

# Techniques to Support Personal Growth

## Reducing Emotional Distress Increasing Emotional Regulation

### INTRODUCTION

As we have explored throughout the first 10 episodes of this training, young people can use, abuse and become dependent on drugs and alcohol for a range of reasons. These reasons can be to reduce negative experiences (i.e. numbing painful memories, or cope with difficult emotions), or they can be to increase positive experiences (i.e. enjoying the feeling of being on ecstasy or cannabis with friends). Regardless of the motivation for using, young people who possess alternative ways of managing emotional distress are less likely to end up relying on drugs or alcohol as the primary method of managing distress.

Whether we are working with young people who have recently tried their first beer, right through to young people with established drug problems, there are 2 key areas we can support them with:

- Reducing Emotional Distress
- Increasing Emotional Regulation

In other words, learning ways of reducing the amount of distress we experience when difficult emotions arise, as well as increasing our ability to regulate our responses to these emotions.

This episode focuses on practical tips young people can benefit from

### REDUCING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

This training focusses on 2 key exercises that have been shown to reduce distress for people and help them connect in with their current reality (rather than being caught up in memories from the past, or anxieties about the future). Other exercises may include meditation, relaxation and mindfulness, however we will not be exploring these in this training.

- Grounding
- Breathing

#### Grounding

Grounding is a great way bring yourself back to the safety of the here and now. So much of our anxiety lives either in the past (things that have happened, or things that we have done), or in the future (things that may or may not happen). Rarely is the present moment as stressful as the thoughts and memories in our minds. Grounding is simply a way of training people to remove themselves from their stress and return to the present.

The exercise below is a quick and easy grounding technique that has benefits for young people through its simplicity and non-threatening nature.

- Step 1: Sit comfortably, facing straight ahead. Turn your head hard to the right, and look as hard to the right as you can (imagine you are trying to look behind yourself). Now name 3 specific things you can see (this could be anything: the corner of a door, a glass, a picture on a wall... literally anything)
- Step 2: Now repeat on the left side. Turn your head hard to the left, eyes hard to the left and name 3 things you can see
- Step 3: Now sit facing forward again and name 3 sensations you can feel anywhere in your body (this could be the feeling of the chair under your leg, the pressure of your shoe laces... again literally anything)
- Step 4: Repeat the whole process as many times as needed until the person reports feeling calmer and more present in the moment.



x 3



x 3



x 3

## Breathing

Breathing techniques have been found to offer similar benefits to relaxation. Below is an example of a breathing technique designed to promote calmer breathing, and reducing stress and tension throughout the body and mind.

*This is a short breathing exercise. The purpose of this exercise is promote calmer breathing, and if practiced regularly can lead people to breath in less anxious ways. The regular counting of breaths can help support peoples internal time-keeper, beginning to strengthen this skill.*

*Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit. Close your eyes, or if this is not comfortable, simply find a single point and allow your gaze focus on this point. Allow your vision to fade around this point. A small tea-light candle works well.*

*First focus your attention on your breathing. Don't adjust your breathing in any way, simply notice the sensations. Feel your chest and stomach rise and fall with each breath. Notice how the sensation of breathing feels for you at this moment. Do this for 8 breaths.*

8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1

*Next, focus on breathing through your nose for 8 breaths. The breaths should be deeper than your average daily breaths, but not painful in any way. Three quarter breaths work best. Notice the sensations in your nose, throat, chest and stomach. Feel the temperature differences in your nose as you move from cool on the in-breath, to warm on the out-breath. Again don't adjust anything else, just breathing through your nose 8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1*

*Next, move your breathing into your abdomen (stomach) for 8 breaths. Mindfully allow the breath to fill your stomach. It helps some people to picture a large tyre inflating around your mid section. Feel the sensations, notice the breath move in, then out of your abdomen*

8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1

*Next, take 8 rhythmic breaths. To do this, allow each breath to first fill your stomach, then your chest. Then allow each out-breath to first leave your stomach, then your chest. Picture a wave moving rhythmically through your body with each breath. Notice the sensations*

8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1

*Finally, continue to rhythmically breath for 8 more breaths and a slower rate. There is no set breathing rate to achieve, simply attempt to slow your breathing. Be mindful of this. Notice how this feels, and any sensation that occur. Allow yourself to be grateful for each breath. Picture the life entering your body, and the tension being released*

8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1

*This exercise can be done at any point throughout the day. It can become a powerful way of slowing down anxious thoughts, and relieving tension in the mind and body. By incorporating the mind with the traditional "take a few deep breaths", we promote synchronicity with the mind and body, which helps with balance and grounding.*

If this exercise is too complex for your young person or client, simply focus on counting the breaths as they move in and out of the lungs:

*Take a deep breath in 1...2...3...*

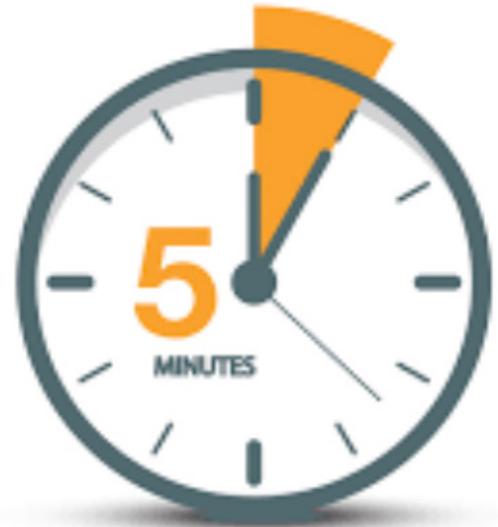
*Hold the breath 1...2...3...*

*Let the breath out 1...2...3...*

## INCREASING EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Increasing our emotional regulation capacity isn't something that just happens overnight. It takes time, and some days will always be better than others. Exercises like Urge Surfing (outlined in Episode 9 of this training) are great ways of enhancing our emotional regulation. Essentially what we are doing is taking a negative sensation (like a drug craving), adding the associated emotions (like irritability, anxiety and frustration) and simply riding through them. By doing this regularly, we are training ourselves to be able to tolerate our negative experiences. The greater our tolerance to these emotions, the more control we have to regulate (or manage) our responses to these emotions.

Another example of how to increase our emotional regulation is the 5-minute game. In this activity we encourage the person experiencing the negative emotion (such as cravings) to set a timer for 5 minutes, and do something else. This could be anything else, have a shower, make some food, tidy part of the house etc. After 5 minutes, we encourage the person to reassess how they are feeling. If they are still feeling anxious, then set the timer for another 5 minutes. In this way we are teaching the young person about the temporary nature of negative emotions. That we don't need to avoid this feeling forever, just ride it out until it subsides.



### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- Briere, J., & Lanktree, C. (2008). Integrative treatment of complex trauma for adolescents (ITCT-A): A guide for the treatment of multiply-traumatized youth. Retrieved from JohnBriere.com.
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