

MODULE 10

Self-soothing

Session X

Self-Soothing

Meeting A

Materials

MH session 7 modification/ "clustering" exercise from The Way of the Journal

Goal – Each group member will recognize her existing methods of comforting herself.

Goal – Each group member will begin to distinguish healthy ways of coping from damaging ways of coping.

Leader

MH p. 58

Q. #1

List responses on flip chart/chalk board

Q. #2

Explain technique of "clustering" and ask group members to use this method to identify most frequently used comfort strategies and their respective costs.

Meeting B

Materials

P. 262

Use exercise 1 as brainstorming session.

Goal – Members will be able to use one self-soothing technique.

Clustering²

Why Cluster?

- quick and easy
- Generates ideas and insights
- Breaks through internal barriers
- Provides details of inner organization and history
- Good for getting unstuck
- Helps with communication and understanding of other persons, parts of yourself, issues, feelings

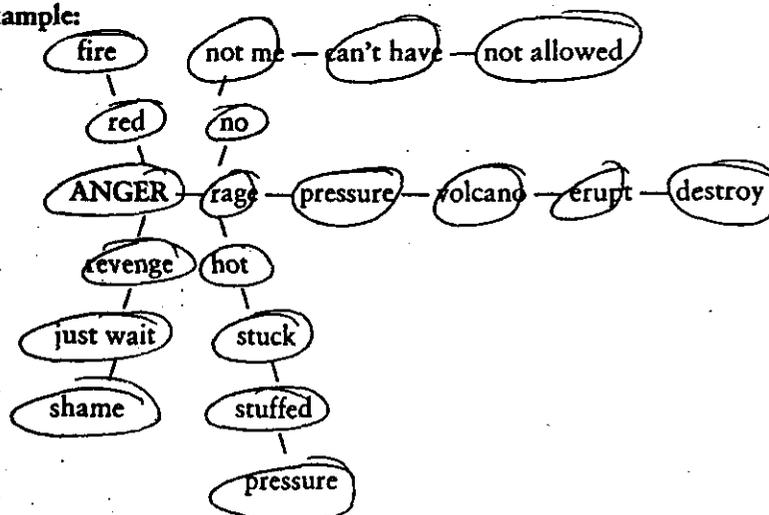
Choose a word or phrase as a topic: a mood, issue, person, memory, part of yourself, feeling, dream symbol or character, today's date. Write this in the center of the page and circle it. Turn off all internal censors and judgments. What's the first thing that comes to mind? Write this above, below, or to the side of your cluster word, circle it, and draw a line connecting it to the middle. What does the second word make you think of? Write it down, circle it, connect it with a line to the word before it. Continue in this way until you can go no further.

Now return to the original word and begin the process again, spinning a new thought-line of associations that occur spontaneously. You can go back to previous thought-lines at any time and add in more associations. Soon your page will begin to look like a web of concentric rings. You'll know you're done when you run out of juice (or paper!) or when you feel a slight internal shift. Stop, survey your Cluster, let associations come together in your mind, and write a 5-Minute Sprint that synthesizes your discoveries or expands on one area of the Cluster.

With each Cluster you'll find a *personal expanded definition* of the theme that represents a personal history of your relationship to it. It is, therefore, a way of better understanding your meaning when you use the Cluster word or phrase.

Clustering does not have to lead to detailed and complex analysis. Often the pattern becomes apparent upon first view. If you don't have time or energy to write a detailed entry, try Clustering instead!

Example:



²Thanks to Bruce Brooks, M.Div. for some of these interpretations of the Clustering technique.

Use this page for your own Cluster. On the following page, write a 5-Minute Sprint exploring some aspect of the Clustering process. Suggestions for your Cluster:

- a feeling you have difficulty with
- a quality you'd like more of
- some project from your "to-do" list

TOPIC 7 Developing Ways to Feel Better: Self-Soothing

SESSION RATIONALE

Survivors of trauma are often all too aware of the necessary but less-than-ideal ways in which they have comforted themselves in the past: drugs and alcohol, fantasy, dissociation, overeating, self-cutting, and compulsive activity. They are less aware of benign ways to self-comfort. This session begins to introduce less damaging ways in which members might feel comforted and soothed.

GOAL 1: Each member will begin to understand what it means to comfort herself.

GOAL 2: Each member will begin to develop an idea of what it means for a method of self-comforting to be too costly.

QUESTIONS

1. When you feel bad, how do you take care of yourself? (How do you help yourself feel good, calm, not afraid?)
2. Some strategies are of the "feel good now, pay later" variety. What does it cost you to receive comfort? List your three most used comfort strategies in increasing order of cost. (Leaders may need to give examples to help group members with the idea of psychic cost.)
3. Are there some people you can count on to comfort you? Describe what they do to comfort you or what qualities they have that you find comforting.
4. What do you do for yourself when you are troubled and there is no one available to help you?

EXERCISE

Each woman makes a Comfort Card depicting the things that bring her comfort. In designing the comfort card, a woman can use magazine pictures, drawings,

ings, writings, or objects from home. Common pictures on the Comfort Cards include nature, relationships, food, home, material goods, cosmetics, pets, and exercise. Women may discuss their cards with one another.

LEADERS' NOTES

QUESTION 1

When you feel bad, how do you take care of yourself? (How do you help yourself to feel good, calm, not afraid?)

TYPICAL RESPONSES	Blocking things out of my mind	Distracting myself
	Keeping busy	Doing fun things
	Counting to myself	Reading a book or magazine
	Going out and enjoying myself	Socializing
	Going to the movies	Meditating
	Using drugs and/or alcohol	Talking to someone who is calming
	Taking a bath	Taking medication
	Listening to music	Avoiding certain situations
	Yelling and letting it all out	Exercising
	Eating	Fantasizing
	Smoking a cigarette	Reading the Bible
	Praying	Going out to dinner with friends

This question helps members become explicit about the ways in which they care for themselves. Often, women who have been severely traumatized feel bereft of any positive means for making themselves feel better and may even have trouble with the concept of self-soothing. In fact, most women do have some strategies to ease internal anxiety and tension. This question is designed not only to help people to think about new strategies but also to allow them to appreciate the positive strategies they already use and consequently feel more empowered.

This is a good opportunity to begin to distinguish between effective and ineffective strategies, (i.e., Does it work?) and constructive versus self-destructive strategies (i.e., What are the secondary consequences of a particular approach?).

QUESTION 2

Some strategies are of the "feel good now, pay later" variety. What does it cost you to receive comfort? List your three most used comfort strategies in increasing order of cost. (You may need to give examples to help group members with the idea of psychic cost.)

TYPICAL RESPONSES	Using drugs	Using alcohol
	Having sex	Overeating
	Smoking cigarettes	Sleeping too much
	Fighting	Self-mutilating
	Watching too much TV	

Leaders will need to define what *cost* means. First, something costly can lead to negative consequences. Using drugs can result in legal trouble or can impair a woman's judgment, leading her to be retraumatized. A second aspect of psychic cost involves how much energy the strategy exhausts. Denial is a way to deal with stressful events but can use a lot of psychic energy. A third aspect of cost has to do with missed opportunities. For example, someone may use a less healthy strategy and therefore be blinded to healthier options.

QUESTION 3

Are there some people you can count on to comfort you? Describe what they do to comfort you or what qualities they have that you find comforting.

TYPICAL RESPONSES	Being thoughtful	Checking in with each other
	Being a good listener	Getting a hug
	Being understanding	Being close and familiar
	Being helpful and supportive	

Being honest	Having been through
Just being there and	personal recovery
available	Being respectful
Being calm and even-	
tempered	

For many trauma survivors, what they have learned about the interpersonal landscape is how to identify problem people. They are often sensitive to the nuances of negative behavior. However, they have more trouble recognizing the positive qualities of people. Therefore, rather than being hypervigilant or suspicious, the goal for the group member is to identify what it is about another person that is positive.

Many of the initial responses to Question 3 will be vague and abstract. Help members to articulate the behavioral markers of comforting behavior. For example, if members list "being thoughtful" as a comforting aspect of someone else's behavior, ask members to define the specific actions that feel soothing (i.e., the other person calls you back when you've called and left a message).

QUESTION 4

What do you do for yourself when you are troubled and there is no one available to help you?

TYPICAL RESPONSES	Listen to my Walkman	Sleep
	Pray or go to church	Take a shower or a bath
	Watch TV or read	Do my hair, nails, and so on
	Walk, run, exercise	Eat
	Shop	Meditate
	Write a letter	Write in a journal

Often, people feel dependent on others for comfort. Encourage members to identify strategies that go beyond relying on someone else for comfort. If members demonstrate difficulty identifying self-soothing behaviors, go back to the responses in Question 1 and ask members which strategies can be done alone.

Members should perform a self-assessment of the strategies they use. For example, how many of the comforting strategies you use require another person? How many of your self-soothing strategies cost money? How many of your strategies are self-generated? Do you feel too many of your strategies are dependent on other people? Do you want to expand your choice of comforting strategies? What is your first choice when needing to comfort yourself? If that is not a possibility, then what do you choose? Then what choice?

Compile a list of the helpful strategies mentioned by group members. A typed version of comforting strategies can be given to members at the next meeting for their use outside of the group (see Appendix Item E).

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. Would active problem solving make you feel better? How would this work?
2. How do you get comfort when you know you need soothing but feel too defeated to ask for it or give yourself permission to take care of yourself?

EXERCISE 1

Prepare for the Comfort Card exercise by gathering the following materials:

Numerous magazines that represent women from diverse cultures, nature scenes, animals, food, cigarettes, material goods, cosmetics, pets, and exercise

Glue, scissors

A 26" x 16" paper or poster board for each participant

Magic Markers

Instruct group members to design their own Comfort Cards by cutting out pictures from magazines; drawing; or bringing pictures from home of special people, family, pets, or of anything that is especially comforting. Allocate approximately 20 minutes to design the card and a 10–15 minute discussion time for members to share their cards with the group. You may want to play soothing music to help put people in the mood.

You can initiate the discussion by asking each member why certain pictures on the Comfort Card are soothing. Members are encouraged to take their

Comfort Cards home for use if they wish. This exercise is very popular and encourages members to *visualize*, *remember*, and *imagine* options for comfort. The exercise itself, over and above the strategies generated, reinforces a woman's cognitive abilities.

Any member who does not feel competent to do the exercise should be allowed to sit out or should be given assistance.

JO'S STORY

I guess a lot of the ways I comfort myself are "feel good now, pay later" strategies. I eat too much, I smoke, and I used to drink. I also used to prostitute. I think I prostituted because I was looking for love—even if it was only temporary affection. The other thing I started to realize is that if I'm feeling bad I rock and rock and rock. It makes people nervous because they think I'm going to rock myself numb. I guess that's what I'm doing—trying to make it all go away. I think I started when I was really little when nothing around me was good. It was kind of like I could block out the world.

When I did my comfort card I cut out pictures of kittens and cats. I don't have a cat, but I do have pictures of cats on my bedroom walls and I have a stuffed cat. When I'm feeling down, I hug my stuffed cat. It helps me to feel warm inside and that's a comfort. Even when I'm in the group, I hang onto my card because I can remind myself of something good even when I'm upset.

TOPIC 7 Developing Ways to Feel Better: Self-Soothing

SESSION RATIONALE

Many women in prison, whether convicted of drug offenses or not, have a history of using alcohol and other substances as a way to self-soothe. Lack of both privacy and personal space limits an incarcerated woman's options for self-soothing. Her options are further limited by the institutional setting and prison rules.

The session will be used as it is in the core manual with the addition of the following question and exercise:

QUESTION

How have you had to alter your soothing techniques because of your confinement in prison?

EXERCISE

Each member will generate a list of things she can do for herself when she is in need of comfort while incarcerated.

LEADERS' NOTES

QUESTION

How have you had to alter your soothing techniques because of your confinement in prison?

TYPICAL RESPONSES I can't take a walk in the woods now, so I just fantasize that I am walking through the woods.
I have a cell mate, so it is hard to get time alone in my room. Sometimes I go take a shower just so I can be alone for a few minutes.

I used to like to go for a run when I was upset, so
now I just exercise in my cell.

I'm learning to write down my thoughts and feel-
ings in a journal instead of running from them
like I did when I was using cocaine.

I used to feel better when I was holding my son,
now I look at his picture when I feel sad.

I don't know what to do when I feel upset, I always
used drugs before.

I have started reading the Bible.

Many soothing strategies are still viable in a prison setting; others need to be modified. By sharing creative strategies, women can get ideas from one another. Negotiating for space and privacy with a cell mate is especially relevant to this discussion.

EXERCISE

Often bringing supplies for creating Comfort Cards into the prison is too difficult. If creating Comfort Cards is not possible, as an alternate exercise, each woman can generate a list of things she can do for herself when she is in need of comforting. The women can take their lists back to their rooms to use for future reference.

TYPICAL RESPONSES Write in my journal
Write letters home
Fantasize about walking in the woods like I used to
do before being incarcerated
Reread letters from home
Look at pictures of my kids
Do sit-ups and other exercises I can do in my room