

Appendix D

Self-soothing Techniques

The goal is simply to shift your attention away from whatever has triggered you so that your body can downshift out of the fight or flight response that has revved you up and is keeping you in a fighting mood. For whatever reasons, you are experiencing the other person as a danger and your primitive physiological response has taken over your brain. You literally cannot think clearly, listen respectfully, or empathize when your nervous system is that aroused. You're like a car whose gas pedal is stuck and even pushing down. You are or soon will be out of control. You can train yourself to put on the brakes or at least take your foot off the gas pedal and let your vehicle slow down when that happens.

What's needed first is to acknowledge it happens to you. Next, recognize it's not okay to do that to your loved one. Third, take responsibility for not turning into the Incredible Hulk. When you stop feeding the fire, it will die down and turning your thoughts to something else is the most effective way to stop the flooding. There are many ways to do this. All that matters is finding a few that work for you. Here are some suggestions of things that work for other people:

- Listen to a few songs with lyrics that you like and which have the effect of taking you to a different place internally. (Make yourself a playlist for this kind of down-shifting so you can get to it easily.) Eventually, you'll be able to sing them to yourself in your mind anywhere you are, on any occasion, and bring about the desired result.
- Do a crossword puzzle or Sudoku.
- Shift your attention to your breathing and intentionally slow it down by "Inhale... 2...3...4, hold...2...3...4-, exhale....2...3...4.... Remain focused and counting for several minutes.
- Distract yourself by picking up a newspaper, magazine or book and counting the number of times a particular letter appears on the page. Continue until your physiology has settled down.
- Go to a favorite relaxing place in your mind's eye—a lakeshore, mountain hike, ocean beach, your grandmother's kitchen, a cabin in the woods. Tell yourself the sensory details of that place as if you're helping a friend picture and experience it: identify and savor all the things you can see, hear, touch/feel, smell, taste. Some people think of this technique as changing channels on their inner television set.
- If you have a dog or cat, sit down and pet them for at least five minutes while reading something neutral out loud to them. Petting them is likely to release soothing oxytocin in your brain, but if you leave your mind free it may just get caught up in whatever triggered you in the first place. So pet them while reading out loud something that puts your mind on something else. Even if you're not with your pet, you can spend time with them in your mind, focusing on the sensory details like the feel of their fur and the sound of purring, or the feel of their heart beating and it may help you feel calmer.