DISTRESS SCALE

WHAT IS SUDS?

SUDS stands for “Subjective Units of Distress.” It’s a way of giving your distress a number from 0 to 100, where 0 means completely calm and 100 means the most upset you have ever been. Putting a number on how you feel helps you notice changes, track progress over time, and tell your therapist exactly how hard something feels.

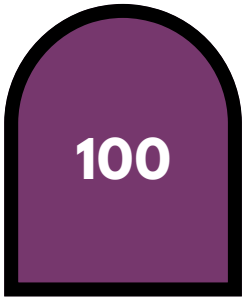
The scale is subjective because the same situation can feel very different to different people. Imagine you and a friend are both pushed into a deep pool. If your friend can’t swim, they might feel a 100. If you’re a confident swimmer, you might feel close to 0. Neither rating is wrong. Your number reflects your experience.

STEP 1: NOTICE WHAT YOU’RE FEELING

Anxious	Angry	Sad	Ashamed	Overwhelmed	Calm
Nervous	Irritated	Down	Embarrassed	Stressed	Relaxed
Worried	Frustrated	Lonely	Guilty	Exhausted	Content
Panicked	Resentful	Hopeless	Self-conscious	Stuck	Grounded

You can choose an emotion that’s not on this list, too. It’s also common to feel more than one at once.

STEP 2: RATE YOUR DISTRESS FROM 0–100



MAXIMUM

Body: Intense shaking, sweating, vomiting; **Mind**: The worst you have ever felt; completely overwhelmed and unable to communicate; **Others see**: Someone who needs immediate support.



SEVERE

Body: Racing heart, struggling to breathe, heavy sweating, nausea; **Mind**: "I can't stand this." It's hard to focus on anything else. Dissociation or feeling numb. **Others see**: Fleeing or lashing out. You might look a bit frozen or without emotion.



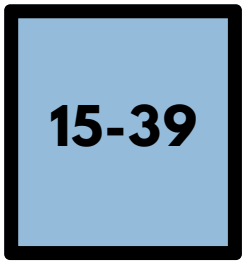
HIGH

Body: Shaky, hard to breathe, stomachache, headache; **Mind**: "I need to get out of here." Staying in control takes a lot of effort; **Others see**: Clear distress; you may want to leave or avoid the situation.



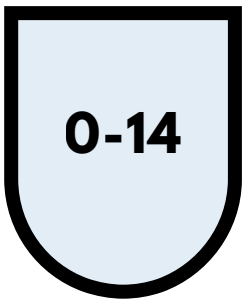
MODERATE

Body: Faster heartbeat, tight jaw or shoulders, starting to sweat; **Mind**: "I'm definitely upset." Unpleasant thoughts are hard to ignore but still manageable with effort; **Others see**: Visible tension, irritability, or trouble talking things through.



LOW

Body: A little muscle tension; breathing shifts slightly; **Mind**: "Something is bothering me a little." You notice it if you check in with yourself; **Others see**: Usually nothing, unless they're paying close attention.



NONE

Body: Relaxed, steady heart rate and breathing; **Mind**: "I feel calm and at ease."; **Others see**: Nothing. There are no outward signs.

STEP 3: BUILD YOUR OWN SCALE

Your scale works best when it's anchored to your own life. With your therapist, fill in a situation that matches each level for you.

- 100 = _____
- 75 = _____
- 50 = _____
- 25 = _____
- 0 = _____

Example:

- 100 = the worst moment of a past trauma
- 75 = an unexpected call from your child's school
- 50 = being called in to explain a mistake at work
- 25 = taking the bus across town
- 0 = watching TV in bed

STEP 4: USE YOUR NUMBER

- 70–100 (high): Use your strongest skills and reach out to your therapist or a support person.
- 39–69 (moderate): Try a coping skill (see below), or if you're doing a planned exposure, keep going and keep rating.
- 0–38 (low): Notice it and carry on. Checking in now builds the habit.

If you're ever thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) or call 911.

COPING SKILLS

- Slow your breathing: in for 4, out for 6
- Ground yourself: name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you can touch
- Tense and release your muscles, one group at a time
- Splash cool water on your face
- Step away for a short walk
- Text or call someone you trust

STEP 5: CHECK YOUR NUMBER AGAIN

1. **Notice your body**: What has changed physically?
2. **Notice your thoughts**: What is going through your mind now?
3. **Re-rate**: What's your number now?
4. **Compare:** Did it go down, stay the same, or go up?

During exposure work, it's normal for your number to rise before it falls. Staying with the feeling and watching it change is how the work happens. If your number isn't moving, try another skill or bring it to your next session.

WHY IT'S HELPFUL

- Clearer communication: "I'm at a 60" tells your therapist much more than "I'm stressed."
- Shows progress: Watching a situation drop from 70 to 30 over several weeks is real evidence that treatment is working.
- Builds awareness: Regular check-ins help you catch distress early, before it peaks.
- Guides your next step: Your number helps you decide when to use a skill, when to keep going, and when to reach out.

PRACTICE SPACE

Date	Situation	Emotion(s)	SUDS before	What I did	SUDS after