

EMOTIONAL RESOURCE

4.3 SAFE SPACE IMAGERY

Feeling safe is a fundamental human need. We need to be able to *accurately* recognise when we are safe and when we are not, in order to get by effectively in the world. However, our sense of what is safe and what is not is affected by what we have experienced. This means that if we have had problems feeling safe in the past, particularly when we were growing up, then we might find it hard to feel safe now. Many of our emotions are triggered by whether we feel safe or not. For this reason, learning to question inaccurate emotion messages is essential to feeling safe (see handout **4.2: Questioning Emotions**).

Many people say they do not know what it feels like to be safe. Safe Space Imagery is a way to start building a sense of safety, by developing a safe place in your imagination. This works because when we imagine something happening, we tend to react as though it is real (e.g. salivating when you imagine your favourite meal, or feeling fear when you worry). This can help you get to know the feeling of safety, and with time and practice you can use this to help yourself *feel* safer in situations where you *know* you actually *are* safe.

Some people struggle with imagery exercises like this because they are not used to imagery, or because they think they are no good at it. In fact, most people never develop a crystal-clear image, and this is not important. We only need to create a loose impression in your mind. Try to persist with it. The act of trying to create a safe place, and the sense of it being somewhere you would like to be, are what's important. Some people find that at first all they can imagine is a sound, a colour or a smell. That's fine, with time and practice these small beginnings can be built upon. Try to let go of any sense that you need results quickly, or that whatever you can imagine isn't good enough. Wherever you start is perfectly okay.

The instructions on the next page can be useful in helping you practice Safe Space Imagery.

Instructions – Safe Space Imagery

To begin with, most people find it easiest to practice Safe Space Imagery in a quiet place, when they are feeling relaxed. It might help to practice some relaxation first. It's usually easier to try imagery exercises with your eyes closed. Sometimes people are helped by calming music or sounds (e.g. the sound of crashing waves if your safe place is on a beach), scented candles, or a prompt (e.g. a picture of a place you can imagine as safe). You can use the **Safe Space Imagery Worksheet** to help you develop the image. Below are some suggestions that might also help:

- To begin with, only you should be present in this place. Alternatively, you can be with someone you trust fully and completely. There are pros and cons to using a real person. It might be easier to imagine, but real people might not feel as safe. Use your best judgement.
- Remember that you are in control, you can make any change to the image that you want to.
- There are pros and cons to using a real place from your memory. It might be easier to imagine, but real places might not feel as safe. If you think that you've never really felt safe before, it can be better to imagine a completely new place. Use your best judgment.
- Try to access the image through all of your senses. This helps to bring the image to life. To begin with, try going through each of the five senses one-by-one, before you start the image, and see what you would like to include.
- Think about your body position and facial expression. Allow your body to be in a safe and open posture and allow yourself to have a soft, subtle smile.
- Try to imagine that this place has a magical quality, in that it takes pleasure in you being there. This can be a tricky idea to understand, but after all, it is a

special and unique place created by you, for you. When you are there you should feel wanted and cared for.

- With practice, the memory and sense of your Safe Space can grow, and it can become a useful resource at times of difficulty.

Safe Space Imagery Script

This script is a guide only. You may also benefit from trying out other Safe Space Imagery exercises available on YouTube or on other internet sites. Try to experiment with different options and what works best for you.

Start this exercise by allowing yourself to get into a comfortable position. You can decide whether you want to close your eyes, or keep them open, gazing at a spot that isn't too distracting. Remember you can change your mind or stop at any point if you choose to. Allow any distracting thoughts or emotions to simply wash over you, and give yourself a few minutes to focus in on your breathing (pause). Don't judge your breathing or try to change it just yet. Simply take notice of it and spend a few moments noticing the rhythm of your breath.

Now take a few deep breaths... in... and out... until you find a relaxed rhythm with a nice, long out breath (pause). Keep going with this and settle into your relaxed breathing rhythm. Don't worry if you can't get to a relaxed breathing rhythm just yet, this may come later (pause). As you breathe out, you may wish to pair each out breath with a safety statement, something simple like "I am safe here", or just the word "safe" or "relax". It's up to you (pause). If you have trouble with your image, don't worry. Most people don't get a crystal clear image, and it's the act of trying to think about this place that really matters (pause).

I'll invite you now to imagine your safe space. Allow it to gently come into your mind and see what you pick up on first (pause). It may be what you see, what you hear, what you smell. Just try to notice these things as they come into your awareness (pause). As you become more aware of this place, remember that it is yours. Nobody else can come here without your permission, and you have total control of what happens here. This is your safe space (pause).

Try to work through your senses now, to deepen the sense of this place in your mind. Try to pick up on what you can see as you look around. What is close by, a little further away and far off in the distance (pause). Try to pick up on the general scene and the small details if you can (pause). Remember that everything you see here should deepen a sense of safety and relaxation. If you don't like something it can go, if you want something to be there, add it in (pause). Now focus in on what you can hear. Notice the sounds close by and far off (pause). Remember that everything here should help to deepen a sense of safety and relaxation. If you don't like something it can go, if you want something to be there, add it in (pause). Now notice what you can feel, and what you can touch or sense on your skin. You might notice warmth or cold, smooth or rougher surfaces, anything that helps you to feel safer and more relaxed (pause). Notice where you're standing or sitting, and what that feels like. If there's something you don't like, change it (pause). Now notice what you can smell or taste (pause). Absorb these sensations and notice that each one deepens your sense of being safe and relaxed (pause). Take another deep breath, look around you and take in the whole image again (pause). Absorb it all, bit-by-bit, through each of your senses (pause). Let it envelop you, noticing that everything here is designed by you and helps to deepen your sense of safety and calm (pause). Remember the name you gave to this place and say it gently to yourself in your mind (pause).

Notice that this place helps you to feel safe and all the pleasant emotions that come from that. Notice how this sense of being safe affects you in your body, your mind and your behaviour (pause). As we draw to a close, take a few moments to take it all in again. Remember that this is your personal safe place and you can visit here whenever you choose. For now though we will say goodbye (pause).

As you are ready, open your eyes and become aware again of where you are. Take a few moments to allow yourself to come back to the room fully (pause). Notice that you are here in [**LOCATION**] on [**DAY** and **AM/PM**]. Allow yourself to stretch or move around to fully come back to the here-and-now. If you feel you need to, you may even find it helpful to practice a little grounding.

END OF EXERCISE

Safe Space Imagery Worksheet

1. Identify an emotional reaction that makes you feel unsafe (and is actually safe)



2. Identify a Safe Space Image – a place that could help you to feel safe and more relaxed.

My Safe Space Image:

"The treehouse"

3. Enhance this image by thinking about how you would experience it through each of your senses. Everything you sense there should deepen a sense of safety and relaxation.

What will I see?
I will be on top of the jungle canopy, far from the ground. I can see the treetops for miles. There are animals all around and the sky is blue and cloudless. In the far distance I can see the ocean.

What will I hear?
I can hear the parrots and exotic birds, and monkeys in the distance. I can hear the wind gently moving through the trees.

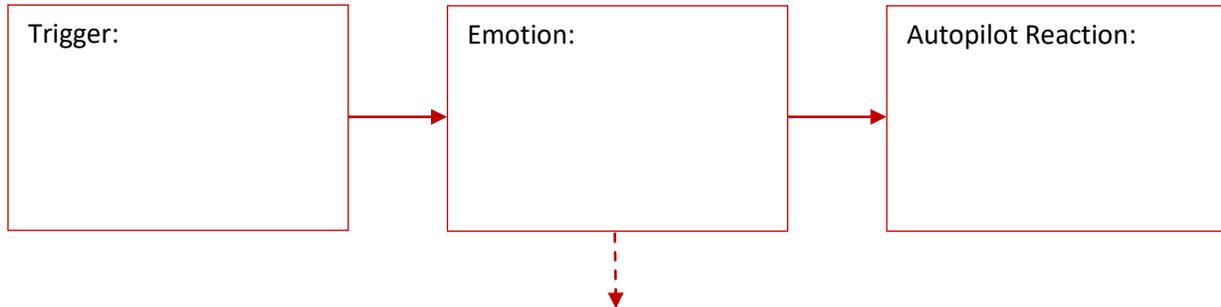
What will I feel?
I can feel the warm sunlight and the humid air against my skin. I notice a faint breeze. I can feel the edge of my hammock and I swing gently from side-to-side.

What will I smell?
I can smell exotic flowers and a moist humid, sea air.

What will I taste?
I have my favourite coconut-flavoured sweets.

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What will I hear?

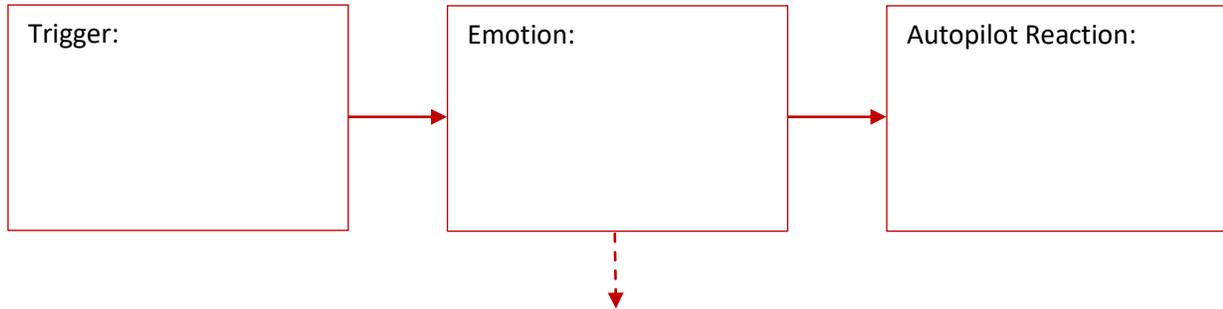
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What will I smell?

What will I taste?

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What will I see?

What will I hear?

What will I feel?

What will I smell?

What will I taste?