

#15 Defining Flooding. Self-Soothing and How to Do It.

This exercise is used when you are flooded. John Gottman defines flooding as when "you feel overwhelmed and disorganized by the way your partner expresses negativity. Couples can feel flooded by one another by the ways they express complaints. They get hyper-vigilant about negative things. The body of someone who feels flooded is a confused jumble of signals. It may be hard to breathe. Muscles tense and stay tensed. The heart beats fast and seems to beat harder."

Flooding causes distinct physiological changes. Once the heart rate reaches 95-100 beats per minute, (or 10 beats above your starting rate) the adrenal glands go into action delivering adrenalin. This excited state interferes with listening and other skills that facilitate understanding...something needed to do the necessary repair work in the relationship. Once flooded, our perspective narrows, we lose our sense of humor and creativity in problem solving, and often will repeat our point again and again, sometimes louder and louder.

When flooded, here are the Five Steps of Self-Soothing:

Step #1—Breathing

Get control of your breathing. When people get flooded, they often find themselves either holding their breath a lot or breathing shallowly. Change your breathing so it is even and you take deep regular breaths. Take your time inhaling and exhaling.

Step #2—Relaxation

The goal is to find areas of tension in your body. First tense and then relax these muscle groups. Pay attention to your face, particularly your forehead and jaw. Next focus your attention on your neck, shoulders, arms and back for any tension.

Step #3—Heaviness

As you begin to notice these areas of tension, imagine that these parts are becoming heavy. Imagine yourself feeling the heaviness in them.

Step #4—Warmth

Imagine your body parts, particularly the ones you've noticed tension in, becoming warm. Say to yourself "My forehead is becoming relaxed and warm..." three times, and imagine that this is so. Do this for each part of your body.

Step #5—Imagery

Here you will add an image of a very personal place where you can go and feel calm. The key is to focus your attention on one calming vision or idea. It can be a very specific place you go to that was once a very comforting place, such as a forest or a beach or someplace you've only ever imagined going. Imagine this as vividly as you can, as you calm yourself down. Try to use all of your senses such as feeling the heat or cool on your skin, seeing the colors, or scenery, hearing the song of birds or the waves, and smelling the pine or the salty air.

As you go through these relaxation steps, try to let go of the topic or words that got you upset. "Ruminating" or going through an incident over and over, will prevent self-soothing.