keep the sound on your smartphone or the smell on a handkerchief and use them to rapidly activate your memory of safeness at any time where you feel under threat.

Some people find it helpful to imagine seeing themselves in their soothing place. Other people don't want to see themselves there and prefer just to imagine their place and their feeling of being in it. It is okay to do either.

After you've been in your soothing place for a few minutes, and when you're ready, just dwell on the fact that this place is *your* creation, and therefore really welcomes you and wants you to be here and wants to offer you soothing and rest.

Don't worry if you find yourself feeling quite sleepy when you do this exercise. This is quite common, and some people even use it to help them sleep. That's okay too. When you have completed at least one version of Worksheet 2, you can begin the audio for Exercise 5.2.

Commented [AM2]: Just wondering why this is highlighted in yellow?

Commented [KG3R2]: Just to remind me what I added 😊 - I've removed it now.