

## The Distress Thermometer

The distress thermometer is a tool often used in anger management and anxiety protocols. It can be extremely useful in trauma treatment as well, since traumatized clients' distress can become so overwhelming that it is difficult to think or function well.

It is recommended that the distress thermometer worksheet be completed with clients before beginning any pendulation (emotion induction) exercise. While the distress thermometer can represent any specific emotion (anger, sadness, fear, etc.), in this workbook it is presented simply as "distress." The clinician can modify this to be more specific when desired.

The distress thermometer is similar to the fear hierarchies commonly used in anxiety treatments, in which the clinician helps the client identify situations, places, people, memories, etc. that are distressing to varying degrees. However, unlike the fear hierarchies of anxiety treatments, the goal is not to have the client identify distressing situations to prepare them for later exposure to those situations. Rather, the objective of the distress thermometer is to help clients build self-awareness, noticing how it *feels* to be distressed, and to identify levels of distress that cause feelings of overwhelm. The points at which distress becomes overwhelming are referred to as clients' "boiling and freezing points." These are the points at which the fear center (amygdala) fires so intensely that it hijacks the thinking center (prefrontal cortex), causing the client to dissociate, fight, flee, or freeze.

To help clients complete the distress thermometer, it is recommended that the clinician do the following:

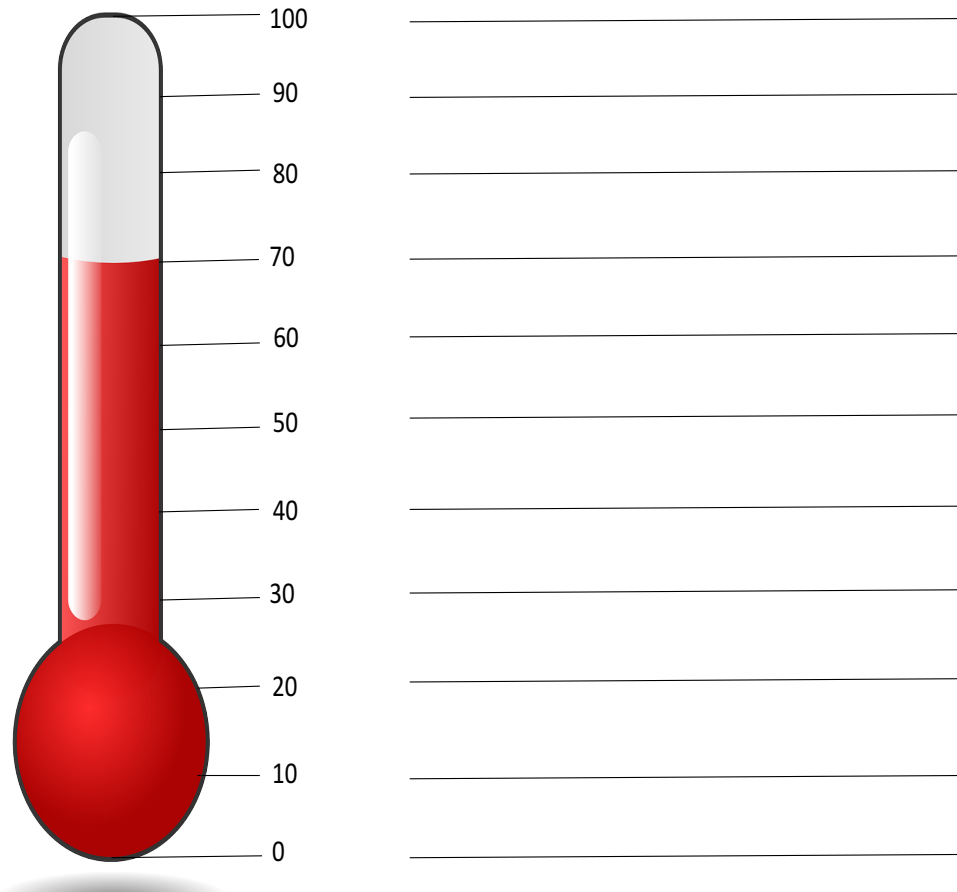
1. Explain the purpose of the distress thermometer. Use the language here as a guided script, if desired.

*Before moving forward, I would like us to spend some time discussing the distress thermometer. The point of completing this worksheet is to identify things, people, situations, etc. that you find to be distressing, in order to become more aware of how distress manifests in your body and your mind. I will not try to make you do any of the things we discuss. Rather, this is just for us to better understand how you experience distress. The benefit of this exercise will be an improved self-awareness of how you experience distress, even at a subtle level. Once you are aware of even low level distress in your body and mind, you can intervene earlier to manage that stress response so that it does not overwhelm you!*

2. Next, explain how the distress thermometer works.

*The distress thermometer goes from 0-100, where 0 stands for total relaxation and no distress at all, and 100 stands for the most distress possible. You can see that the numbers appear in increments of 10. I want you, with my help, to identify situations, people, places, or even memories that you would categorize as distressing at these different levels. You will write these examples to the right of the thermometer. It is okay if “total relaxation” is not something you prefer – we are not measuring what feels “good” or “bad;” rather, we are identifying what feels “distressing” versus “relaxing.”*

3. Begin by identifying a stressor that the client rates as 100. Next, identify a situation, place, or person that is not distressing at all (score of 0 on the thermometer). These are the client's upper and lower limits. \*\*Keep in mind that a client's lower limit, which represents total relaxation, may not actually feel good or safe to the client, as some clients will not like the feeling of relaxation. This is okay, and how to work with this is explained later in this chapter.\*\*
4. After identifying examples of the client's upper and lower limits, help the client identify a situation that falls roughly in the 50 range, and from there fill in the other number ranges as well as possible. Ideally, the client will be able to identify situations that fall at nearly every increment of 10 on the thermometer.



- 100 – worst distress
- 90 – severe distress
- 80 – strong distress
- 70 – moderate distress
- 60 – mild distress
- 50 - neutral
- 40 – mild relaxation
- 30 – moderate relaxation
- 20 – strong relaxation
- 10 – very strong relaxation
- 0 – total relaxation