

## **Discipline #4 – Suspending Self-soothing**

### **Injunction [What to do]:**

1. Identify the activities that you do that soothe you when you are anxious. These may be actions that are ways of being that are intrinsically relaxing or they may be actions that are a form of acting out or an addiction.
2. Before you do the activity that soothes you, feel the anxiety until you can clearly name what you are anxious about. If you can't identify it, try to stay with the feeling for a while and just let yourself feel the anxiety.
3. If the feeling gets too strong, simply do what soothes you.

### **Why do it [Rationale]:**

We all feel anxious. From time to time, the anxiety gets so strong that we act in ways to soothe the anxiety...to make it go away.

Anxiety is a natural and normal response to our inability to resolve problems in our life. The purpose of anxiety is to draw our attention to the problem so that we can give it attention and solve it. But sometimes the anxiety gets so intense that it gets in the way of our ability to act creatively. At these times, we need a break from the anxiety.

We all have ways to soothe ourselves. Some of these strategies are ways of being that offer a genuine alternative to the way of being that generated the anxiety. But some of these strategies are things we do to mask or mute the anxiety itself. In any case, we are not going to address and resolve the problem until we know that we have a problem and we know what the problem is. The point of this discipline is to stop the self-soothing until we are sufficiently aware of the problem such that we can do something to address it, rather than simply masking the symptoms of the problem.

### **What it will get you [Promises]:**

**You will *feel more anxious*.** We are mostly unaware of our anxiety. As we pay attention to it we discover that we always have at least a low level of anxiety. This is perfectly appropriate. If you have no anxiety at all, you are dead. But when you pay attention to it, you will notice it more and more. So the first promise is that you will become more aware of your anxiety. That doesn't really sound like a good thing.

**You will *be less* anxious.** But the second promise comes from the awareness. That is, the more aware you are of your anxiety, the less of it you will have. You will naturally mobilize your resources to address the problems that are the sources of the anxiety in the first place. Alternately, the less attention you give to your anxiety, the more of it you will have.

**You will have more energy.** The third promise is that, as you become more aware of the anxiety, you will put more of your time and attention to addressing the problems, and you will spend fewer of your resources on avoiding the anxiety in the first place.

### **Suggestions:**

Notice what you find boring. Boredom is the feeling we have when what we have been doing to avoid the anxiety isn't working any more. Just notice: are you ever bored watching TV? How can that be? They spend millions on making every instant powerfully engaging. But when we are choosing to watch TV as a way to not feel the anxiety, after awhile the anxiety builds up and the TV watching doesn't work anymore to mask the anxiety. We feel bored with it. Whatever you are bored with is something that you are doing to mask anxiety or it is something that generates anxiety. Try to notice when you are bored and to find the source of the anxiety.

Keep a list of what you do to self-soothe. You probably have many things that you do. Some of them are just *ways of being* [taking a walk, listening to music] but some of them are *ways of doing* that are designed to hide the anxiety [eating compulsively, smoking cigarettes]. Try to identify as many of the strategies that you use to self-soothe as you can.

When you notice yourself using one of the strategies, stop yourself and see if you can identify what you are anxious about. Practice feeling the anxiety and work on being able to tolerate more and more of it until you can feel it very clearly. Remember, you can always return to what you do to self-soothe if the anxiety becomes too much for you.

When you do use one of your strategies to self-soothe, don't be critical of yourself. You are just doing what you do to care for yourself. It isn't bad to care for yourself. Simply notice what you are doing. Don't beat up on yourself.