

■ CLINICAL Q&A ■

What Is an Effective Self-Soothing Technique That I Can Teach My Client to Use at Home When Stressed?

Editorial Note: The Clinical Q&A is a regular journal feature in which master clinicians answer a question posed by a reader who is requesting assistance with clinical challenges. In this issue's column, responses are written by two clinicians who are EMDR approved consultants: Farnsworth Lobenstine, a licensed independent clinical social worker from Amherst, Massachusetts, and Elan Shapiro, a psychologist in private practice from the Haifa area of Israel. Readers can send questions for future issues to journal@emdria.org.

Question: *What is an effective self-soothing technique that I can teach my client to use at home when stressed?*

ANSWER BY FARNSWORTH E. LOBENSTINE:

The Over-Energy Correction (OEC) is the single most calming technique I have ever learned and taught. It can also be very helpful for inducing restful sleep. In fact, I have done this so often for sleep that I cannot demonstrate it to my clients without yawning. So I just tell them why!

The OEC is similar to Cook's Hook-Up, which was developed by Wayne Cook in the 1970s. The OEC is taught by many yoga practitioners and clinicians using energy therapies. It is based on Chinese medicine and was developed to correct an over- or under-energy state by using the meridians of energy, or *chi*, in the body. I often teach it to clients in the first few sessions. Then I can encourage home use and we may use it before or after EMDR.

You can easily teach this exercise to your clients after practicing it a few times yourself. As you sit, hold your arms straight out in front of you, back of the hands together, fingers extended and thumbs down. Put one hand over the other, so that palms are now touching, and interlace your fingers. With hands clasped, bring them to rest over your heart. (If your right wrist was on top with hands clasped in front of you, the left wrist will be on top when they are resting on your chest.) Cross your ankles so that the same side is on top. If it is more comfortable to have the left wrist on top next to your chest, then put the left ankle over the right ankle. This setup phase is thought to center and contain the energy in the body. Now the really powerful part

begins. As you breathe in, put the tongue on the roof of your mouth. As you breathe out, let the tongue drop down to the bottom of your mouth, where it usually rests when you're not talking or eating. I remind my client, "As your chest rises, let your tongue rise. As the chest falls, let your tongue fall." We continue this for about two minutes.

So why is this so powerfully calming? As I have indicated, from a Chinese medicine perspective, the setup phase helps to center and contain the energy in the body. Slow, deep breathing is part of many meditation practices. The position of the tip of the tongue, touching the gums above and below the front teeth, activates the Governing and Central (or Conception) Vessels, which are just below the nose and just below the lower lip. The Governing Vessel, which ends below the nose, is understood to control the *yang* meridians that ground us to the earth, and the Central Vessel, which ends just below the lower lip, is understood to control the *yin* meridians that link us to the heavens. Consequently this exercise is a very relaxing, grounding, and balancing procedure because it coordinates all of the energy, or *chi*, in the body.

RESPONSE FROM ELAN SHAPIRO:

Over the years I had used various self-soothing, stress management exercises for clients, most of them familiar (e.g., grounding, breathing, safe place) and some novel (e.g., producing saliva). I found that while each of these had their individual merits, they tended to have relatively weak and short-lived effects, and were not suitable for everyone. So, to enhance their effectiveness and general application, I combined them in a package, which made sense and could be easily remembered. I added a mechanism for frequent

reminders and practice. The outcome is a four-part exercise called the 4 Elements Bracelet Method: Earth, Air, Water, and Fire, which is practiced every time the client notices a certain bracelet or sticker on his or her watch or mobile phone. The acronym for the four elements in the original Hebrew also creates the word for *mother*, so it is called the “mother bracelet” method.

Practicing the 4 Elements at random times during the day is a way of enhancing the effects of the individual exercises and managing stress by preventing the accumulation of responses to stressors and keeping the client within their arousal “window of tolerance” (Ogden & Minden, 2000). Over time, and with frequent practice, the bracelet acquires secondary conditioning power to reduce stress rapidly.

I used this package of exercises for more than 10 years with my clients and taught it to my supervision groups. However, it was only after encouragement in 2006 from my colleague, Brurit Laub, that I wrote it down. Fortunately it was therefore readily available as one of the resources we were able to distribute to the EMDR volunteers who went to the North of Israel during the missile attacks of the recent Lebanese war.

Advantages of this package that were noted during this experience were:

1. It gave the helpers confidence that they could do something tangible immediately in difficult circumstances (e.g., in the shelters).
2. Giving people the bracelet or sticker had an empowering effect, which allowed people to carry this transferred object, after the clinician had left, reminding them that they could help themselves to reduce stress and anxiety.
3. After the initial stabilization of the first three elements it seemed easier to access the safe place images and experiences. Consequently, it can be used for additional preparation and stabilization in emergency situations, or for clients who are easily flooded, prior to doing the safe or calm place exercise, which is then introduced as the 4th Element (“Fires” the imagination).

The 4 Elements can also be used in group situations and for various ages, modifying the instructions when needed for younger children.

Instructions for the Therapist

Provide the client with the handout material in Table 1 and explain the 4 Elements in the following manner. Say to the client, “Let’s take a current reading of your stress level where 10 equals the most stress and 0 no stress at all. Where are you now with stress on our 0–10 scale?”



- **EARTH:** GROUNDING, SAFETY in the PRESENT / REALITY
 - Say, “Take a minute or two to ‘land’...to be here now. Place both feet on the ground, feel the chair supporting you. Direct your attention

outwards. Look around and notice three new things. What do you see? What do you hear? Notice three things.” (*Don’t ask this if it draws attention to ongoing dangers, e.g., if there are explosions still going on.*)

- **AIR:** BREATHING for BALANCE and CENTERING
 - (Anxiety equals excitement without oxygen and you stop breathing. When you start breathing, your anxiety reduces). Say, “As you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND, take three or four deeper slower breaths from your stomach, making sure to breathe all the way out to make room for fresh energizing air. As you breathe out, imagine that you are letting go of some of the stress and breathing it out. Direct your attention inwards to your center.”
- **WATER:** CALM & CONTROLLED. Switch on the RELAXATION RESPONSE.
 - Say, “As you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND and feel CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out, notice if you have saliva in your mouth. Make more saliva because when you are anxious or stressed your mouth often dries, since part of the stress emergency response (which has to do with the sympathetic nervous system) is to shut off the digestive system. When you start making saliva, you switch on the digestive system again (or the parasympathetic nervous system) and the relaxation response. This is the reason why people are offered water or tea or chewing gum after a difficult experience. A Spanish surgeon uses this production of saliva to train his patients to ignore pain while he performs surgery without anesthetics. When you make saliva, your mind can optimally control your thoughts and your body. Direct your attention up to making saliva.”
- **FIRE:** LIGHT up the path of your IMAGINATION
 - Say, “As you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND and feel CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out and feel CALM and in CONTROL as you produce more and more SALIVA, bring up the image of your SAFE PLACE (or some other RESOURCE). Where do you feel it in your body? (*Install with brief slow bilateral stimulation or butterfly hugs.*) Direct your attention to feeling good in your body.”
- 4 ELEMENTS
 - Say, “As you continue feeling the SECURITY NOW of your feet on the GROUND; and feel

TABLE 1. 4 ELEMENTS HANDOUT FOR CLIENTS

Directions for 4 Elements Exercise for Stress Management
Elan Shapiro

| 4 Elements for Stress Reduction Earth, Air, Water, Fire | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|---|
|  | Fire (light your imagination) | Power of Imagination |  |
| | Water (Saliva) | Image of safe place, resource | |
| | Air (breathing) | Calm, focused, in control | |
| | Earth (grounding) | Centered, balanced, strength | |
| | | Grounding, safety, in the present | |

Rationale:

- External and internal stress triggers have a cumulative effect during the day.
- We cope better with stress when we stay within our arousal window of tolerance.
- An antidote to stress triggers: frequent random monitoring of stress level with simple stress reduction actions to keep stress levels within our arousal window of tolerance.

Suggestions:

- Wear a 4 Elements bracelet (such as a colored rubber band or string or use a bracelet that you wear on a regular basis) on your wrist. Every time you notice it, take a quick reading of your current stress level (Subjective Units of Disturbance or SUD) and perform some brief self-calming / self-control exercises (see below for the 4 Elements). Then take a second SUD reading.
- Alternative: Place a small sticker or label on your watch, mobile phone, and so forth.
- The (modest) goal is to reduce your stress level by 1 or 2 units each time, to do this at random times and at various initial stress levels. By preventing your stress responses from accumulating, you may be better able to stay within your window of tolerance.

Tips:

- Opt to use a rubber band *and* a label on your cell phone or watch.
- The rubber band can be stretched (gently) and released each time, to signal the beginning of the 4 Elements exercise and to stop negative thoughts and to ground quickly in the present.
- The sequence of the 4 Elements (Earth-Air-Water-Fire) is designed to follow the body up from the feet to the stomach and chest, to the throat and mouth and up through the head.

CENTERED as you BREATHE in and out; and feel CALM and in CONTROL as you produce more and more SALIVA; you can let the FIRE LIGHT the path to your IMAGINATION to bring up an IMAGE of a place where you feel SAFE/CALM, or a memory in which you felt good about yourself. Go with that (*brief slow bilateral stimulation*). Now touch your bracelet (or sticker, etc.) and focus on that. (*Brief slow bilateral stimulation to install the bracelet*). Now, let's take a current reading of your stress level where 10 equals the most stress and 0 no stress at all. Where are you now with stress with our 0–10 scale?

- “Please practice the 4 Elements Exercise at least 10 times a day for the first two weeks. It is helpful to practice when your stress levels are not high, to create the positive conditioning that will help you to use it more effectively when your stress is high.”

Option: this can be a way of introducing the safe place exercise as the fourth element, especially when there is a greater need for stabilization during ongoing danger.

Acknowledgment. Thanks to Marilyn Luber for editing suggestions in this version of the 4 Elements protocol.