

EMOTIONAL RESOURCE

4.1 DISTRACTION

Emotions have a powerful effect on our ability to concentrate and pay attention. They do this by taking control of our ‘spotlight of attention’ and shining it onto the things that the emotion tells us are important. This is a normal part of how the mind works, and can be helpful if our emotions are bringing our attention to important things at the right time. However, it can also be unhelpful. This is most obvious when emotions are too intense, when it often feels like we can’t focus on anything other than the thing that has made us feel angry, sad or ashamed. When this happens repeatedly it can lead to a pattern of circular thinking called “rumination”. This can cause emotions to last longer than usual and can even progress to become an obsessional problem.

Distraction is a common coping strategy that involves shining the spotlight of attention away from a situation or emotion if it doesn’t help us. It is a useful strategy for dealing with intense emotions. It is generally not useful when we are feeling too little, as we are already disconnected from the emotion at this point. It is also important to remember that distraction should only be used as a short-term strategy in certain situations. For example:

- Where an emotion is too intense and focusing on the problem now could overwhelm us and cause an autopilot reaction.
- Where we are unable to do anything about the trigger and continuing to think about it is unhelpful.
- Where the trigger is not that important to us (e.g. a driver cutting in front of us in a queue of traffic).

If we rely on distraction too much it can lead to avoidance and suppression, which are mostly unhelpful ways of dealing with emotions. However, it can help us to get through a tough time. When thinking about distractions, it is important to pick things that will be easily available to you and occupy your attention as much as possible. The tips on the next page can be helpful in making sure distraction works for you.

Distraction - Instructions

A key tip with distraction is making sure it is a **consciously chosen and time-limited strategy**. This will help to prevent it from developing into a more problematic autopilot reaction that can lead into emotional avoidance or suppression. Anything that **occupies your attention** without too much effort works well. It can also help if the distraction helps to create alternative emotions and gives you a sense of pleasure or achievement. For example:

Watch a favourite TV show, movie or a funny YouTube clip.

Listen to your favourite music or something you've never heard before. Many people enjoy calming sounds and music from a relaxation CD.

Soothe or treat yourself with a relaxing bath or light some fragranced candles. Go for a massage or buy your favourite chocolate.

Imagine a different situation or a calming place. Remember a happy time or situation when you felt very different.

Play a game on your phone or computer. Try a board game or jigsaw puzzle. Spend time with your children or pets.

Be creative with drawing, singing, or art. Lots of people enjoy colouring books as a distraction.

Read a good book, magazine or story.

Socialise with a friend or family member. Take a trip to visit someone you haven't seen in a while.

Escape on a short walk, or a trip. Take the dog for a walk.

Exercise at the gym or go for a run. Do something to keep yourself active in your body. Tidy up around the house.

Remember that there really is no right and wrong when it comes to distraction. What's most important is finding what works best for you. So long as your distraction technique is not being over-used or causing your or others harm, whatever works is fine.

DISTRACTION WORKSHEET

Use the worksheet below to list as many distraction techniques as possible that you might use, then try to consider the pros and cons of these.

Distraction technique	Pros	Cons

Based on the pros and cons you identified, try to think about which distraction techniques might work best for you. Now use the table below to think about when you will use them, for how long, and when you will know to stop using them (to prevent their overuse)?

When will I use it?	For how long?	When to stop?