

Pausing During a Distressing Situation: The REST Technique

Objective

To pause during a distressing situation so that you can identify healthier ways of managing your emotions to avoid reacting impulsively.

You Should Know

When confronted with distressing situations, it can be challenging to remember healthy coping strategies that you have learned. It might seem easier and feel more natural to return to unhealthy habits than to identify helpful techniques to manage your emotions. When you take a step back from an emotionally upsetting situation, it gives you the opportunity to examine the situation more objectively. As a result, you are more likely to choose healthier solutions and coping techniques.

Think of a recent situation when you experienced upsetting emotions and responded by acting impulsively or resorted to harmful urges. Then, answer the questions below.

Describe what happened during this situation.

Describe your emotions during this situation.

Describe how you reacted.

How did you feel afterward?

What You Should Do

Name: _____ Date: _____

The following strategy, which uses the acronym **REST**, lays out the steps to help you pause, clear your head, and then determine a helpful plan of action to address the situation. By encouraging you to briefly shift your attention from emotions and urges to facts and solutions, REST can be used as the first step in changing your unhealthy habits.

Relax: Take a “time out” from the situation to focus on your wellbeing. Go for a walk, take a hot bath, call a supportive friend, or even just take some deep breaths or count to ten.

Evaluate: Identify the facts within the distressing situation. Notice how you feel physically and emotionally. Observe what other people are doing and how they are reacting. Identify any threats to your safety.

Set an intention: Create a goal or plan to address the situation. This could mean choosing a coping skill, asking someone for help, calling a family meeting, or negotiating with others.

Take action: Put your plan into action with intention and awareness. While you may not necessarily resolve the situation, this action will be more effective than the impulsive behavior you would have otherwise carried out.

You might need to repeat some or all of the REST steps during a particularly overwhelming or upsetting situation. But with practice, it can become a new habit to help you manage your emotions and cope in healthier ways.

Using the distressing situation you described on the previous page, imagine how you could have responded differently using REST.

What could you have done to **Relax** during this situation?

If you had **E**valuated the facts of this situation, what could you have noticed or learned?

What “**S**et intention” or plan could you have used?

If you had **T**aken action based on that intention, what could have happened?

How would your response or reaction have been different?

The key to the **REST** strategy is to identify the moment when you will choose how to react to an upsetting situation: either with harmful habits or with healthier coping skills. Here are some indicators that can help you identify that moment:

- You feel an intense negative emotion that usually results in avoidance or becoming confrontational.
- You are suddenly in physical or emotional pain.
- You notice the urge to act impulsively with a harmful behavior, even if there is no obvious reason.

Now, think of a recurring situation that causes you overwhelming or distressing emotions and harmful urges (for example, a confrontational family member, an unreasonably demanding boss, an overdue mortgage, etc.). Describe the situation below.

How can you use **REST** to address this situation next time it happens?

R: _____

E: _____

S: _____

T: _____

During what other recurring situations could the REST technique be helpful?

Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise increased your ability to identify healthier coping skills and solutions to distressing situations? Explain.

Which of the **REST** steps did you find easiest to do? Explain.

Which of the **REST** steps did you find most challenging? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
