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Soothe ourselves in times of need

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Abstract

Objectives: Evidence suggests that self-compassion is linked to psychological benefits. Compassion-focused therapy emphasises the importance of developing abilities to self-soothe in alleviating psychological distress. However, little is known about how the feeling of soothe is understood, experienced and achieved in everyday life. This study addressed two research questions: (1) How is the feeling of soothe understood? (2) How is the feeling of soothe experienced in everyday life?

Design: This is part of our ongoing research Project Soothe (www.projectsoothe.com), which collects soothing images from the public with the goal to develop a bank of soothing images for psychotherapeutic and research use. We also set up an online survey to explore how individuals understand and experience the feeling of soothe in everyday lives. The current study was based on the qualitative narratives obtained in this survey.

Methods: A total of 176 participants were recruited. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three themes emerged in response to the first research question: 1) a complex interconnected state of feelings, 2) self-soothe and being soothed, and 3) involvement of physical sensations. Five themes emerged regarding the second research question: 1) venturing out in nature, 2) being in a familiar surrounding, 3) being solitary, 4) being affiliated, and 5) being physically and mentally relaxed.

Conclusions: Our study illustrated the importance of affiliations, physical sensations, mindfulness, connection with nature, and solitude on the cultivation of soothe. Results may help develop therapeutic techniques in enhancing self-soothe by tapping into individuals' understanding and subjective experience in everyday contexts.

Practitioner Points:

1. Compassion Focused Therapy and related third wave therapies emphasise the role of cultivating self-compassion and feelings of self-soothe in reducing psychological distress and improving mental wellbeing.
2. This study sheds light on how individuals understand and achieve self-soothe in everyday life contexts.
3. Individuals' subjective narratives suggested that both being in solitude and affiliated with others were associated with feelings of self-soothe, in addition to feeling connected with the nature, being in familiar environments and experiencing physical sensations.
4. These findings will help practitioners develop different ways to enhance individuals' self-compassion by tapping into their understanding and experience of self-soothe in everyday life.

Keywords: soothe; self-compassion; mental health; wellbeing, Project Soothe, lived experience

Introduction

Compassion is originally derived from Buddhist principles and defined as ‘a sensitivity to suffering in self and others, with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it’ (The Dalai Lama, 2001). Buddhist teachings emphasise that the practice of compassion involves a dedication to alleviate suffering through soothing ourselves and others (Shonin, Van Gordon & Griffiths, 2014). In the past two decades, there has been growing research evidence in support for the therapeutic potential of compassion on improving individuals’ mental health, with meta-analyses illustrating that higher levels of self-compassion are associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress with large effect sizes across age groups (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Marsh et al., 2017), as well as higher levels of well-being (Zessin et al., 2015). Notably, MacBeth and Gumley (2012)’s meta-analysis suggested that this association was not different between clinical and non-clinical samples, suggesting that self-compassion plays a role in mental health regardless of the severity of symptoms. This evidence base has supported the development of Compassion-focused therapy (Gilbert, 2010) and a range of other compassion-based interventions (Kirby, 2016) designed to help individuals cope with psychological distress through cultivating self-compassion, as well as the ability to show compassion for and receive compassion from others, and enhancing the experience of feeling soothed. However, no research has examined what soothe means to individuals and how it is experienced in the everyday life contexts.

The importance of compassion has been emphasized in many schools of thoughts across different disciplines. Within psychology, compassion has been defined in a variety of ways. Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas (2010), for example, defined compassion as an affective experience that arises when witnessing undeserved suffering of others, which then motivates a subsequent desire to facilitate cooperation and protection of the weak and those who suffer. Jazaieri et al. (2013), on the other hand, proposed that compassion is a multidimensional construct comprising of a cognitive component (an awareness of the suffering), affective component (sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering), intentional component (a wish to see a relief of the suffering), and a motivational component (a responsiveness or readiness to help and relieve that suffering).

One of the most commonly used conceptualizations of compassion was proposed by Neff (2003a, 2003b). In this model, self-compassion was defined as a self-to-self relating construct that comprises three components, each with two opposing pairs: self-kindness versus self-judgement, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification, all of which interact with one another and constitute a self-compassionate mind (Neff, 2016; Neff et al., 2017). According to this theory, self-kindness entails offering oneself warmth, gentle acceptance, understanding and actively soothing oneself in times of need, rather than being overly judgmental condemning oneself for his/her imperfections. Common humanity refers to the recognition and acceptance of the flawed humanity as a shared human experience so that one needs not be isolated for his/her inevitable failings or sufferings, but rather feel connected for the shared experience. Mindfulness involves staying aware of the presence with clarity and balance, rather than persistently ruminating on one's own negative aspect.

While Neff's conceptualization of self-compassion was based on a social psychological perspective, Gilbert (1989, 2000)'s model was grounded in evolutionary theory. While both were derived from Buddhist practice, the latter proposed an interactive three-system affect regulation model – suggesting that the threat-protection system detects threats and activates fight-or-flight responses; the incentive system drives one to seek resources he/she needs for survival; and the soothing and contentment system brings to mind a sense of soothe, quiescence and peacefulness (Gilbert, 2009). According to this theory, compassion arises when the seeking and achieving state of mind in the threat and drive systems blends with the soothing system to enable caring responses and facilitate prosocial and affiliative interactions with the self and others. In other words, this theory proposed that mental health would be enhanced by a well-developed soothing system, which would help balance the threat and drive systems and regulate their associated emotional responses (Gilbert, 2014; 2015). Gilbert's theoretical conceptualization was supported mostly from studies demonstrating the physiological processes underlying the relationship between affiliation and affect regulation, and theorizations on the interplay between the evolved social motivational systems (Gilbert, 2014). For instance, neuroscientific research suggested that attachment, physical touch and social support have salubrious effects on the affect regulation system (Leaviss & Uttley, 2015). In particular, the feeling of being cared for and

physical touch increase the release of oxytocin and endorphins respectively, both of which are hormones that stimulate the soothing properties of the parasympathetic nervous system and generate a sense of calmness, fulfilment and contentment. This was shown in Rockcliff et al. (2008) where compassion exercise was found to lower the level of stress hormone (cortisol) in individuals. While the existing evidence showed a correlational relationship between affiliation and emotions in compassion, how the construct of compassion resides in the proposed interactive affect regulation system and how it can get ‘awakened’ and ‘re-wired’ still remain largely on a theoretical level (Cozolino, 2010).

In terms of clinical application, a recent review by Kirby (2016) has identified eight compassion-based interventions, with six of them (including Compassion-Focused Therapy, Cognitively Based Compassion Training, Compassion Cultivation Training, Mindful Self-Compassion, Cultivating Emotional Balance, and Compassion Meditation and Loving Kindness Meditation) having been examined by randomised controlled trials. According to this review (Kirby, 2016), the most empirically investigated compassion-based intervention is Compassion-focused therapy (CFT; Gilbert, 2005b). CFT aims to ‘redress the imbalances within the affect regulation systems’ by cultivating a kind and self-supportive inner voice to counter shame and self-criticism (Gilbert 1989; Gilbert 2000; Leaviss & Uttley, 2015). A growing body of research is constructing a considerable evidence base for the therapeutic value of CFT. For example, a systematic review of 14 studies suggested that CFT showed promise as an intervention for mood disorders, particularly those with higher levels of self-criticism (Leaviss & Uttley, 2015); the effectiveness of CFT and other self-compassion related therapies in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety has been further illustrated in a recent meta-analysis of 22 studies (Wilson, Mackintosh, Power, & Chan, 2018). A pilot randomized controlled trial also suggested that group-based CFT offered in conjunction with treatment as usual for eating disorders may be an acceptable, feasible and efficacious intervention with an additional benefit in patients overcoming fear of compassion (Kelly et al., 2017). Compassionate Mind Training, a form of CFT, has also been found to increase heart rate variability, a physiological measure of emotion regulation (Matos et al., 2017).

Despite the surge of studies on the conceptualization of compassion and investigation of how it helps individuals achieve better mental health, there is a paucity of research on how individuals

subjectively understand soothe and how they soothe themselves in times of need. To date, there have only been two qualitative studies of compassion, one in individuals who suffer from depression and anxiety, and another in people who suffer from overweight problems (Pauley & McPherson, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2014). No qualitative study has been conducted to illuminate how compassion is directed to the self in day-to-day contexts among the general populations. The present study therefore sought to address this research gap and present an exploratory qualitative thematic analysis of how “soothe” is understood and manifested in the lived experiences of the general population, as a route to elucidate the structured contents of the subjective experience of compassion. This study asked two specific questions:

- (1) How the feeling of soothe is understood?
- (2) How is the feeling of soothe cultivated in everyday life contexts?

Methods

Design and ethics

This is part of our ongoing research Project Soothe, which invites the general public to submit images that make them feel soothed with the ultimate goal to develop a bank of soothing images for use in psychotherapy and research. Alongside collecting images, we set up an online survey to explore how individuals understand and experience the feeling of soothe in everyday lives. Other than the minimum age requirement (16 years or above), there were no other inclusion or exclusion criteria. Recruitment was conducted using a snowball approach via the Project Soothe website (projectsoothe.com) and advertised via online social media platforms. Qualitative data collected from this survey were based on responses to two questions. Firstly, participants were asked “when people say ‘soothed’, what does it mean to you? Can you describe what is meant by feeling ‘soothed’?” Secondly, participants were asked to recall their previous experiences of feeling soothed. Memory recall of the experiences were prompted by four follow-up questions: (1) What were your surroundings? (2) What did you see, hear, smell, or touch that made you feel soothed? (3) Was there anything else that made you feel soothed? (4) Which emotions did you experience? Participants could

share up to three memories of soothing experiences. These questions were designed with an aim to capture and elucidate the structured contents of individuals' subjective experience of soothe. This study sought to explore to what extent individuals' conceptual understanding of soothe was similar to, or different from, their actual experiences in everyday lives. The follow-up prompt questions were based on the soothing imagery exercise used in the practice of CFT. In addition to the above, a small set of quantitative data was collected. Specifically, participants were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 10, how soothed they felt at the time and also at the present moment when recalling the memory. These questions were included to observe if participants would re-experience similar levels of soothe through memory retrieval. To collect some contextual information about the everyday life experience of soothe, we also asked participants to indicate in general how frequently they feel soothed and what kinds of activities they found particularly soothing. An information sheet was provided on the front page of the survey. Informed consent was recorded. The completion of survey was anonymous. This study received ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee.

Participants

A total of 176 participants (66.5% female; 10.8% male; 22.7% did not mention) were recruited. The mean age was 37.65 ($SD = 11.27$), ranging from 21 to 71. Of the 176 participants, 134 (76.1%) answered the first question asking their interpretations of soothe. For the second part, the survey received a total number of 184 self-soothing experiences collected from 105 participants. Of these 105 participants, 43 (41%) shared one soothing experience, 45 (43%) shared two experiences and 17 (16%) shared three experiences.

Data analysis

Narratives were analysed using thematic analysis, informed by a hermeneutic phenomenological stance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to systematically analyze the large amount of qualitative data, all responses were entered into a qualitative software package NVivo 11. Two coding frameworks for

the two separate research questions (see Appendix) were carefully devised based on the inductive codes grounded in the content of the data after multiple performances of line-by-line inspection of the data set. The entire coding process was informed by the step-by-step guide suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization of the data set, (2) multiple coding, (3) initial search of candidate themes, (4) revision of candidate themes, and (5) re-definition and refinement of themes.

For purposes of rigour, the first author coded all the scripts. The research team met and discussed the validity of the lists of initial descriptive codes and the analytic categorizations of them to increase accuracy of the data analysis, readability, and transparency of how the thematic contents were interpreted. This also facilitated the re-organisation of the hierarchy of codes and the interconnections between the codes under each theme.

Results

Research question 1: How is the feeling of soothe understood?

Three themes were identified. To better elucidate the recurring themes, results are presented according to the prevalence of the themes documented in participants' responses. Each theme will begin with a visual network chart that illustrates the nodes and relationships between the nodes under a theme (see Figure 1-4). The nodes appearing in the highest position coloured in blue within each network chart are the most recurring ideas. These visual network charts were then combined into a full thematic map (see Figure 5).

Theme 1. Soothe is understood as the interconnected states of feeling calm, relaxed and at ease, constituted by a sense of inner peace, contentment and safeness

As illustrated in Figure 1, the complex interconnectedness of the feeling of calmness, relaxation and ease, as constituted by inner peace, contentment and safeness, comprises the core of the understanding of soothe. When asked what is meant by feeling "soothed", the majority of the participants characterized it as an interconnected state of emotions, rather than giving it a single

emotional definition. In particular, the intertwined feeling of calmness, being relaxed and at ease emerged as a very important main theme that recurred the most in the data.

[Feeling soothed is] feeling comforted, warm, calm, at ease, feeling deeply content...

(Female, 50)

Soothe to me means to become calmer or how to relax... [it] means being able to breathe more slowly and evenly with a reduction in negative or anxious thoughts.

(Female, 43)

We further categorized the sources of soothe mentioned by participants into two sets of frameworks. In relation to reaching the state of feeling relaxed and calm, narratives mainly centered on the cultivation of inner peace and contentment.

[Feeling soothed] means bringing myself to being at peace with myself. It involves bringing my awareness to my body, paying close attention to... any feelings of emotional discomfort or pain... being able to come back to a place of calm.

(Female, 50)

In regard to the state of feeling at ease and calm, the sense of safeness, which was the feeling of being safe, secure and protected, was widely mentioned as a specific source.

[Feeling soothed is] made to feel secure, made to feel that I can stop worrying about whatever was previously worrying or upsetting me.

(Female, 45)

These two themes, namely “relaxation” and “ease” (see Figure 1), are not completely separated, but rather interlinked as they together contribute to emotional relief, which was widely projected as one of the major sources of the aforementioned interconnected emotions.

[Feeling soothed is] de-escalation of anxiety/stress.

(Female, 36)

[Feeling soothed is] brief respite from stresses and responsibilities of daily living.

(Female, 38)

Emotional relief after stressful situations is followed by a wealth of positive emotions, ranging from comfort, happiness to a sense of wellbeing. These positive emotions were regarded as highly linked to the feeling of warmth, which reinforced the interconnected emotions that were closely linked back to the feeling of soothe.

[Feeling soothed is] getting a warm feeling of inner peace and serenity when getting overwhelmed by negative emotions.

(Female, 26)

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Theme 2. The interconnected states of feeling calm, relaxed and at ease were underpinned by two separate frameworks: (a) self-soothe and (b) being soothed

(a) Self-soothe

A widespread opinion was the use of mindfulness practices to soothe themselves and attain inner peace and contentment. Specific mentions of the activities were exercises of

breathing and reflection, engagement of senses, detachment from other people and immersion of oneself into the tranquility of the environment.

[Feeling soothed is]... in the moment, present-focused, relaxed.

(Male, 53)

[Feeling soothed is] a state of aloneness or detachment from my surroundings where I feel calm, warm, safe and secure.

(Female, 62)

Other than mindful living, inner peace and contentment were also sometimes preceded by a sense of psychological preparedness mentioned by the participants. This idea mainly stemmed from those who understood soothe as a feeling that came with confidence.

[Feeling soothed] comes with confidence and determination or a feeling of control [over] the future or thorns in life.

(Female, 28)

Although not a recurring theme, a few participants did touch upon the notion of kindness – both being kind to others (care-giving) and also kind to oneself (self-compassion) in the understanding of soothe.

[Feeling soothed is] calmed, nurtured, self-compassion.

(Female, 38)

Another noteworthy strand is the idiosyncratic interpretation of soothe as a ‘hideaway from reality’, which appeared to be somewhat contradictory to some other participants’ understanding that feeling soothed was “voluntary detachment from the surroundings”.

[Feeling soothed is] about covering up, hiding, not facing the truth perhaps.

(Female, 34)

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

(b) **Being soothed**

In addition to self-soothe, highly prevalent in the data was feeling safe via being the object or receiver of soothe through affiliations. As shown in Figure 3, this was primarily linked to behaviours that made individuals feel relaxed and secure. Most felt relaxed and then safe when being calmed and comforted by others after stressful situations; whereas some other participants expressed that they were made to feel relaxed when being reassured by others, distracted from distress, reminded of good things in the world and made to slow down.

[Feeling soothed is] being comforted and calmed during times of stress or distress.

(Female, 45)

The feeling of soothe was also understood as a sense of security that was constituted by being loved, cared for, accepted, understood, heard, touched, and hugged. In particular, some participants described their interpretation of soothe with the analogy of being taken care of like a baby.

[Feeling soothed is] swaddled like a baby.

(Female, 56)

Participants noted that both “made to feel relaxed” and “made to feel secure” through affiliations led to a calming process and a reduced level of distress. Together they comprised an important main source of safeness that was interpreted as a feeling of soothe.

[Feeling soothed means] transitioning from a state of upset or anxiousness to one of feeling calm and at peace.

(Female, 71)

Of note, it was observed that female participants tended to understand soothe more frequently as stemming from affiliations (being soothed), whilst male participants tended to more frequently mention using mindfulness-based techniques (self-soothe) to achieve and interpret the feeling of soothe.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Theme 3. Both frameworks involve physical sensations

The feeling of soothe was anchored to a range of physical sensations. Some recurring nodes among them included ‘tenderness’, ‘physical pleasure’ and ‘lightness of the body’.

[Feeling soothed is] calm, softness, no agitation...

(Female, 36)

Whilst other idiosyncratic narratives included physical sensations that connoted a sense of physical comfort, such as “moist”, “colour”, the feeling of “putting cream onto the mind”, “lying down”, one respondent mentioned ‘fatigue’ as her interpretation of soothe.

[Feeling soothed means] feeling warm and a nice tired.

(Female, 36)

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Summary of Themes emerged for Research Question 1

All themes considered, individuals' understanding of soothe can be demonstrated as a complex yet highly interconnected emotional and physical network (see Figure 5). The physical sensations acted as a foundation for both the frameworks of self-soothe and being soothed, which altogether gave rise to the sample's understanding of soothe.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

Research question 2. How is the feeling of soothe cultivated in everyday life contexts?

Five themes were identified concerning how the feeling of soothe is cultivated in everyday life contexts. When recalling experiences of feeling soothed, on average participants rated the intensity of feeling soothed as 8 out of 10 at the time and 7 out of 10 during the processing of memory recall. Activities that were identified by most participants as soothing included taking a walk (86%), listening to music (70%), taking a bath (62%) and engaging in a creative hobby (60%). Based on the recurring themes, we summarized that the cultivation of soothe in this sample is the flexibility to move between two continuums, which, as illustrated in Figure 6, intersect with each other. In the center of the intersection lies the "physical and mental relaxation", which was described as the source of soothe contributed by its interlinked components.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

Continuum one:

Theme 1. Venturing out in nature: cultivation of soothe via admiration of the taken-for-granted surroundings

Venturing out in nature emerged as the singularly most recurring theme. When illustrating their past soothing experiences, many participants attached significance on the attention they paid onto the minutest details of the natural surroundings, including what they saw, heard, smelled and felt, which made them felt soothed. Many of these experiences were episodes when participants were taking daily strolls in the nature.

[I was] out walking on a country lane. A number of kittens and cats appeared from farm buildings, two came to say hello. [I was soothed by] the quietness of the lane, bird song and amused at the playfulness of the youngest kittens. [I was] concerned that they might be in danger if a car came along the lane, but mostly relaxed by the innocence and sweetness of animals.

(Female, 46)

Also highly prevalent in the data were soothing experiences when participants ventured out of their ordinary lives and showed admiration towards the beauty of the 'unspoiled' nature.

Whilst travelling I visited the Mongolian steppes... I was surrounded by mountains, glacial rocks and valleys... [I felt a] total sense of freedom. It was utterly beautiful and unspoiled by man. [I was] in awe and amazed as the moon rose... [I felt] content...

(Female, 30)

[I was] standing at the very front of the ship... [I felt an] intense calmness... [when] looking up at the vastness of the universe.

(Male, 62)

Albeit an idiosyncratic mention, a noteworthy description from a respondent was the ability to 'own' the moment that created a feeling of soothe.

I was at my favourite beach [looking at the] sand, sea and reflected lights. I felt calm, appreciation and soothed because I had a camera with me to create an image.

(Female, 58)

Theme 2. Being in a familiar surrounding: cultivation of soothe via a sense of safeness

On the other end of the continuum, being in a familiar surrounding also emerged as a very important main theme. Many emphasized that it is the familiarity with the environment and proximity to familiar people that brought them a sense of safeness, which cultivated the feeling of soothe. Among the familiar environments, home appeared be the most frequently mentioned setting where participants felt soothed.

[I felt soothed when I was] in my home, sitting on the sofa in the living room and saw a tidy and homely setting...

(Female, 27)

This feeling of soothe arisen from the familiarity with the environment was very often accompanied by physical proximity to family members.

[I felt soothed when I was] lying on my sofa cuddling with my toddler son. Skin on skin... The soft warmth of his body.

(Male, 44)

[I felt soothed when I was in a] familiar room... and knowing my husband was at home too.

(Female, 27)

Whilst the majority of the participants documented familiar environment as home and people as family members, familiarity here was not limited to home and the presence of family members.

[I was in] Maggie's Centre meeting room for my art class. [It was a] closed group with just a few people who had been attending for 8 weeks... Familiar people in similar situation.

(Female, 44)

Continuum two:

Theme 3. Being solitary and detached: cultivation of soothe via engagement in individual activities and witnessing kindness

Also important in the cultivation of soothe in everyday life was the flexibility to move between being solitary and detached versus being affiliated and connected, which we grouped in the horizontal continuum seen in Figure 6. The ability to stay solitary and detached from other people emerged as the second most recurring theme in the everyday cultivation of soothe. This was manifested by two subthemes:

(a) Full concentration on the presence

Among those who favoured solitary and detachment, many mentioned that the feeling of soothe came from activities that demanded their full concentration on the presence.

I was playing my piano. The cadences of notes, harmonies, being absorbed in concentration on one activity, the stillness of mind made me feel relaxed and soothed.

(Female, 46)

I was working in my garden... The warmth of the sun on my back, the quietness and being able to focus on the job in hand without distractions made me feel soothed...

(Female, 62)

Some participants also specifically mentioned the absence of responsibilities and worries as the source of soothe that accompanied solitary and detachment.

[I felt soothed when] knowing that the ocean will always meet the land... [and] that I was alone and could stop to take it all in without people walking past and looking.

(Female, 34)

(b) Witnessing kindness

Apart from concentrating on the ongoing tasks, two participants also spoke of mindfulness yet from a different perspective. They expressed feeling soothed when witnessing something was “well taken care of”.

I was walking home after work. I saw a garden filled with beautiful flowers and a vegetable plot that was clearly well tended... I felt calm after a day of work and enjoyment in the evidence of someone’s care and love for their garden.

(Female, 46)

Theme 4. Being affiliated and connected: cultivation of soothe via kin-based, dyadic, interpersonal relationships

On the other end of this continuum was affiliation and connection with others. Narratives can be categorized into two subthemes:

(a) Kin relationships

Almost all participants who favoured being affiliated emphasized that the feeling of soothe stemmed from interpersonal connections with their significant others from kin relationships.

I was at home in our bedroom with my husband... I was laying down and we had an intimate conversation. I was listening to my husband talk about his feelings. I felt loved, joyful, peaceful and empowered.

(Female, 31)

(b) Non-kin relationships

Non-kin relationships were also significantly mentioned among the participants, especially affiliations and connections with animals and people who shared similar situation to theirs.

I was at home working. I saw my cats sleeping on a bed. I touched and smelt their fur. Their warmth [soothed me]. I felt secure, happy and comforted.

(Female, 46)

[I felt soothed when I was] being with people who accepted me because we were all autistic.

(Female, 35)

Theme 5. Physical and mental relaxation: cultivation of soothe via release of body tension

The source of everyday soothe was also fairly widely mentioned to be solely stemming from the release of physical tension and unnecessary thoughts. In relation to the release of physical tension, responses recorded a range of activities including exercising, having a massage and taking a bath, etc.

[I felt soothed] when I was swimming in the water, being able to move easily (I have arthritis and this can be hard and painful sometimes)... [I felt] happy, relived, free and excited to] be able to move easily and without pain...

(Female, 27)

Some participants specifically mentioned the practice of mindfulness meditation as the source of soothe.

I listened to a short mindfulness audio tape which helped me to focus on my breath... it helped me to focus through visualization... I got a sense of strength and calm after listening to the audio tape.

(Female, 50)

Four participants particularly mentioned the notions of “having a task in hand” and “having completed a task” as a source of soothe, which was also often accompanied by the aforementioned mindfulness at familiar surroundings and nature.

[I was] in bed, relaxed and with music on... I was soothed when] knowing that all my work and tasks were done. I was both happy and optimistic.

(Male, did not mention age)

Discussion

The present study explored the understanding of soothe in the general public and their lived experiences of soothe in an everyday life context. The results revealed that there were considerable commonalities between individuals’ conceptual understanding of soothe and their actual experiences of soothe. Overall, a shared, essential understanding of soothe was represented as the interconnected

states of feeling calm, relaxed and at ease. These feelings were attributed to the sense of inner peace and contentment cultivated solitarily by the participants themselves (the framework of self-soothe), and the sense of safeness that was often attained via affiliations (the framework of being soothed). This cognitive understanding of soothe was manifested in the lived experiences narrated by the participants, where participants did not only emphasise an almost equally important need for both solitude and affiliations with others, but they also attached great significance on being surrounded by familiar people and environments. These findings were consistent with the conceptualisation of 'soothe' in Gilbert (2004)'s model of compassion which contextualises the sense of 'safeness' within social affiliation. Within CFT, the sense of "safeness" is related to freedom, exploration, openness and curiosity, which is different from a state of "safety" achieved through avoiding or running away from danger. This theme of safeness is also in line with attachment theories, in particular echoing the concept of 'secure base' and attachment security, i.e. a sense of assurance that others will be responsive and supportive for us in times of need (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). It is largely developed based on the care and soothe received from primary caregivers during infancy, when infants internalize the "experience-based mental representations of children's caregivers' likely behavior" as their internal working models and form their attachment style (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Sherman et al., 2015). It was shown that attachment orientation plays an important role in psychological wellbeing even in late adulthood, and that attachment security was conducive to the development of a self-compassionate attitude (Homan, 2016). Whilst attachment patterns developed in childhood remain highly stable throughout the lifespan, these patterns could be "revised" by experiences and therapeutic relationships (Waters et al., 2000; Weinfield et al., 2000). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) suggested that the sense of safeness and security can be activated by mental representations of loving and caring relationship partners instead of overt proximity-seeking behavior in adulthood. For example, securely attached individuals reported that they coped with stress by seeking out physical and emotional support from romantic partners when distressed (Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993), whereas peer relationships can offer opportunities to people of

similar age, social status and competencies for cooperation, mutual altruism and reciprocity that are mostly egalitarian in nature (Furman, 1999). Therefore, these results from existing literature could account for why some participants in our study experienced feeling soothed by the “acknowledged presence” of their significant others whilst some others felt soothed when they were affiliated with someone similar to them.

This study also highlighted the notion of solitude being conducive to creating a feeling of soothe. Gilbert (2014) defined solitude as distinct from loneliness, where the former is a state that is “sought out and enjoyed” and the latter is related to “a yearning and seeking for connectedness”. Despite being a niche in research, Leary et al. (2003) illustrated that the frequency and enjoyment of solitary activities were more strongly associated with a high desire for solitude instead of disinterest in social contact. It was also revealed that solitude served as a constructive and protective function as a strategic retreat that complements social experience (Larson, 1997). Thus, it was hypothesized that solitude and attachment may work together as a “boon companion” rather than two disparate ends, as “a positive experience of solitude is only possible when one is securely attached and that secure attachment requires the potential for aloneness” (Detrixhe et al., 2014). While our findings revealed an interesting role of solitude in creating a sense of soothe, it should be noted that empirical findings in this area are still scant. How solitude may benefit one’s psychological wellbeing still remains largely unclear and warrant future research for further investigation into this hypothesized association.

Apart from the above, a number of threads also underpinned the feeling of soothe stemming from being mindful of the present when participants were spending solitary moments. This result was in line with the components of common humanity and mindfulness under Neff’s (2003a, 2003b) conceptualisation of self-compassion. This was also consistent with previous findings which revealed that feelings of connectedness afforded by self-compassion was a crucial attitudinal factor in the mindfulness-happiness relationship that led to greater psychological wellbeing (Hollis-Walker &

Colosimo, 2011). However, the existing literature has yet to examine the relationship of self-compassion and mindfulness with solitude. Although current conceptualisations of compassion and self-compassion accentuated the adverse effects of isolation (Neff, 2003a, 2003b) and loneliness (Gilbert, 2014) on mental wellbeing, the results in the present study suggested that solitude played a significant role when self-compassion and mindfulness took place. It is also noteworthy that the current findings showed that female participants tended to more frequently understand soothe as stemming from affiliations (being soothed), whilst male participants tended to understand soothe as a process of self-soothe. This finding was congruent with the gender difference illustrated in a previous meta-analysis, where males showed slightly higher levels of self-compassion than females (Yarnell et al., 2015). Another possible interpretation is that males may have an increased belief in the importance of being self-reliant and hence may intuitively view “soothe” in relation to self-soothe rather than being soothed by others; this is consistent with recent findings which showed that males have lower levels of compassion for others in the Compassion Engagement and Action Scales (Gilbert et al., 2017). Altogether these findings may suggest novel research directions in the future on investigating whether voluntary desire for aloneness, as opposed to the involuntary state of being isolated, creates a “mental space” that facilitates self-compassion and mindful awareness of the surroundings, and whether gender influences the cultivation of individuals’ soothing experience.

Furthermore, physical sensations also appeared to play a role in both individuals' understanding of soothe and their actual experiences of feeling soothed. They are represented to play a fundamental role in offering participants’ a sense of emotional relief, comfort and warmth, which are then understood as soothe. This importance of physical relief was again anchored when participants narrated their experiences of feeling soothed via release of body tensions. From the theoretical point of view, this finding echoed with the existing evidence on the psychological benefits of physical touch. Gilbert (2010) posited that physical contact, kindness and warmth are a powerful way of soothing. When such tactile contact is with an object that contains thermal warmth, oxytocin is released from

its receptors, which are identified in the amygdala, the emotional and behavioural center of the “social brain” (Zak et al., 2004). Since physical touch was the most frequently mentioned bodily sensation that gave rise to the feeling of soothe via a sense of warmth in our sample, our findings provided qualitative accounts complementary to these neuroscientific findings.

The major difference between the thematic findings of the two research questions was participants’ lack of awareness of the soothing power of nature. While recalling the actual experiences of feeling soothed, venturing out into the nature emerged as the most recurring theme. Surprisingly, the importance of nature was not mentioned when participants were asked to verbalise their understanding of soothe. The closest narratives possible were the occasional remarks of tranquillity and solitary that inform participants’ understanding of soothe via a sense of inner peace and contentment. This suggested that the soothing power of nature may be below the conscious awareness of participants. The notion of nature being a mental oasis is not a novel concept as it has previously been highlighted in the Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Recovery Theory (Joye et al., 2013; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich, 1983). In support of these theories, a study involving more than 250,000 participants based on the second Dutch national survey of general practice (DNSGP-2) showed that the percentage of green space in people’s living environment was positively associated with their self-rated health (Maas et al., 2006). Another study of a large cross-sectional population from the 2008 Scottish Health Survey also demonstrated that physical activity in natural environments has a greater association with reduced risk of mental ill health compared with physical activity in other environments (Mitchell, 2013). In a laboratory setting, individuals were found to report viewing natural environments as a more positive experience than viewing urban environments (Joye et al., 2013). In field experiments, Hartig et al., (2003) showed greater stress reduction, increased positive affect and decreased anger among participants who engaged in walking in a natural reserve than those in an urban surrounding. Similarly, a study in 24 forests across Japan exploring the effect of “Shinrin-yoku” (“forest bath”) evinced that exposures to forest environments

promoted more positive physiological changes than city environments (Park et al., 2010). Notwithstanding, research on the benefits of natural environments has been faced with challenges of translating their findings into practice and inform further research (Bell et al., 2011). The present study, elucidating the latent soothing effect of nature, therefore contributed to bridging the gap between the two research areas and suggested that future research may look into the association between the benefits of natural environments and compassion in relation to mental wellbeing.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that public engagement is at the heart of Project Soothe. We have explored new ways to collect data and represent research findings through public exhibitions and science festival events. For example, results of this study have been transformed into a poem by a local poet (see <http://www.projectsoothe.com/poem/> and Appendix).

Limitations

The sample in the present study consisted of more female than male, which limited our search for gender differences. The extent to which factors such as participants' ethnicity, and socio-economic and cultural background influenced their responses also remained unclear. Although the use of survey is useful for collecting a large sample size, the inability to clarify participants' answers on the survey items meant that occasions when the researcher had to interpret their responses were inevitable. Conducting interviews in the future may help collecting more in-depth narratives.

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis explored how individuals understand the concept of "soothe" and illustrated the themes underlying individuals' subjective soothing experiences in everyday life such as the importance of solitude, affiliation, mindfulness, connection with nature and physical sensations. These findings have implications for the development of compassion-based interventions. Specifically, they may help practitioners support individuals to develop self-soothing strategies by tapping into their understanding and experience of feeling soothed in everyday contexts.

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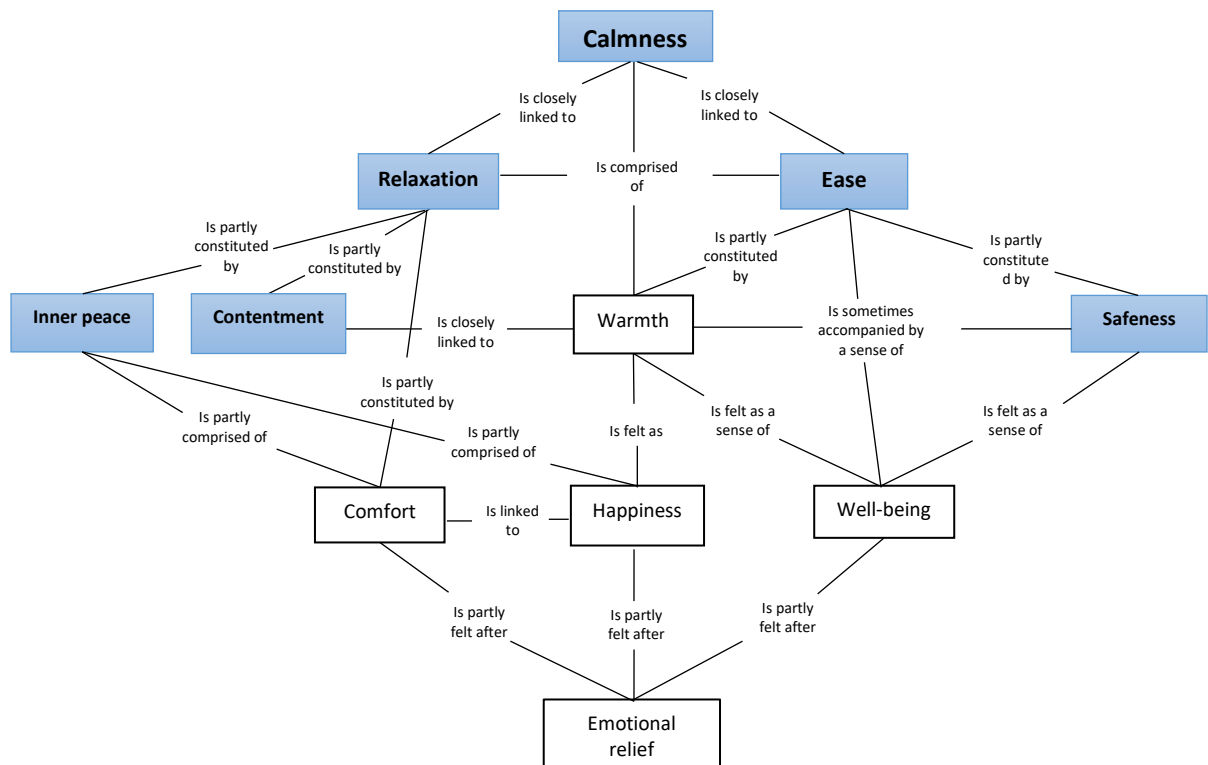


Figure 1 Soothe understood as the interconnected states of feeling calm, relaxed and at ease, constituted by the feeling of inner peace, contentment and safeness

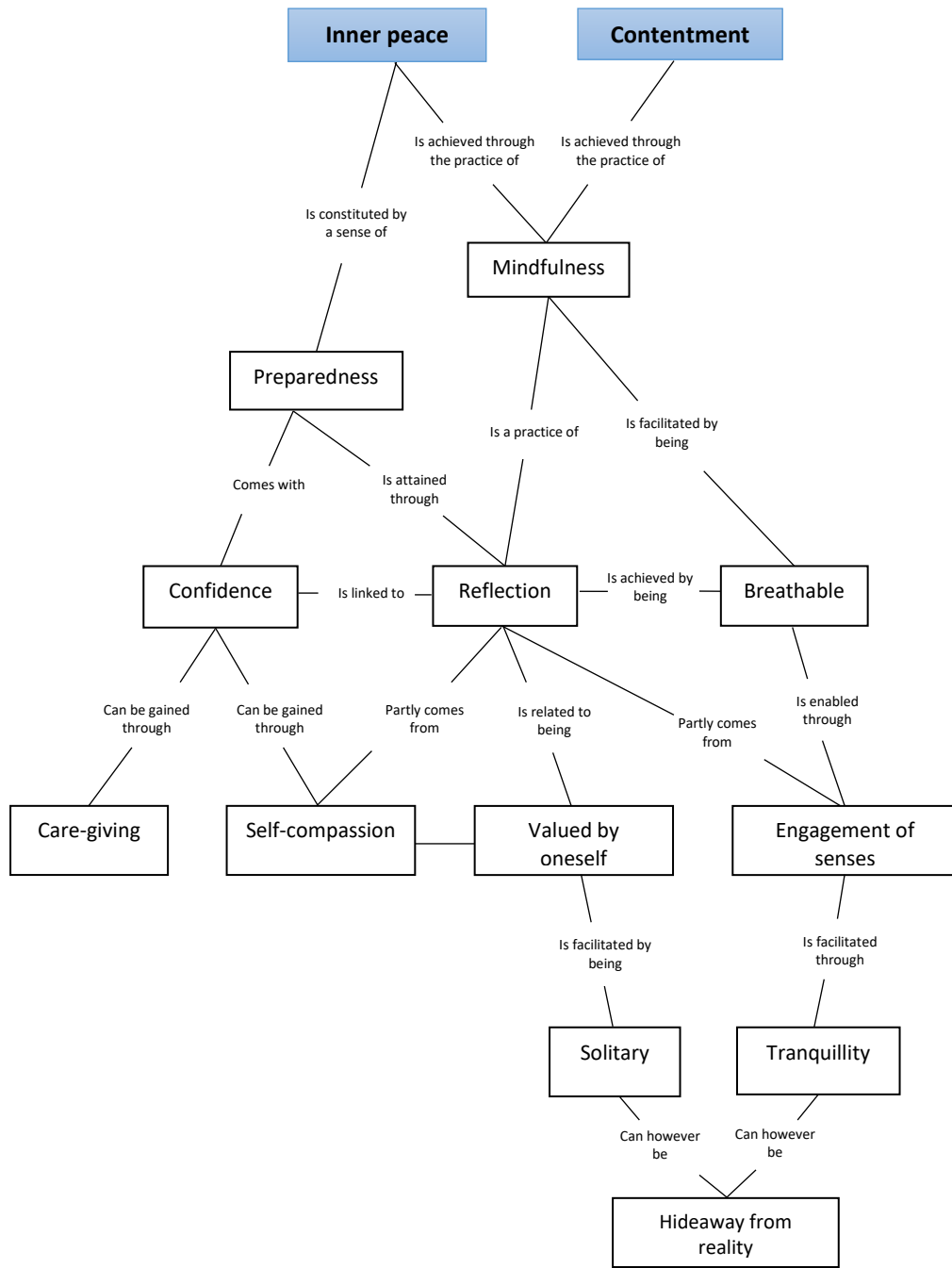


Figure 2 Understanding of soothe: the framework of self-soothe

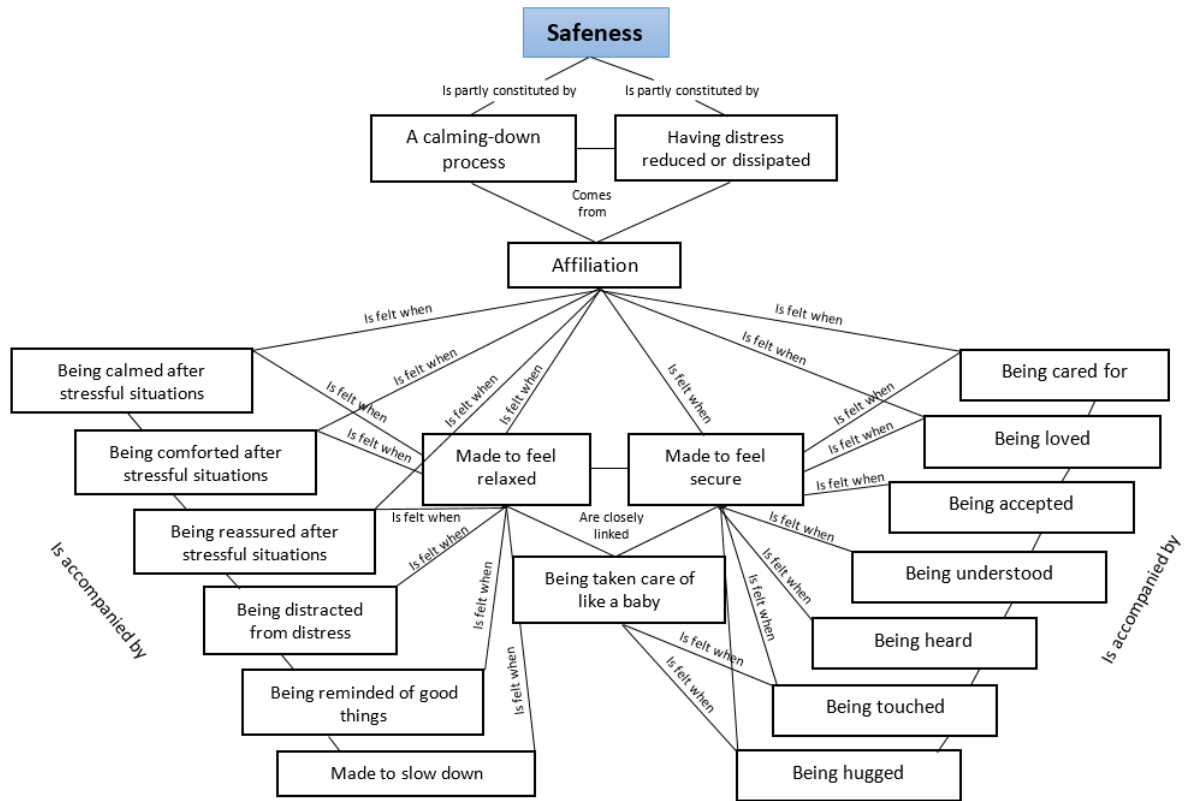


Figure 3 Understanding of soothe: the framework of being soothed

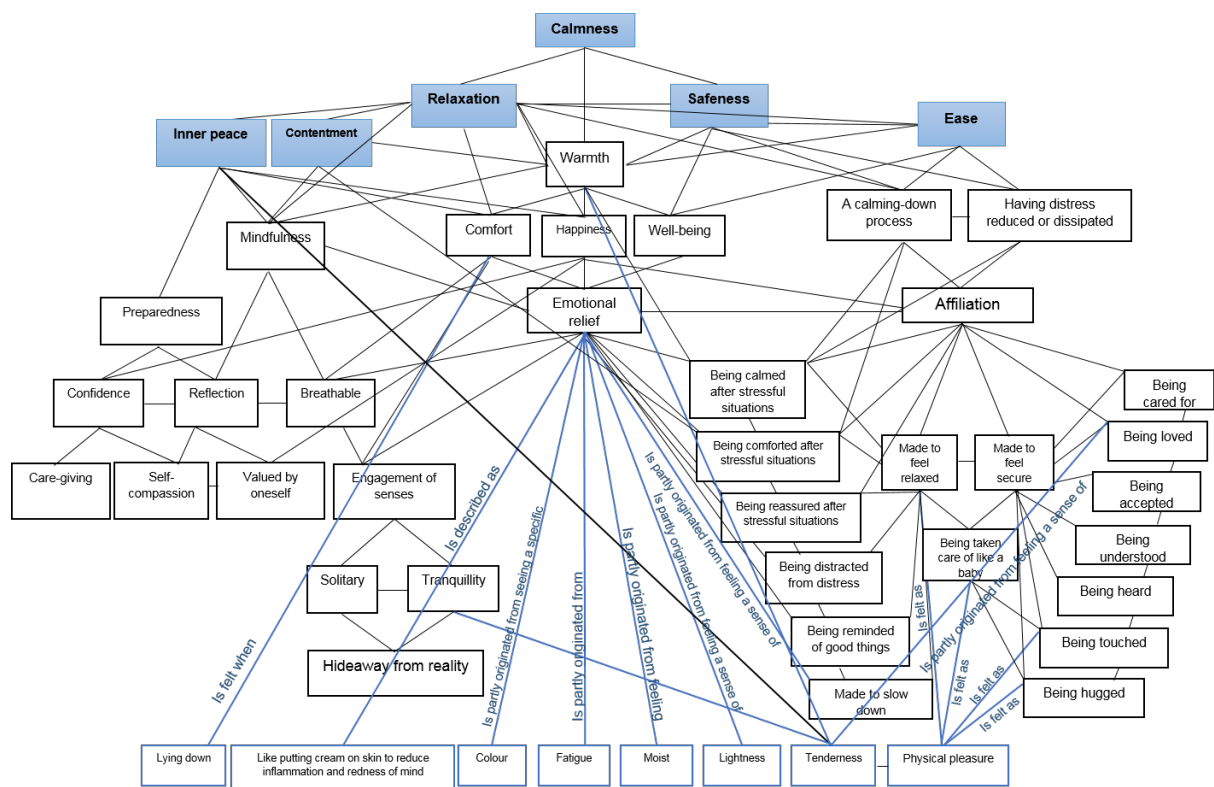


Figure 4 The physical sensations involved in the understanding of soothe

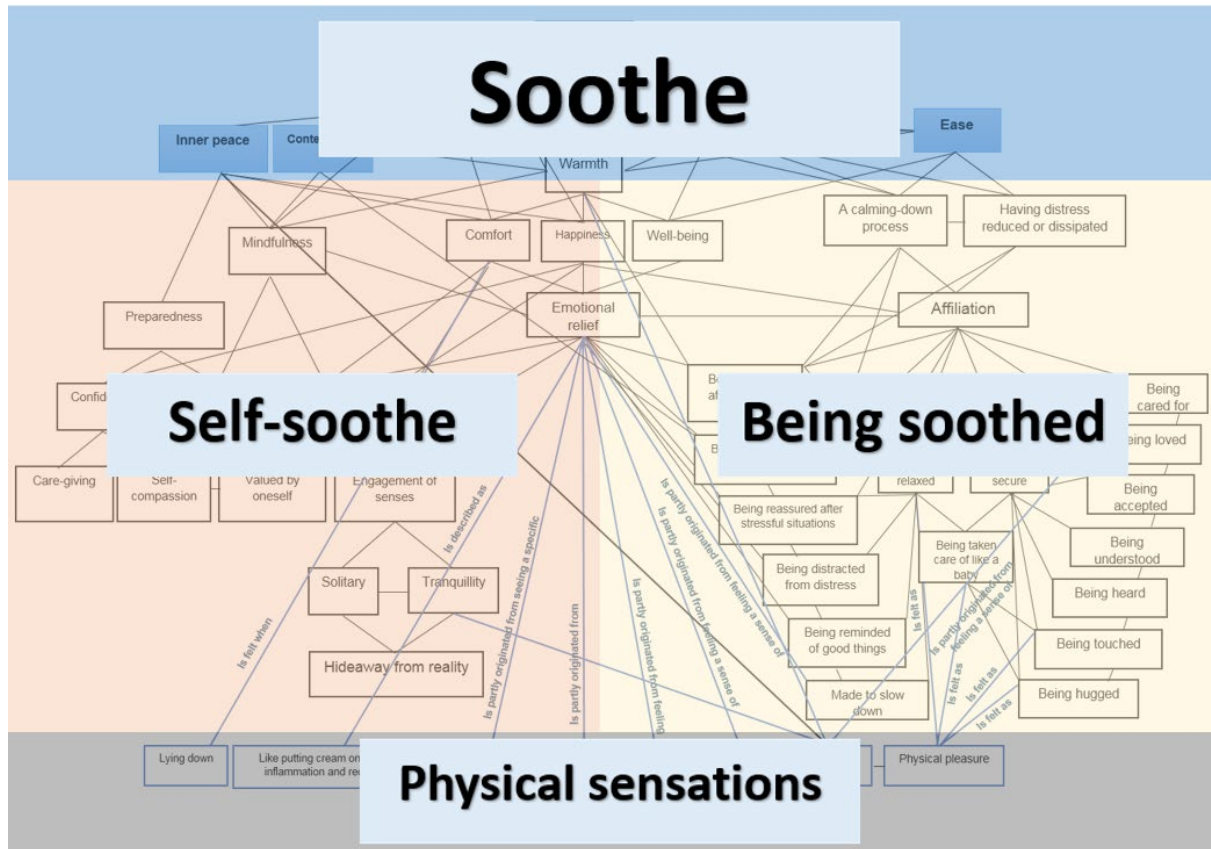


Figure 5 How the feeling of soothe is understood.

Note. This figure illustrates the entire thematic map in response to the first research question.

Details regarding "Self-soothe", "Being soothed" and "Physical sensations" are displayed in figures 1

– 4.

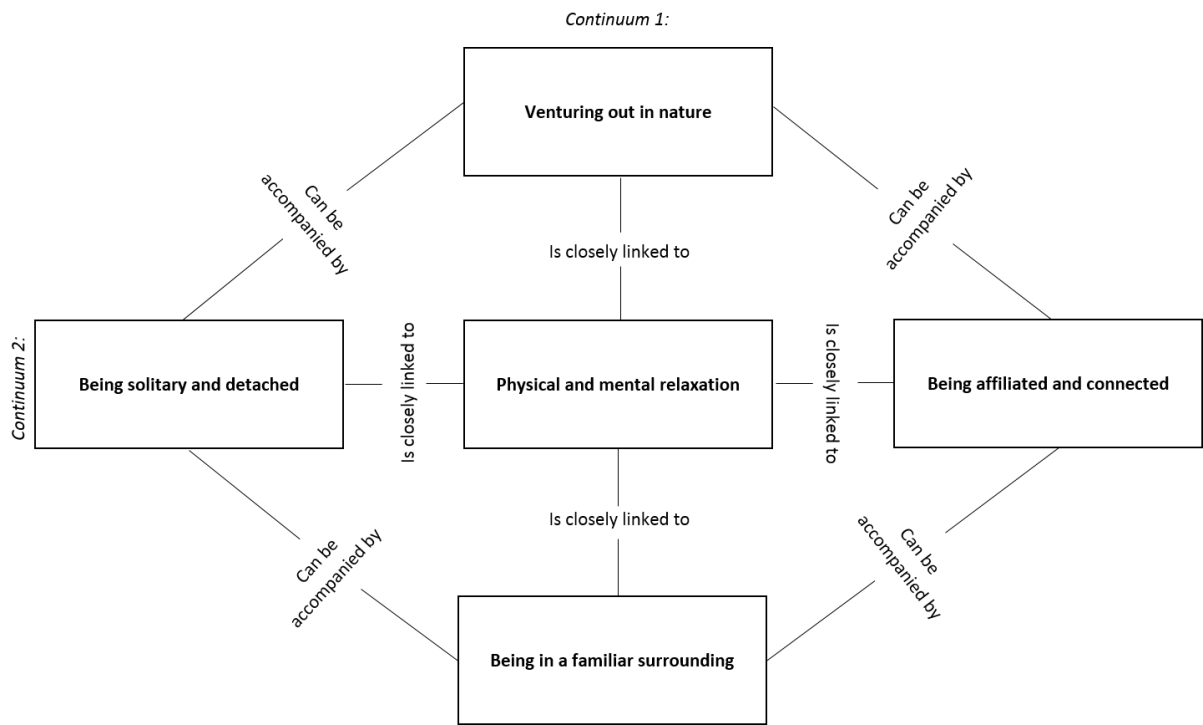


Figure 6 The cultivation of soothe in everyday life contexts

Appendix: Coding frames

Coding frame 1: How is the feeling of soothe interpreted?

Code-name	n	Definition	Example
Category 1: Emotions		Explicit statement about the emotions involved when people interpret the meaning of 'soothe'	
Calmness	61	Feeling soothed means feeling calm.	'[Feeling soothed is] feeling calm, content, relaxed.' (Female, 45)
			'[Feeling soothed is feeling] calm and content in both body and mind.' (Male, 48)
			'[Feeling soothed is] feeling comforted, warm, calm, at ease, feeling deeply content, feeling connected, feeling in contact.' (Female, 50)
			'[Feeling soothed is feeling] calm, quiet, still, mindful, in the moment...' (Female, 48)
			'[Feeling soothed is] calming yourself down when you are angry/over excited or making yourself feel better when you are sad.' (Female, 23)
Relaxation	50	Feeling soothed means feeling relaxed.	'[Feeling soothed is feeling] relaxed, nurtured, safe.' (Female, 48)
			'[Feeling soothed is] feeling calm and comfortable, relaxed but aware.' (Female, 35)
			'[Feeling soothed is feeling] relaxed, calm and content (especially after feeling

anxious or worried).'
(Female, 34)

'[Feeling soothed is] having levels of stress or upset reduced; being comforted; feeling more calm/relaxed/peaceful.'
(Female, 61)

'[Feeling soothed is] to be able to calm down and relax after a state of distress.'
(Female, 32)

'Soothe to me means to become calmer or how to relax. Feeling soothed to me means being able to breathe more slowly and evenly with a reduction in negative or anxious thoughts.'
(Female, 43)

'[Feeling soothed is] feeling calm and relaxed. Usually interpersonal – e.g. parent soothing a child, feeling soothed after talking a difficulty through a friend.'
(Female, 27)

'Feeling an inner embracing sense of peace/tranquillity and comfort.'
(Female, 27)

'... [Feeling soothed] means bringing myself to being at peace with myself. It involves bringing my awareness to my body, paying close attention to how it feels and if there are any feelings of emotional discomfort or pain, being able to use the tools that are available to me such as my breathing or mindfulness or other techniques I have learned for releasing painful or traumatic feelings and

Inner peace

25

Feeling soothed means feeling at peace.

			being able to come back to a place of calm.’ (Female, 50)
			‘Getting a warm feeling of inner peace and serenity when getting overwhelmed by negative emotions.’ (Female, 26)
			‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling comforted, safe, at ease.’ (Female, 29)
			‘[Feeling soothed means] calm, safe, free from pain, gentle.’ (Female, 37)
Safeness	19	Feeling soothed means feeling safe, secure and protected.	‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling relaxed and safe; contentedness. Having been troubled and the experiencing the troubles dissipate.’ (Female, 27)
			‘[Feeling soothed means] calm, content, free of worries, warm, hugged, cosy, soft, gentle, comfortable, at home, uplifting, rocking...’ (Female, 34)
Warmth	12	Feeling soothed means feeling warm, nurtured and contained.	‘[Feeling soothed means] a state of aloneness or detachment from my surroundings where I feel calm, warm, safe and secure.’ (Female, 62)
			‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling comforted, warm, calm, at ease, feeling deeply content, feeling connected, feeling in contact.’ (Female, 45)

			<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling relaxed and safe; contentedness. Having been troubled and then experiencing troubles dissipate.’ (Female, 27)</p>
Contentment	18	Feeling soothed means feeling content and satisfied with the current state of life.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed means feeling] safe, content to be alive at that moment...’ (Female, 51)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] I’m not worried, flustered or stressed about anything I’m just very calm and contented.’ (Female, 21)</p>
Well-being	2	Feeling soothed means to feel a sense of well-being.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] a feeling of calmness, security and wellbeing.’ (Female, 42)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling calm and comfortable, relaxed but aware.’ (Female, 35)</p>
Comfort	6	Feeling soothed means feeling comfortable.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling comfortable and peaceful.’ (Female, 24)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed is to be] at ease.’ (Female, 27; Male, 62; Female, 25; Female, 23; Female, 30; Female, 26; Female, 34; Female, 29; Female, 45; Female, 36; Female, 23; Female, 21)</p>
Ease	28	Feeling soothed means feeling at ease without having any worries or stress.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed is to be] relaxed, lying down, [and have] no worries.’ (Male, did not mention age)</p>

			<p>‘[Feeling soothed is] to feel calm, without anxiety, to have a feeling of peace and well-being.’ (Female, 46)</p> <p>‘[Feeling soothed is] not agitated or highly-strung. Calm. A feeling that the body’s chemicals are balanced.’ (Female, 46)</p> <p>‘... [Feeling soothed means] emotional needs being validated and met... more on an emotional level, a feeling.’ (Female, 27)</p>
Emotional relief	9	Feeling soothed means feeling emotionally relieved after stressful situations.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] a diminishment of excitement, particularly negative excitement. A balm.’ (Male, 44)</p> <p>‘Usually soothed means a relief after pressure, ecstasy, a pain or a shock to me.’ (Female, 28)</p> <p>‘[Feeling soothed means] emotional relief. We can be soothed by others or by ourselves, from sharing discomfort, imitating self-talk to recalling pleasant memory...’ (Male, 24)</p>
Affiliation	3	Feeling soothed means feeling affiliated and connected with others.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling comforted, warm, calm, at ease, feeling deeply content, feeling connected, feeling in contact.’ (Female, 45)</p> <p>‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling calm and relaxed. Usually interpersonal – e.g. parent soothing a child,</p>

			<p>feeling soothed after talking a difficulty through with a friend.’ (Female, 27)</p> <p>‘... [Feeling soothed] comes with confidence and determination or a feeling of control [over] the future or thorn in life.’ (Female, 28)</p> <p>‘When I feel soothed I feel calm, confident and comforted.’ (Female, 34)</p> <p>‘[Feeling soothed is] to feel relaxed and able to cope with whatever is coming next.’ (Female, 34)</p> <p>‘[Feeling soothed is a state of not worrying and knowing I will be able to cope with the situation at hand...’ (Female, 30)</p>
Confidence	3	Feeling soothed means feeling confident and having a sense of control.	
Preparedness	5	Feeling soothed means feeling a sense of control over things that will happen in the future.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed is]... a kind of confidence and determination or a feeling of control over the future and the unknown, or the tricky problems in life.’ (Female, 28)</p> <p>‘[Feeling soothed]... comes with confidence and determination or a feeling of control [over] the future or thorn in life.’ (Female, 28)</p>
Happiness	10	Feeling soothed means feeling happy and pleasant.	<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] relaxed, at peace, positive, filled with love and positive emotions, accepting, feeling happy and confident and valued by myself.’ (Female, 41)</p>

			<p>‘[Feeling soothed means] being relaxed and being happy.’ (Male, did not mention age)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed is] to feel calm and peaceful, relaxed and happy.’ (Female, 26)</p>
Self-compassion	2	<p>Feeling soothed means accepting our experience as it is and embracing ourselves with warmth and tenderness.</p>	<p>‘[Feeling soothed is a] momentary sense that things are in fact alright, brief respite from stresses and responsibilities of daily living.’ (Female, 38)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed is] calmed, nurtured, self-compassion.’ (Female, 38)</p>
Valued by oneself	1	<p>Feeling soothed means feeling valued by oneself.</p>	<p>‘[Feeling soothed is to be] valued by myself.’ (Female, 41)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed is] a state of aloneness or detachment from my surroundings where I feel calm, warm, safe and secure.’ (Female, 62)</p>
Solitary	2	<p>Feeling soothed means feeling solitary and detached.</p>	<p>‘[Feeling soothed is] silence, colour blue, away from people, city peripheries, good smell in the air – good, water-infused fresh smell.’ (Male, 26)</p>
			<p>‘[Feeling soothed is] feeling tranquil, calm, relaxed, being at peace.’ (Female, 30)</p>
Tranquillity	6	<p>Feeling soothed means feeling tranquil.</p>	<p>‘Feeling soothed brings to mind feelings of peace, warmth, quiet, a certain stillness even in movement, a feeling of being anchored</p>

			and being cared for, of tenderness.’ (Female, 46)
			‘[Feeling soothed is] calm, quiet, still, mindful, in the moment, any worries or concerns have gone, certainly for that moment. (Female, 48)
			‘[Feeling soothed is to be] breathable. (Female, 42)
Breathable	4	Feeling soothed means feeling breathable.	‘[Feeling soothed is] being able to breathe again. An opportunity to merge with what’s around me rather than block it out. Feeling safe. (Female, 34)
			‘Feeling soothed to me means being able to breathe more slowly and evenly with a reduction in negative or anxious thoughts. (Female, 43)
Fatigue	1	Feeling soothed means feeling fatigue after a task is done.	‘[Feeling soothed means] feeling warm and a nice tired.’ (Female, 36)

Category 2: Active behaviours	Explicit statement about the active behaviours involved when people interpret the meaning of ‘soothe’		
			‘[Feeling soothed is] feeling calm and comfortable, relaxed but aware.’ (Female, 35)
Mindfulness	9	Feeling soothed means to be present-focused, being aware and mindful of the surroundings.	‘[Feeling soothed is] calm, contentment, in the moment, present-focused, relaxed. (Male, 53)

			<p>'[Feeling soothed is] a personal comfort and attachment with your surroundings at that moment.'</p> <p>(Male, 49)</p>
			<p>'[Feeling soothed is] being slowed down and able to absorb an atmosphere or environment, with a sense of time standing still and the ability to just enjoy a moment. All of the senses being engaged.'</p> <p>(Female, 46)</p>
			<p>'[Feeling soothed is] calm, quiet, still, mindful, in the moment. Any worries or concerns have gone, certainly for that moment.'</p> <p>(Female, 48)</p>
Engagement of senses	1	Feeling soothed means to have all senses engaged.	<p>'[Feeling soothed is to have] all of the sense being engaged.'</p> <p>(Female, 46)</p>
Reflection	1	Feeling soothed means to be reflective of one's emotions.	<p>'[Feeling soothed is] the movement away from more dynamic, energised feelings towards more reflective, calm feelings.'</p> <p>(Male, 65)</p>
Care-giving	1	Feeling soothed means to offer care for others.	<p>'[Feeling soothed is] to console, to comfort.'</p> <p>(Female, 50)</p>
A calming-down process	16	Feeling soothed means to calm down after states of distress.	<p>'[Feeling soothed is] a calming process. Something comforting, caring, reassuring.'</p> <p>(Female, 29)</p>
			<p>'[Feeling soothed is] transitioning from a state of upset or anxiousness to one of feeling calm and at peace.'</p>

			(Female, 71)
			'[Feeling soothed] means a relief and a belief after pressure, a shock, ecstasy, or a sadness.'
			(Female, 28)
			'[Feeling soothed is to be] calmed down from a tense or irritating or frustrating situation...'
			(Female, 33)
			'[Feeling soothed is] feeling relaxed and contented after a state of agitation and anxiety.'
			(Female, 27)
Hideaway from reality	1	Feeling soothed means to hide away from the reality.	'[Feeling soothed is]... about covering up, hiding, not facing the truth perhaps.'
			(Female, 34)

Category 3: Passive behaviours	Explicit statement about the passive behaviours involved when people interpret the meaning of 'soothe'
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			'[Feeling soothed is] a sense of being calmed down and distress reducing. It brings to mind feeling warm...'
			(Female, 27)
Being calmed after stressful situations	21	Feeling soothed means being calmed, consoled and emotionally settled after stressful situations.	'[Feeling soothed is] comforted, calmed, made to feel less anxious, made to feel secure, made to feel that I can stop worrying about whatever was previously worrying or upsetting me.'
			(Female, 45)
			'[Feeling soothed means] feeling calm and at ease... something or someone has

			had a calming effect.’ (Female, 34)
			‘[Feeling soothed means to be] brought to a sense of peace and control by a person or activity. (Male, 36)
			‘[Feeling soothed is] comforted, calmed, made to feel less anxious, made to feel secure, made to feel that I can stop worrying about whatever was previously worrying or upsetting me.’ (Female, 45)
Being comforted after stressful situations	21	Feeling soothed means being comforted after stressful situations.	‘[Feeling soothed is] feeling comforted, warm, calm, at ease, deeply content, feeling connected, feeling in contact.’ (Female, 45)
			‘[Feeling soothed is] being comforted and calmed during times of stress or distress.’ (Female, 45)
			‘[Feeling soothed is] a calming process. Something comforting, caring, reassuring.’ (Female, 29)
Being reassured after stressful situations	4	Feeling soothed means being reassured after stressful situations.	‘[Feeling soothed is] to be calmed and reassured, and made to feel that everything is going to be okay.’ (Female, 29)
			‘[Feeling soothed means] having levels of stress or upset reduced, being comforted; feeling more calm/relaxed/peaceful.’ (Female, 61)
Having distress reduced or dissipated	16	Feeling soothed means having anxiety and distress reduced or dissipated.	

			<p>'[Feeling soothed is] to be calmed in a de-stressing, relaxing manner.' (Male, 43)</p> <p>'[Feeling soothed is]... brief respite from stresses and responsibilities of daily living. (Female, 38)</p> <p>'Feeling soothed is] calm, de-stressing, not worried. (Female, 42)</p> <p>'[Feeling soothed is]... de-escalation of anxiety/stress.' (Female, 36)</p> <p>'[Feeling soothed is to be] relaxed after a stressful thought or situation.' (Female, 27)</p>
Made to feel relaxed	3	Feeling soothed means being made to feel relaxed after stressful situations.	<p>'[Feeling soothed is to be] calmed or made to feel better when upset/stressed, distressed/anxious – hugged, consoled.' (Female, 45)</p>
Made to feel secure	4	Feeling soothed means being made to feel secure.	<p>'[Feeling soothed is] made to feel secure, made to feel that I can stop worrying about whatever was previously worrying or upsetting me.' (Female, 45)</p> <p>'[Feeling soothed is]... feeling secure and comforted.' (Female, 35)</p> <p>'[Feeling soothed is] calm, safe, secure.' (Female, 42)</p>

Made to slow down	1	Feeling soothed means being made to slow down.	'[Feeling soothed is] being slowed down and able to absorb an atmosphere or environment, with a sense of time standing still and the ability to just enjoy a moment. All of the senses being engaged.' (Female, 46)
Being loved	3	Feeling soothed means being loved by somebody.	'[Feeling soothed is]... loved in a situation when I am being ignored or forgotten... embraced or held when I am being or have been neglected...' (Female, 33)
Being cared for	6	Feeling soothed means being cared by somebody.	'Feeling soothed is feeling embraced by someone's love, someone's care, empathy and compassion.' (Female, 27)
Being reminded of good things	1	Feeling soothed means being reminded of good things by somebody.	'[Feeling soothed is]... the feeling of being the object or receiver of care... which is comforting with a calming effect' (Female, 30)
Being taken care of like a baby	4	Feeling soothed means being taken care of like a baby.	'[Feeling soothed is being]... reminded of good things in the world.' (Female, 27)
			'[Feeling soothed is] swaddled like a baby.' (Female, 56)
			'[Feeling soothed is] relaxed, calm, chilled. A baby being soothed by its parent.' (Female, 22)
			'[Feeling soothed is] feeling calm and relaxed, usually interpersonal – e.g. parent soothing a child...' (Female, 27)

Being touched	1	Feeling soothed means being touched.	'[Feeling soothed is] being touched, heard, understood, accepted.' (Female, 47)
Being hugged	2	Feeling soothed means being hugged.	'[Feeling soothed is calmed or made to feel better when upset/stressed, distressed/anxious – hugged, consoled.' (Female, 45)
Being heard	1	Feeling soothed means one's voice is being heard.	'[Feeling soothed is] being touched, heard, understood, accepted.' (Female, 47)
Being understood	1	Feeling soothed means being understood,	'[Feeling soothed is] being touched, heard, understood, accepted.' (Female, 47)
Being accepted	2	Feeling soothed means one is being accepted.	'[Feeling soothed is] being touched, heard, understood, accepted.' (Female, 47)
Being distracted from distress	1	Feeling soothed means being distracted from distress.	'[Feeling soothed is] a distraction from distress or simply a pleasant moment on its own.' (Female, 29)

**Category 3:
Physical sensations**

Explicit statement about the physical comfort involved when people interpret the meaning of 'soothe'

Tenderness	5	Feeling soothed means feeling gentle, soft and tender.	'[Feeling soothed is] calm, softness, no agitation, care, comfort, relaxed and open.' (Female, 36) 'Feeling soothed brings to mind feelings of peace, warmth, quiet, a certain stillness even in movement, a feeling of being anchored and of
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			being cared for, of tenderness.’ (Female, 46)
			‘[Feeling soothed is] gentled, calmed with affection...’ (Male, 44)
Lightness	2	Feeling soothed means feeling the lightness of the body.	‘[Feeling soothed is] feeling relaxed and having a light body.’ (Female, 30)
Moist	1	Feeling soothed means feeling moisturised.	‘[Feeling soothed is] moist.’ (Female, did not mention age)
Colour	1	Feeling soothed means looking at a particular colour.	‘[Feeling soothed is] silence, colour blue, away from people, city peripheries, good smell in the air - good, water-infused fresh smell.’ (Male, 26)
Putting cream onto the mind	1	Feeling soothed means putting cream onto the mind.	‘[Feeling soothed is] a sense of being calmed down and distress reducing. It brings to mind feeling warm – like putting cream on skin to reduce inflammation and redness, only for your mind.’ (Female, 27)
Lying down	1	Feeling soothed means lying down.	‘[Feeling soothed is] relaxed, lying down, no worries.’ (Male, did not mention age)
Physical pleasure	3	Feeling soothed means feeling physically comfortable.	‘If I feel soothed I feel relaxed, my mind is at ease and I am physically comfortable.’ (Female, 23)

Coding frame 2: How is the feeling of soothe cultivated in everyday life contexts?

Code-name	n	Example
Category 1: Venturing out in nature	89	
		<p>'[I was] out walking on a country lane. A number of kittens and cats appeared from farm buildings, two came to say hello. [I was soothed by] the quietness of the lane, bird song and amused at the playfulness of the youngest kittens. [I was] concerned that they might be in danger if a car came along the lane, but mostly relaxed by the innocence and sweetness of animals.'</p> <p>(Female, 46)</p>
		<p>'[I felt a sense of] intense calmness and awesome feeling [when] standing at the very front of the ship, in the middle of any ocean, on a clear, but moonless night, and looking up at the vastness of the universe. [I was soothed by the] flying fish, dolphins, motion of the waves, sunrises, sunsets, the silence of the ocean with only the sound of the waves the ship made.'</p> <p>(Male, 62)</p>
Feeling calm and warm when being mindful at the surrounding nature	82	<p>'[I was] going to work, getting out of my car and the sun was shining. [I felt soothed when I] breathed the fresh air, looked at the daffodils and heard [the] birds singing. [I was also made soothe when taking] deep breath and pause for the moment.'</p> <p>(Female, 60)</p>
		<p>'[I was] sitting in the garden very early in the morning, just after dawn. The only sound was the birds in the bushes, and there were small rabbits in the garden eating the flowers. I could smell the fresh coffee that I was drinking. [I felt] a feeling of belonging and personal satisfaction emphasized the calmness of the surroundings – a new day, a new start.'</p> <p>(Male, 49)</p>
		<p>'Whilst travelling I visited the Mongolian steppes... I was surrounded by mountains, glacial rocks and valleys... as far as the eye could see... I walked alone and climbed up a large rock pile to watch the sunset. Then I climbed down again and watched the full moon rise red over</p>

the mountains. The only sounds were a faint hum from the camp and the crickets and wind in the grass. [I felt a] total sense of freedom. It was utterly beautiful and unspoiled by man. [I was] in awe and amazed as the moon rose... [I felt] content... This is one of my very favourite memories and always makes me feel relaxed.’
(Female, 30)

‘[I was] on a cruise boat going down the Yangtze River in China... [I was soothed by] the smell of the water and feel... as it was quite misty. There were beautiful towering cliffs either side of us, some of which had monkeys running up and down, on others you could see waterfalls coming down to the main river or some steep winding paths with local people drawing carts on. Sometimes you could hear them calling to each other above the noise of the river. My partner and I [were] holding hands as we went through, just in awe of what we were seeing.’
(Female, 30)

‘[I was surrounded by] a loch, countryside, a hill and my partner. [I was soothed by] the sunshine, warmth on [my] face, watching the water/wildlife on the loch, dogs playing around the loch, holding hands/holding my partner, sounds of birds, children playing/families around. [I was also soothed by] closing my eyes and feeling the sun on my face.
(Female, 25)

‘[I was watching] sunrise on the Malvern Hills in January. [I felt soothed by the] silence, apart from odd bird singing, no one around, cold crisp air, but beautiful sunlight, no bees no flies... stillness but with the odd rabbit hopping past. Down below the town was covered in mist – just felt calming, beautiful and perfect.’
(Female, 36)

‘I was out walking in the hills near my home. There was silence, beautiful scenery, sunshine. [I was soothed by] the solitude. [I felt] peaceful and calm.’
(Female, 49)

Feeling relaxed when there are no other people around (tranquillity)

8

Feeling pleased to be able to 'own' and 'capture' the moment	2	<p>'I was at my favourite beach [looking at the] sand, sea and reflected lights. I felt calm, appreciation and soothed because I had a camera with me to create an image.'</p> <p>(Female, 58)</p> <p>'[I was] at a park with a loch. [There were] trees, light and reflections. [I was] walking and [felt] peaceful and soothed again having a camera to create images with.'</p> <p>(Female, 58)</p>
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Category 2: Being in a familiar surrounding	71
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Feeling affiliated, safe and contented with familiar people in a familiar environment	53	<p>'[I was] at home watching a favourite film. [My] familiarity with the film [made me feel that] there was nothing to fear.'</p> <p>(Female, 56)</p> <p>'[I was] in bed. [It was] dark and quiet. [I felt soothed by] feeling the warmth from bed covers and electric blanket [and] touch from hugging [the] teddy bear.'</p> <p>(Female, 28)</p> <p>'[I was] at home, reading. [I felt soothed by] the low side lighting in living room, house very quiet, husband nearby. [I felt] content.'</p> <p>(Female, 30)</p> <p>'[I was in] Maggie's Centre meeting room for my art class. [It was a] closed group with just a few people who had been attending for 8 weeks... Familiar people in similar situation.'</p> <p>(Female, 44)</p> <p>[I felt soothed when I was] being with people who accepted me because we were all autistic.</p> <p>(Female, 35)</p> <p>'[I was] at home, comfortable, with my partner. [I was soothed by] soft things, gentle sounds, nothing extreme or harsh. [I was also soothed</p>
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			<p>by] my partner's presence. [I felt a sense of] calmness and relaxation.'</p> <p>(Female, 26)</p>
			<p>'[I felt soothed when I was] lying on my sofa cuddling with my toddler son. Skin on skin... The soft warmth of his body.'</p> <p>(Male, 44)</p>
			<p>'I was at home. [I was soothed by] my cat's fur under my fingers, warmth of her sitting on my knee... [I felt] relaxed.'</p> <p>(Female, 34)</p>
			<p>'[I had] my cat lying asleep on my bed. I saw the cat relaxed and I felt her soft fur. [I felt soothed by] the peacefulness of the room. [I was also] calm and grateful.'</p> <p>(Female, 49)</p>
Feeling affiliated, relieved and connected with animals/pets	9		<p>'[I was] at home, watching the cats sleep, feeling their warmth. [I felt a sense of] comfort, allegiance, a feeling of space away from the world.'</p> <p>(Female, 46)</p>
			<p>'[I was] at home working. I saw my cats sleeping on a bed. I touched and smelt their fur. [I was soothed by] their warmth, feeling secure, happy and comforted.'</p> <p>(Female, 46)</p>
			<p>'[I was] sitting on the sofa at home, letting go of responsibilities and reading what I like. [I felt soothed by] the absence of noise. [I felt] happy and satisfied.'</p> <p>(Male, 34)</p>
Feeling engaged and focused on a task without being disturbed	9		<p>'[I was] sitting reading a book under the sun. [I felt soothed by the] birds, warmth and pages of the book. [I felt a sense of] enjoyment of the story and reading it without being disturbed.'</p> <p>(Female, 50)</p>
			<p>'[I was] at home, hearing my favourite piece of music on classic FM, sitting on the chair and listening properly not doing anything else. [I felt] happy, content and peaceful.'</p> <p>(Female, 60)</p>

Category 3: Being solitary and detached

90

Feeling warm to be surrounded only by the nature

80

'[I was] sitting in the garden very early in the morning, just after dawn. The only sound was the birds in the bushes, and there were small rabbits in the garden eating the flowers. I could smell the fresh coffee that I was drinking. [I felt] a feeling of belonging and personal satisfaction emphasized the calmness of the surroundings – a new day, a new start.'
(Male, 49)

'I was on holiday in Scotland, rowing in a boat on the loch on a fine day. The landscape around the loch, the sun on the water, the sound of the oars in the water, the sturdy feel of the boat and the warmth of the sun soothed me. [I felt a sense of] peace, stillness, a feeling of slowing down, a feeling of timelessness [and] happiness.'
(Female, 46)

'Whilst travelling I visited the Mongolian steppes... I was surrounded by mountains, glacial rocks and valleys... as far as the eye could see... I walked alone and climbed up a large rock pile to watch the sunset. Then I climbed down again and watched the full moon rise red over the mountains. The only sounds were a faint hum from the camp and the crickets and wind in the grass. [I felt a] total sense of freedom. It was utterly beautiful and unspoiled by man. [I was] in awe and amazed as the moon rose... [I felt] content... This is one of my very favourite memories and always makes me feel relaxed.'
(Female, 30)

Feeling relaxed when there are no other people around (tranquillity)

8

'[I was watching] sunrise on the Malvern Hills in January. [I felt soothed by the] silence, apart from odd bird singing, no one around, cold crisp air, but beautiful sunlight, no bees no flies... stillness but with the odd rabbit hopping past. Down below the town was covered in mist – just felt calming, beautiful and perfect.'
(Female, 36)

		<p>'I was in the royal botanic garden. I was surrounded by the beautifully landscaped grounds. [I felt soothed when] I saw a rich living collection of green plants and smelt the great fresh air in the tranquil garden. I was there alone. Maybe this helped me to concentrate on feeling and enjoying the beautiful sense. [I felt] happy, relaxed and delighted at that time.'</p> <p>(Female, 24)</p>
		<p>'I was out walking in the hills near my home. There was silence, beautiful scenery, sunshine. [I was soothed by] the solitude. [I felt] peaceful and calm.'</p> <p>(Female, 49)</p>
Feeling calm and grateful witnessing someone/something is cared for	2	<p>'I was walking home after work. I saw a garden filled with beautiful flowers and a vegetable plot that was clearly well tended. It was spotting with rain and there was the metallic smell of new rain on pavements. I felt calm after a day of work and enjoyment in the evidence of someone's care and love for their garden.'</p> <p>(Female, 46)</p>
		<p>'I was walking through a park and saw spring flowers, daffodils, crocuses and trees... I felt relaxed and pleased that we have well maintained and protected park spaces.'</p> <p>(Male, 43)</p>

Category 4: Being affiliated and connected	75
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Feeling affiliated, safe and contented with familiar people/pets in a familiar environment	54	<p>'[I was] coming home from work. [I had] a long hug from husband. Seeing his smile before hugged. [I was soothed by] his warmth and steadiness of pressure in his hug, familiar smell of his skin and deodorant.'</p> <p>(Female, 45)</p>
		<p>'[I was] being with partner at home. [I felt soothed by] being cared for with a sense of protection. Calm home, little activity. [I was also soothed by] someone's support, embrace. [I felt] happy and loved.'</p> <p>(Female, 26)</p>

		<p>'[I felt soothed when I was] being with people who accepted me because we were all autistic.' (Female, 35)</p>
		<p>'I was at home in our bedroom with my husband... I was laying down and we had an intimate conversation. I was listening to my husband talk about his feelings. I felt loved, joyful, peaceful and empowered.' (Female, 31)</p>
Feeling connected, encouraged and secure through interpersonal conversations	12	<p>'[I was] on the phone with my mum – heard her voice. [I was] talking through difficulties / things I'd been thinking about and soothed to have someone listen.' (Female, 27)</p> <p>'[I was] talking calmly... and the feeling that my family is there for me when I am upset made me feel soothed.' (Female, 30)</p> <p>'[I was] going to pick up my dog. [I was soothed by] my friend's embrace [and the] soft jacket material. [My friend's] low, soft voice, long pauses in speaking... and attentive listening [also made me feel soothed].' (Female, 33)</p> <p>'I was in my warm beautiful home with my dog on my lap warm soft and calming. [I knew] I was safe and well in the moment, just here. A feeling of gratitude.' (Female, 44)</p>
Feeling affiliated, relieved and connected with animals/pets	9	<p>'[I was] at home with my cat's fur under my fingers, [feeling] the warmth of her sitting on my knee, music playing and relaxed.' (Female, 34)</p> <p>'I was at home working. I saw my cats sleeping on a bed. I touched and smelt their fur. Their warmth [soothed me]. I felt secure, happy and comforted.' (Female, 46)</p>

Category 5: Physical and mental relaxation

47

Feeling mentally soothed when the body is relaxed

22

'[I felt soothed] when I was swimming in the water, being able to move easily (I have arthritis and this can be hard and painful sometimes)... [I felt] happy, relived, free and excited to] be able to move easily and without pain, and feeling happy to be able to exercise and use my muscles.'

(Female, 27)

'[Soothe was]... the feeling of being pleasantly tired after a run [in the countryside]. Peace, connectedness.'

(Female, 33)

'The lady [in the massage] took my feet and wrapped them in a warm towel and held them... that moment was extremely soothing and moving - such delicate care for my feet. [I felt] relieved, relaxed, safe, comfortable and connected.'

(Female, 36)

'[I was] at the end of a long jog/run in the countryside. [I was soothed by] the trees, a sense of being out in the open, the feeling of being pleasantly tired after a run. [I also felt] peaceful and connected.'

(Female, 33)

Feeling engaged and focused on a task without being disturbed

9

'[I was] at home, looking at the view over the harvested fields with the daylight fading. [I felt soothed when looking at] the autumnal colours being vibrant in the low sunlight, the fields having been harvested with the bales casting long shadows and the fresh breeze coming through the open window. [I was also soothed by] the music played in the background. [I felt] happy and a sense of wistfulness in understanding the passage of time.'

(Male, 49)

'I listened to a short mindfulness audio tape which helped me to focus on my breath... it helped me to focus on an image... through visualization... it soothed me so that I could take the next step from a place of calm. I was [originally] shocked [because of an unexpected

		news] but then got a sense of strength and calm after listening to the audio tape.’ (Female, 50)
		‘I was indoor in my bedroom on my bed sitting upright listening to a guided meditation... I had my eyes closed, heard the song to start meditation and then the relaxing tones of the meditation instructor. [I] concentrated on my breathing and listened to the tone of the voice instructing us... [I felt] acceptance of where I was at.’ (Female, 43)
Feeling relaxed when there are no other people around (tranquillity)	8	‘I was in the royal botanic garden. I was surrounded by the beautifully landscaped grounds. [I felt soothed when] I saw a rich living collection of green plants and smelt the great fresh air in the tranquil garden. I was there alone. Maybe this helped me to concentrate on feeling and enjoying the beautiful sense. [I felt] happy, relaxed and delighted at that time.’ (Female, 24)
		‘I was out walking in the hills near my home. There was silence, beautiful scenery, sunshine. [I was soothed by] the solitude. [I felt] peaceful and calm.’ (Female, 49)
		‘[I was] in bed, relaxed and with music on. I listened to my favourite style of music after completing a lot of my work. [I was soothed when] knowing that all my work and tasks were done. I was both happy and optimistic.’ (Male, did not mention age)
Feeling calm in a tranquil surrounding after finishing a task	3	‘[I was] at my house in the living room. My small puppy [was] laying on my shoulder sleeping while I was watching TV. [I felt soothed by] being alongside my partner, being comfortable and warm, knowing all the jobs were done for the day. [I felt] content, happy, relaxed and loved (for the puppy!).’ (Female, 29)
		‘I was at home in my hall. As I closed the front door after my commute home from work, I could feel the carpet beneath my feet, I could see the garden through the hall window. There was no sound from TV or kitchen. There was no

traffic outside, the weather was very still. Stillness all around me inside the house and outside. [I felt soothed when knowing] I had nothing urgent that I had to do in relation to work or business. I had already decided to do nothing except prepare dinner.'

(Female, 48)

'[I felt soothed] that morning in the kitchen when my brain was still engaged after Fri meeting digesting the info and thinking about the vision and strategy for the new project. I saw pictures of what I can deliver and understood my colleague's approach. I felt at peace afterwards and disengages my brain after doing a good job.'

(Female, 41)

Feeling empowered, engaged and hopeful when there is a mission in hand

2

'I was working in my garden. [I was soothed by] the plants I was planting in pots, the feel and smell of the potting compost as I packed it round the new plants... [I was also soothed by] the warmth of the sun on my back, the quiet and ability to focus on the job in hand without distractions.'

(Female, 62)

Appendix: Poem based on the current research findings

THE OFFERING

Before we were born we knew only darkness
and the lap-lap-lapping of moonless tides drawn
and released from a woman's heart.

Since then, it seems we live in exile.

And yet, there are moments when we accept
the ground beneath our feet will not give way,
the sky above will shelter,
the sea bring reassurance,
and other people - those wayward stars whose gravities
criss-cross into our own - might strengthen us and comfort.

Such. Fleeting. Moments.

So when we can, let's remember who we are
and where we come from -
and make this memory our offering in return.

And share, and soothe.

*A poem inspired by Project Soothe
Ron Butlin*