

Some thoughts on Self-soothing and Self-nurturing

– Margaret Gray MSW

Self-soothing and self-nurturing skills are probably the most useful skills we can ever learn. The great thing is that we can easily acquire them at any age.

Some rare people are gifted with these skills in utero, thanks to a wonderful 'A' class womb experience, whilst the majority of us learn them somewhere along the way on our life journey. Although the self-soothing skills that resonate most with each of us differ, there are some key similarities across all of them.

It can help to visualize them as an invaluable part of the package of skills and resources that we carry with us in a little backpack on our life journey. Knowing what they are and how to access them, can sometimes make the difference between life and death during challenging times, and they are a key ingredient in building our inner resilience, which is necessary to climb over life's obstacles. They are also a means of self-regulating our emotions, thereby reducing the risk of feeling overwhelmed and resorting to dissociation, repression or suppression, when feelings come up.

One of the added bonuses of having a good repertoire of self-soothing skills, is that it enhances all our personal relationships. Much as we are interdependent on each other for nurturing, limited skills in self-soothing often leads to a strong dependency on relationships, to meet those needs. This puts a lot of pressure to be in a relationship, regardless of whether we are happy or not in it. It also puts an impossible burden on the other person to soothe and comfort us at all times.

Challenging and traumatic childhoods often prevent children from learning self-soothing skills, as survival is the main priority. Later in adulthood, unresolved childhood trauma and PTSD can result in the adoption of survival skills that can appear to be comforting, but which are in fact self-destructive. (See the section below on self-nurturing, versus self-harm)

Some ways to figure out what soothes you most

One way is to think back to when you were a child – maybe age 4/5 - and you came home from school upset. Imagine you had 'Disney' perfect parents. What might have soothed and comforted you most? A hug? Some cookies and milk? A listening ear? Emotional empathy? A story? Time with your friends? Playing a game with your parent? Going for a walk or a swim? Dancing? Singing? Drawing? Baking? Quiet peaceful time in your room, or maybe the garden? Listening to your favorite music...

As you got older – maybe age 14/15 – what would have soothed and comforted you then? Lying on your bed reading a book? Time with your best friend? Playing music? Riding your bike? Lying in the sun and feeling the warmth? Looking at the flowers and bees in the garden? Holding hands with your boyfriend/girlfriend?

What soothes and comforts you now?

The adult version of childhood self-soothing

Hugs from a parent might become hugs with your partner, friend, family member, dog, cat (if it allows you!), wrapping yourself in a warm soft and cozy blanket, hugging a hot water bottle with a soft cover on it, hugging a soft cuddly toy, hugging a tree...

Cookies and milk might translate into cooking a healthy and delicious meal for yourself, or going to your favorite restaurant to eat something you enjoy, or inviting friends you are close to over for dinner, or asking to join a friend for dinner, or enjoying a yummy ice cream, or some cake or chocolate...

Other adult self-soothing skills can easily carry over from childhood including: time in nature by water, or mountains, or forest, or swimming in the ocean, or a pool, or having a warm candlelit bath. Calling a good friend and being heard by them, having fun with friends, spending some peaceful time reading your favorite book, or writing poetry, or watching a comforting heart-warming movie...

Self-nurturing versus self-harm

The question often arises – are drinking alcohol, eating sugar, watching violence on TV, playing video games, using drugs, smoking, overworking etc, (which can appear to offer immediate comfort), nurturing or destructive?

To some degree this depends on the quantity, motivation and well-being of the individual. A slice of chocolate cake once in a while can be a self-soothing treat. Eaten every day, sugar can suppress emotions. Similarly with alcohol – a glass of alcohol with a nice meal can be an enjoyable treat. On a daily basis or in excess, alcohol represses emotions.

We all know the difference between a once off treat, which equates to cookies and milk as a child, and a regular pattern of using substances, work or sex, to suppress our

connection to our feelings, rather than soothing them and helping us to connect with ourselves in a more loving compassionate way. Often this can be the result of unresolved childhood trauma that gets triggered when powerful feelings come to the surface. Learning to gently self-soothe with the help of counselling, body work, energy work, yoga and other forms of support, can help to heal the childhood pain, and let go of the association between the use of addictive substances or behaviors, and self-soothing.

What's soothing for one person, can be punishing for another. Going to the gym can feel great if it's a way to experience our physical strength and develop a level of healthy fitness. It can however be tortuous and punishing if we go because we hate our body. Often it's a process of trial and error to discover what soothes us at different stages in life.

Here is a basic checklist that you can keep adding to of things that feel self-soothing to you:

Reading – novels, short stories, poetry, biographies, adventure stories, love stories?

Writing – journaling, poetry, stories, blogs

Listening to podcasts – what kind?

Using tools like Tarot, Astrology, Crystals to get clarity and connect with your intuition?

Time out in nature – mountains, sea, beach and sand, lakes, hills, fields, gardens and parks

Weather – sun, snow, rain, wind?

Time alone

Time with close friends

Time with large groups

Connecting online with friends

Exercise – indoor, outdoor, dance, sports, alone, in a team, fast, slow, yoga, tai chi?

Music – playing, listening, alone, with others, silence?

Food – cooking, being cooked for, going out to eat, cold food, warm food?

Water- a warm bath, a vigorous shower, a hot tub, pool, the sea?

Travel – where? Alone or with others? How?

Spirituality – meditation, yoga, a daily practice, spiritual teachings, praying?

Enjoy!