

SUDs Scale and Regulation

Subjective Units of Distress Scale and how it can help manage Regulation

SUDS – Subjective units of distress is a simple scaling exercise, which allows us to assess and scale our mood, behaviour and the physiology taking place in our body. The more aware we become of our pattern; the sooner we can check ourselves and put a regulating strategy in place. When our SUDs are escalating, if we can pick up on our body's signals, the goal is to work to regulate to get back into our window of tolerance, either with self-regulation or by seeking external support when we need it.

The SUDs scale below is an example. Yours will typically have some difference, but this may give you some ideas of what you are looking for – what you may notice in your body, what you are thinking/feeling and what behaviour is taking place.

Over time the goal is to manage at lower levels and not to get to the higher levels as frequently. Remember changing any pattern of behaviour takes time and practise. It begins with awareness of what is taking place.

As we have been speaking about in the video clips most of us have higher SUDs at the moment, with increased stressors due to the Pandemic. Being aware of where we are and having little and regular strategies to help us stay in our windows or get back into our windows becomes important in managing as best we can.

Example of a SUDs scale

1. Peaceful and calm – all is well in my world – feel relaxed and calm in my body, enjoying and aware of myself and my environment around me.
2. Recognition of mild irritation but can control my thinking.
3. Beginning to feel uncomfortable, dry mouth, feeling agitated, worried about what may happen next.
4. Easily distracted by external events, jumpy, notice my mind is starting to race a bit more, my breathing is increasing, short and shallow.
5. Can't think clearly – "it's happening again," my heart is racing, I can't sit still, feel angry and or anxious.

6. Getting more jittery, want someone to come and take over, heart racing and head pounds.
7. Start to notice my hands shaking – want to run away, just want it to stop.
8. Chest is pounding, feeling hot and cold sweats, head is racing, can't stop my mind, catastrophic thinking (think worrying thoughts and can't seem to stop them.) Shaking all over.
9. Want it to stop but know it won't - heart pounding, want to curl up in a ball, crying and can't stop.
10. Full blown panic attack - total loss of control, need to shut the world out feel numb and shut down.

The goal is to work out at what point you are leaving your window and work to stay at levels within your window.

Please see separate handout for SUDs scale.

In this example we would want a calming strategy at about step four. Trying to do a breathing exercise at step ten is a bit like taking a paracetamol for a broken leg. The sooner we put a regulating strategy into place the more effective it will be. The higher up the scale you are, the more physical the regulating strategy may need to be, or the more likely you may need to reach out for external support, and this is OK and what you may need.

In the lower levels some of the more cognitive strategies tend to be effective, in the higher levels once the fight or flight is triggered the goal is to regulate heart rate and sooth the body, so walking, five senses practise etc may be more effective.