Practical Brain-Focused Strategies for Working with Depression

How to Lead Your Client Toward Greater Safety and Connection

with Elisha Goldstein, PhD
Dr. Goldstein: Now, in this next segment, I’m going to bring you through one more practice that builds on this first one, but it’s enough to be in its own segment. I’m going to tell you about it, and then we’re going to do it.

This is a practice that’s becoming more well-known – it’s called the SAFE practice.

I’m a big fan of acronyms that say what they’re intended to do.

SAFE is intended to lead someone through a practice when they’re feeling a difficult experience that inevitably will lead them into a space of feeling more safety and connection.

“SAFE is intended to lead someone into a space of feeling more safety and connection.”

Ultimately, at the basis of our beingness, we all want to feel safe.

When we feel safe, we feel more open and trusting. We’re able to learn more, and all kinds of things happen.

Feeling safe is certainly correlated with well-being, and feeling unsafe with feeling more depressed and anxious.

In SAFE, the S stands for Soften, so the first thing that’s happening when we’re not feeling well is there’s usually a constriction in the body or there’s a sense of torpor we feel.

The nervous system is starting to become imbalanced and we’re going into the fight/flight/freeze response.

The first thing is to notice where we’re experiencing this in the body, and just to soften into it – quite literally to soften the body – to just let it be – to roll the shoulders and soften into the feelings. That’s what the S stands for.

The A stands for Allowing. Here, and typically when we are getting depressed, the brain wants to figure it out – problem-solve.

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But what that does is lead to rumination, which, if we remember the depression loop, just fuels the depression loop – the thoughts, emotions, sensations, and behaviors just keep it going.

What we want to do is bring ourselves to the opposite of that.

So we practice this out loud: “Can I acknowledge? Can I allow?” With this, we now have Soften and Allow.

F stands for Feel – feeling into the actual emotion that’s there and feeling: “Where is it in my body? How big is it?”

What we’re doing here is we’re starting to become more intimate with the feeling we’re noticing.

This is synonymous, to some degree, with Michele McDonald’s RAIN practice that Tara Brach popularized – this is the Investigative part.

So, now, we are feeling into it and being curious about it – bringing a sense of mindfulness to it – bringing our awareness to it and noticing if it’s shifting and changing.

We’re also dropping in a question, which is “What am I needing right now?” There’s the question: “What do I need? I need to feel safe. I need to feel cared about. I need to feel accepted just as I am. I need to feel at ease. What I need right now is to feel connected.”

We’re just allowing whatever arises to be the answer to that.

If the person says, “I don’t know what I need,” then they need clarity.

There’s always something, and we’re feeling into that need and we’re dropping in the question, “What am I needing right now?”

You can also drop in the question, “What am I believing?” and that takes us into a certain thought realm. But we’re going to stay with the feeling here, so it will be, “What am I needing?”

We’re open to whatever comes. Let’s say, as an example, “I need to feel safe. I need to be at ease” – something like that.

Then – and some of you are familiar with the loving-kindness practice – we bring in some of these intentional phrases to ourselves and we say, “OK, our body’s softening – we’re allowing – we’re feeling into “what I’m needing right now.”
We say this to ourselves, and we might then take the gesture that we learned before: putting our hands on our body if it feels soothing in some way – whatever the soothing gesture is for you.

We might say, “May I feel at ease. May I feel connected” – whatever the phrase is.

In the loving-kindness practice, which we’ll mention later, there are certain stock phrases usually that you’re given to try on, and sometimes those feel a little foreign and not real to some people, so rather that those, here you’re actually just using what’s yours – what’s coming from you.

If “May I be at ease – May I feel safe” is what’s arising in terms of your needs, then integrate a little bit of nonviolent communication language, which talks about understanding certain feeling states and needs that are there.

Now, here we are and we’re saying these things to ourselves.

We are moving into sending these intentions toward ourselves about what we’re needing, and then we move to the E of SAFE.

The E stands for **Expand** – we’re expanding by saying and considering for a moment all the other people in this moment that live on your block, in your area, in your neighborhood, in your city, or maybe even around the world that are experiencing something similar to what you’re experiencing right now.

Just statistically – it’s just a fact – people are experiencing something similar, if not historically, then throughout time – there’s just this human experience.

We’re getting in touch with the common humanity piece now.

We’re imagining all those people sitting there, and we’re saying, “May we all feel at ease – be safe.”

Whatever it was that you said you were needing, now you’re saying that for everybody – including yourself, and that creates a sense of connection – it creates a sense of safety.

So, you can check your intentions – seeing if you can become friends with your “inner monster” here – and if you’re game for it, I’d like to lead you through this practice so you get a sense of it.

If you’re thinking, “We just went through a difficult moment/practice a little earlier,” then just check in on that – you can always come back to this. That’s fine.
But I would just challenge you to definitely engage in this practice because it’s a really, really wonderful and important one.

So, here we go, and again, just get comfortable – we always start off with that – closing your eyes if you feel comfortable with that, or gazing forward – this is the SAFE practice.

Bring back a visualizing, and if you didn’t do this before, visualize something in the last week or month or whatever comes to you – a recent difficult experience that you had or are currently in the midst of having.

Maybe even it’s the wanting to avoid this particular practice! That could come up and arise – resistance is often there.

Visualize something that gives you a sense of discomfort or stress or anxiousness or sadness – maybe something that drummed up a feeling of guilt or shame or embarrassment.

The more you can picture this, the better. Who was there? What was happening? What was said? What was it about this experience that was really difficult?

Visualizing and embodying – and then checking in for a moment, seeing if you can experience this. Do you feel this in the body as you’re visualizing this picture?

The more you can visualize it and get into it, the better.

So, if you can, just soften your body – as if you’re softening around the feeling that’s there.

In this moment, there’s plenty of space for this feeling – just allowing it to be as it is. No need to change it or make it any different – just sense the feeling, softening around it and allowing it to be as it is.

There’s a real sense of not striving here – you’re not trying to make it any different.

As we become a little more intimate with what we’re visualizing, we can go a bit deeper – just feeling into it, actually physically feeling it with our minds and bodies – where it is and how big it is.

If it has passed a little bit, you can bring up the experience in your mind again.

What’s the shape of it – the density of it?

See if you can feel the feeling as it is in your body – softening – allowing –feeling.
See if you can, as you’re getting in touch with the feeling here, drop the question into the space: “What is it that I’m really needing right now? Is it to be at ease? Is it to be relaxed? Is it to feel safe, to feel connected, to feel understood, to feel cared about, to accept myself just as I am?

What is it that I’m needing right now – to feel strong? What is it that I’m needing?”

Just be open – allow yourself to be open to whatever arises in response to that question.

With whatever arises, now turn toward yourself – and perhaps this is the time, if you feel comfortable, to place your hands on your body, and then your heart, or two hands on your abdomen – wherever it might be.

Remembering the experience again, turn toward yourself, and as sincerely as possible, sending whatever you’re needing toward yourself – much like you would to a good friend: “May I feel safe, or connected, or be at ease.”

Say whatever it is that you need to feel strong – sending these intentions toward yourself as sincerely as possible.

“As you begin, imagine all the other people around the world, or even, if you want to, just in your neighborhood alone or in your city – you can expand out to the world and to all the other people who are experiencing a similar type of feeling as you’re experiencing or have experienced.

Whatever it was – the stress, the anxiousness, the guilt, the shame, the embarrassment, the sadness, relational difficulties – whatever it might be – imagine all those people.

Just statistically, there are so many.

Imagine them here in your mind, and say, “May we all be at ease – feel safe.”

Whatever it was that you were needing for yourself, now expand that out, expanding your heart out to all those people – including yourself: “May we all...”

Just do that for a few rounds, as intentionally and sincerely as possible.
Softening your body again, come into your body.

Softening your body, maybe begin to notice what your body needs physically – rolling your shoulders or whatever it might be.

Just acknowledge, if you can, the act of choice – taking this time out, just to engage this practice.

I always end with this piece because it’s so important and true: take this time out for your own self-care and well-being.

It’s certainly an act of self-care – just some way of acknowledging yourself and taking this time.

With eyes open, here’s the moment where you can pause and just reflect: “What did I notice? How was it different from how I normally pay attention to my feelings?”

As I went through this, what were the conditions of my body and my emotions and my thoughts? What was I aware of in doing that?

What will the days, weeks and months ahead be like if there’s a little more of this in my life in relationship to difficulty?”

So, that’s the SAFE practice.

When I work with people, sometimes there’s resistance – we can use the SAFE practice around the resistance: we soften, come back to allow – we go back and soften into the feeling – we work with that as we go.

Sometimes people have difficulty accessing their self-compassion, so we think about other people in their life – living or dead – who have espoused that sense of warmth and wisdom.

I ask them to just wonder how that person would handle this difficult feeling – that sometimes helps them access what’s already inside of them.

You can play with this over and over again, and get comfortable with it.
We don’t want to use this practice with people who are, on a scale of one to ten, a seven/eight/nine/ten, but we can use it with those who are more in the middle of that scaffolding where they’re building to feel something – to be successful with it.

Then, we can move to more difficult emotions, but first we want to start with you playing with it on your own, and then continuing on.

So, that was the practice.

Now, in the next segment, we’re going to be moving from talking about warmth toward pain and difficulty, which is our own self-compassion, to warmth toward joy.