

Part I, Focusing Away: Just the Facts

The Focusing Away technique has been shown to reduce negative emotions, increase activation of the “thinking brain” (prefrontal cortex), and reduce activation of the “fear brain” (the amygdala).

To practice Focusing Away, follow these steps:

1. Bring to mind a negative emotional event. Start with a moderately negative event, not a traumatic event.
2. Focus on, or write down, the contextual aspects of the memory, retrieving as many details as possible about it. Continue to concentrate on these contextual aspects for approximately 5-15 minutes. Some contextual details may include:
 - a. Where and when the event occurred.
 - b. Who was present during the event, and what they said and/or did.
 - c. What the scenery around you looked like.
 - d. Any smells associated with the event.
 - e. Any sounds associated with the event.
 - f. What exactly happened, including the sequence of events.
 - g. How the event began and ended.
3. Starting from the beginning, repeat this exercise until 15 minutes have passed.

A few Focusing Away tips:

- In focusing on the contextual details of the memory, try to refrain from focusing on emotional aspects of the memory, including sensations or feelings that the event may have elicited, emotions you had at that time, or any interpretations of the event you might have had.
- If you find it difficult to focus away from the emotional aspects of the memory, be patient with yourself, as this is a challenging task for most people. When you find your mind wandering to these emotional aspects, gently redirect your attention to the contextual aspects of the memory.
- After becoming skilled at practicing this skill with moderately negative events, you may opt, with the help of your provider, to begin practicing this exercise with more intense negative memories.
- Try to practice this exercise frequently, as practice makes progress!

(Adapted from methods described in Denkova, E., Dolcos, S., & Dolcos, F. (2014). Neural correlates of ‘distracting’ from emotion during autobiographical recollection. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*.)

Part II: Focusing Near: How Does That Make You Feel?

In Part II the goal is to help the client begin to slowly engage with the emotional content of the negative event/memory. Keep in mind that for trauma clients in particular, Part I is helpful but insufficient, as we do not want to encourage avoidance and want to help the client engage with and desensitize to negative emotions and memories. In Part II we begin to titrate engagement with the emotional components of negative events/memories.

To practice Focusing Near, follow these steps:

1. Have client read the written memory (Part I) out loud once. Instruct the client to then begin reading the memory slowly again, this time to themselves. As they do this, they will pause to circle any words/phrases that contain emotion for them. If the client is having difficulty accessing their own emotions, they may circle words, phrases, or sections that they believe *another person* might have an emotional reaction to.
2. Collaborate with client to identify an arousal-reducing/relaxation/mindfulness technique that can be used to reduce arousal if/when client were to become overwhelmed by negative emotions during Part II. Agree ahead of time to pause and practice this technique as needed.
3. Establish with client the max SUD score client believes they can experience without needing to practice the arousal-reducing technique. Any time a SUD score rises above this level, it is agreed that the client and provider will stop and practice the technique.
4. Starting from the beginning of the narrative, instruct client to begin slowly reading until they reach the first circled word/phrase. At each circled word/phrase, complete the following steps:
 - a. Ask for the SUD score
 - b. Ask whether the score is overwhelming
 - c. If the SUD score is overwhelming, pause and practice an arousal-reducing exercise
 - d. Check in with the SUD score again and ensure it has reduced to a manageable level before proceeding
 - e. Once the SUD score is at a manageable level, ask client to provide more information about the emotions and associations related to the circle. A few examples include:
 - i. What do you feel when you see this word/phrase?
 - ii. How did you feel at the time this was happening?
 - iii. What were you thinking as this happened?
 - iv. What does this remind you of?
 - f. Ask for another SUD score, and practice an arousal-reducing exercise as needed
 - g. Repeat these steps with each hot spot (circled word/phrase)
5. After each hot has been “unpacked” (which may take several sessions), instruct client to once again read the entire narrative from start to finish. Discuss how this experience may differ from the client’s experience of Part I.

A few Focusing Near tips:

- Always start with the facts before moving onto Part II.
- Be prepared to slowly engage with the emotional components in Part II.

- Ask for a SUD score at every hot spot (circled emotional point).
- Practice an arousal-reducing exercise before ending therapy sessions that have focused on Part II.
- Repeat Part II with client until SUDS have decreased by 50% or are reportedly able to be managed.