

A User Guide to: Using the SUDS Scale to Measure the Intensity of Feelings

Author: Luisa Dal Molin

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Copyright: This article and its content are based on a scale developed by Joseph Wolpe in 1969. Versions of the SUDS scale are widely used in cognitive-behavioural treatments, especially for anxiety disorders. This version is adapted by Inner Actions.

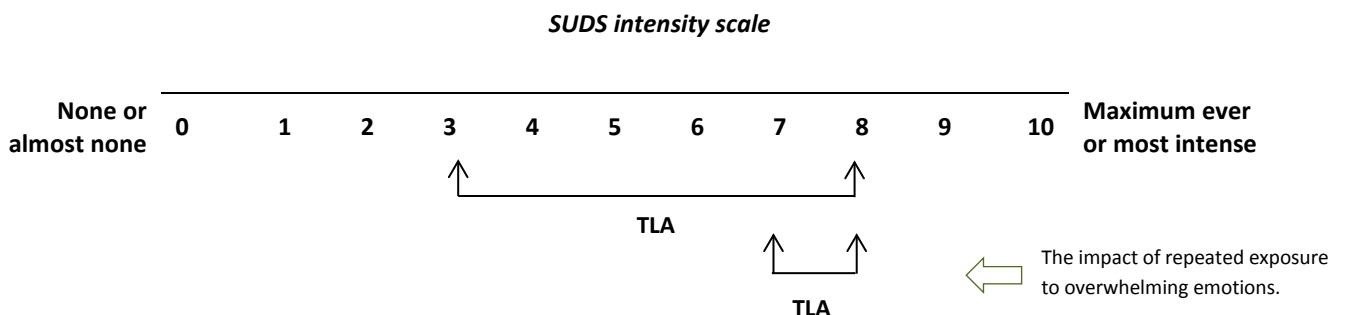
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Wolpe, Josphe, *The Practice of Behavior Therapy*, New York, Pergamon Press, 1969

The SUDS Scale

The Subjective Units of Distress Scale, or SUDS scale for short, is a tool for measuring the intensity of your feelings and other internal experiences, such as anxiety, anger, agitation, stress or other painful feelings. These experiences are often associated with the release of adrenaline in the body. We want to experience some level of adrenal arousal during the day as it galvanises us to do the things we need to do; e.g., get tasks done, meet deadlines. It is also part of the excitement we feel when we are watching a thriller, or doing something we really enjoy.

In the following example, a SUDS scale ranging from 0 to 10 has been used.



You can use any range that fits for you, e.g., 1 to 100, 0 to 25, or 0 to 5. The scale just needs to allow you to measure the intensity of feelings from none or almost none, right through to the highest or most intense level of the feeling you could possibly have. It doesn't matter whether you have ever reached the highest intensity, or if you can't remember a time when the intensity of a particular emotion was low for you. By using this scale regularly to measure the feeling, and with regular mindfulness practice, the intensity of the feelings will shift.

Tolerable Level of Arousal (TLA)

This refers to the level of adrenal arousal which you can tolerate and still remain mindful and present; that is, you can still address what's happening around you (or inside your body) and to think through ways of responding to these events. Ideally we want to stay within a tolerable level of adrenaline-induced arousal; this is generally between 3 and 7-8 out of 10 (i.e., 3 to 7/10 or 8/10).

Being under 3/10 can be associated with being bored, unless you are relaxing in a banana lounge by the beach, resting on the lounge at home, or doing anything else you find relaxing. Staying at this level for long periods of time can start to feel very uncomfortable, especially if you have very little choice about the circumstances.

When you reach 7/10 or 8/10, your brain starts to become overwhelmed and you can slip into habitual ways of coping. Five common coping strategies that people often fall into when they become overwhelmed are:

- **Top down management.** Here, the person shuts out or minimises their awareness of their feelings and other body sensations, and goes into rational thinking. While this can be a useful strategy in an emergency or crisis, it is not helpful to spend large chunks of time using this strategy.
- **Experiencing an intense emotion** which seems to take over; e.g., 'seeing red' with anger or having a panic attack. When feelings become this intense, the person's capacity to think clearly is greatly reduced, which is why it is not helpful to try and reason with a person who is 'seeing red', or to tell someone who is experiencing a panic attack to just calm down.
- **Circular thinking**, where one or several thoughts go around and around the person's mind and they struggle to think clearly or to work out how to address the triggering event or situation.
- **Agitation.** Here, the person may be literally pacing, or feel like he or she is pacing inside.
- **Dissociation**, which can range from going blank and not being able to think for a couple of minutes, feeling like you are looking out onto the world or like you are seeing yourself go through the motions, through to losing time.

When we have gone beyond our TLA we are on an emotional roller coaster. At this point, we need to take care of ourselves until our feelings come down.

The more often we flip beyond our TLA and become overwhelmed, the more our brain adapts and becomes primed to escalations in arousal (or stress, anxiety, etc.). Our base line shifts so that it takes less and less for us to become overwhelmed. We can start to feel chronically stressed or anxious.

The more we practice using the SUDS scale to gauge the intensity of our feelings, the better we will become at noticing our feelings when they are less intense, and the easier it will be to take action to both regulate our feelings, and to address the events that have prompted our feeling experience.

Gradual Exposure to Intense Emotions

You can also use the SUDS scale to gradually 'expose' yourself to intense emotions and avoid becoming overwhelmed. A brief summary of a process of gradual exposure to intense emotions is outlined below:

- Allow yourself to feel the emotion, making sure that you don't go over 7/10 or 8/10. The [Mindfulness of Emotions](#)¹ practice can be helpful here.
- When you do start to move towards this intensity of feeling, mindfully distract yourself. The [Observing Through Your Senses](#) exercise can be useful. Alternatively, you could make yourself a cup of tea or get a glass of water to drink mindfully, or listen to some soothing music.
NOTE: it is advisable to have a list of 'mindful distractions' ready to refer to before starting this process.
- Come back to the feeling when the intensity of the feeling has reduced, (e.g., down to 5/10 or 6/10).
- Keep practising exposing yourself to the uncomfortable feelings until their intensity comes right down and they no longer feel overwhelming.

¹ The Mindfulness of Emotions and Observing Through Your Senses guides are available from the [Inner Actions](#) web site.