

Attention Out, or Giving the Mind a Break

Everybody gets activated at times. Other words for activated are triggered or upset. Another way to talk about this is to talk about acting out a distress pattern, or being dysregulated. It feels better when we are regulated, in our River of Integration, when our Window of Tolerance is nice and wide. There are many ways to point ourselves back to regulation, and, there will be times that your system gets flooded and, at those times, it is difficult (feels impossible) to reach for the choices that help bring us back into perspective; to see “what else is in the room” alongside the distress; especially for those of us with trauma in our backgrounds (which is most of us).

One of the strongest contradictions to distress is to remember that YOU GET TO DECIDE when you do the work of healing trauma, and how long you focus on it at any given time. Remember, our minds regulate information and energy flow. A system that is traumatized is a mind overwhelmed: the stimulus is too great to stay open and it finds ways to shut down (this creates survival mechanisms that present many different ways: shame, guilt, negative self-talk, numbness, dissociation, addiction, over indulgences of all kinds, ignoring the needs of our emotional and physical selves....and so on). Keep in mind that these survival mechanisms served us at one time; with gentleness, love and attention we can teach our system to have a more open, broad approach in times when we are dysregulated.

This concept of choice is a bifurcation point: One choice we can make is to address the activated part direction and engage in a healing process with the distress. Some choices under this umbrella is to listen to our activation, mine the experience for the wisdom that it holds (e.g.: the part that has a voice that says “I’m stupid” may be attempting to absolve you of responsibility if what is unfolding does not turn out well: it wants to help you feel safe and protected), love the parts that are misguided, and perhaps give the part something else to do or focus on. Another choice we can make is to take our attention off the distress. What does that look like? We have come to the meat of this handout: Attention Out

Attention out moves the focus off of the distress to benign reality. It can help to note the date, time, place you are currently in and perhaps note to yourself that “nothing bad is happening right now.” This might look like “It is May 5, 2021; I am in my living room. I really like that piece of art on the wall. There is no tiger in this room and nothing bad is happening in this moment.” This is an example of using a top-down regulation technique (using your mind to calm your mind). Bottom-up techniques are anything you do with your body to regulate: breathe, engage in bi-lateral tapping, do any rhythmic and repetitive behavior you wish (e.g.: marching, running, hopping). If you have not seen my hand out Tips for Integration, ask for it: it has a long list of ideas (top down and bottom up) for increasing regulation. You can also make a list of things that are going well in your life, you can make this list mentally, write them down, or tell a friend.

Here are specific attention out techniques you can try that engage your mind and take attention off distress:

Naming trees, flowers, states, countries, planets, solar systems, fruit, types of nuts, animals, fish, insects (etc). you can decide you'll name a specific number (5 or 10) and for extra challenge you can try to name them in alpha order. You aren't trying to get this “right:” if you decided trees and you say “conifer” and then you say “pine tree” it's totally fine! You are just getting your mind to focus on trees. Do mental math problems that are a teensy bit out of your comfort zone (if you are good at math 247X3 might work for you, or you might need to do an algebra problem; if you mind is stressed, you might have to do something simple; you know best what will work for you—you'll be focused on the math problem and not your distress)

Ask yourself when was the last time you: took a hike, went to the beach, hugged a tree, pet the cat, touched a reptile, played hide and seek....

Recite phone numbers you have memorized

Recite poetry you have memorized

Name the kinds of furniture you would find in a living room, in an office, in a lobby

Name three books you have read in the last two months

You can make a list of your own, and you can make up attention out exercises on the spot.

Remember, you DO have work to do, but it's also true that the mind needs regular breaks!

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