

Do you want to be distracted, soothed or healed?

Imagine you have had a rough day at work.

You are feeling stressed out by yet another face off with your boss (maybe he's as bad as your dad) and it's left you with a racing mind, churning stomach and knotted shoulders. You probably wouldn't enjoy feeling this way, but what are you going to do about it?

There are three main approaches you could take:



Distraction: You could go, make a cup of tea, open a packet of chocolate biscuits, then slump on the sofa watching whatever is showing on the TV, or you turn on your X-Box and slaughter some aliens.

You do your best to forget about the day's events and put your mind elsewhere. If you don't think

about it perhaps it will all go away. It doesn't the stress returns at 3 am to spoil a good night's sleep.



Soothing: Feeling the knots in your shoulders you might decide to go for a massage. At your nearest holistic therapy centre you are greeted by soft lighting, gentle music and a massage therapist. Who lets you lie your tensed body on a comfortable massage table, then tends to your aching limbs.

It is so relaxing you almost fall asleep. When it's over you reluctantly get up and dress feeling lighter, calmer and more balanced. What could be better?

However in a few hours, days or weeks, life is once again stressing you out in the same old way leading you to feel as wound up as you did before. It's soon time for another soothing massage.

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Healing: You notice that the reason you are getting stressed is something to do with the way you are relating to your boss, there is just something about them that pushes all your buttons – and it seems like you push all theirs.

The other people at your work-place who are doing exactly the same kind of job don't seem to have these difficulties with your boss. They doing what's needed to be done in the day and leave the office in a reasonable frame of mind as you leave like an over-wound spring.

You decide that the stress reaction is just that, a stress reaction and that your reaction has a part to play in how that feels. So you decide to take a more

radical approach to your stress. You go to a therapist to get to the bottom of these reactions and change them so that you don't have these unhelpful stress reactions running, and ruining, your life.

You go to the same holistic therapy centre. The lighting is soft and inviting. The background music is gentle and soothing. You are warmly welcomed into the therapist's room.

So far, so good, but then it starts to get tougher ...

The therapist expects you to investigate and change old familiar patterns. You have to approach the kinds of thoughts and feelings you wanted to avoid in the first place. You may well have to go through this process more than once. If it all goes well, you leave the therapy process with new feelings and responses and the stress reaction has gone, replaced by a more resourceful response.

To summarise these approaches

Distraction

Pros

- It's quick and easy – All you have to do is get in, turn on and tune out
- It's inexpensive – It might not cost more than a packet of biscuits, but if you need to use this strategy for the rest of your life that could be a lot of biscuits.
- It's what most people do – Just about everyone I know uses a strategy like this to wind down after a hard day at work.
- You don't have to do much – You can just sit there and veg out until bed time

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Cons

- It only gives temporary relief. However well you distract yourself, you will have to get back to the situation that causes the stress.
- It's a great way to put on weight. (It's called comfort eating for a reason).
- Nothing has changed. The stress situations you have been distracting from are going to happen again and you will be just as unprepared for them as the first time. It's lucky that lots of places sell biscuits.

Soothing

Pros

- You get symptomatic relief – You tend to feel (much) better after a massage. The kinks have been taken out and you feel good.
- It's comforting – There is something wonderful about being comforted. Being physically cared for by a massage therapist is a very satisfying, human experience.
- Immediate relief – The relief is almost immediate, you don't have to wait a long time for results.
- You are in a passive role – It's great, you just need to lie there and an expert will do things that will make everything feel better. You might not even have to speak once the massage therapist starts.
- It's not threatening. Your world may be soothed by the treatment but it won't be changed. You don't need to get used to the idea that things will be different, that you will have to be different as well. It can be business as usual but without the kinked muscles.
- You know what you are going to get. When you have a massage you probably have a good idea of what you are going to get, it will be a soothing, relaxing process and you

will come out at the end feeling calmer and relaxed. It's easy to imagine the end result.

Cons

- It's temporary relief – For the stress issue the results fade with time. All the old response patterns are still in your system waiting to be triggered next time
- The cause of the problem is not addressed. While the results of the problem (the stiff neck) have been treated, the causes – those pesky stress responses have been left unaddressed.
- It's costs more than a packet of biscuits.

Just to be clear, I'm not having a go at massage therapists here. Massage is a wonderful thing, I'm all for it. I'm just using massage as an example of a 'soothing' treatment.

Healing

Pros

- The changes are long lasting. If the therapist has done a good job the original pattern that caused the stress is undone and your life gets much better. You are no longer triggered in those situations.
- The benefits usually spread. If you are lucky the changes you achieve in the therapy session spread well beyond the original problem area
- You become happier and more contented. As these changes take effect you can feel more contented and at ease in all areas of your life – your general wellbeing improves.

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Cons

- You need to be willing to change. This can be a very uncomfortable prospect. Most people would prefer everyone else to change so that they can be happy as they are. “If only my husband would stop looking at me in that way”. “If only the kids didn’t argue”. “If only my boss didn’t intimidate me”. But they are not there in the therapist’s office, you are, you are the one that is going to be doing the changing and you need to want that.
- You might not get instant relief. You may have to wait sometime for relief from stress. In fact you might leave the therapy session more ‘stressed’ than when you went in as all those old patterns are churned up.
- You need to take part. The therapy process requires your participation. You have to play an active role in your own change, you can’t just sit there and wait to be fixed by the expert.
- This process requires courage. Most of us don’t want to go towards our difficulties, we want to get away from them by distracting or soothing ourselves.
- The end is unknown. Because you are in your current mindset it is very difficult for you to imagine the end result of therapy. You have no idea what the outcome is going to be.
- It costs a lot more than a packet of biscuits.

These apparent drawbacks to therapy are a challenge. If you are a client who is suffering stress the distraction or soothing options seem so much more appealing than the changing ‘option’. As far as I can tell most people would prefer to be soothed by someone else than be helped to change.

But some people are up for the work. Some people want their lives to be different. They want to put down all the baggage and old rules that have held them back all this time. They want to feel differently

about their situations and themselves and to be able to act differently.

The good news for these brave souls is that you no longer have to spend 30 years on a couch speculating about your potty training, or months working your way through your past with boxes of paper tissues.

Newer processes based on NLP, EFT, solution focussed therapy and others allow you to make those changes much more quickly and less painfully than before.

You probably won’t be surprised to know that I’m in favour of healing.

Steps to take if you want to change

1. Decide that you have had enough and want to change
2. Decide how you want to be different (don’t worry about how you are going to get there, it’s the therapist’s job to help you with that)
3. Decide that you are going to do what it takes (within reason)
4. Look around for a qualified therapist who seems able to offer those possibilities and feels right to you.

Images courtesy of [dusk-photography](#), [thomaswanhoff](#) & [tanakawho](#)