

Four elements of SIFTing

sensation image feeling thought

In the SIFT exercise, the four elements of body sensation, image, emotional feeling, and thought are layered together to create an integrated physiological and psychological experience of ventral vagal engagement. There are two ways to find an experience for the SIFT exercise. One way is to listen for a story of safety and connection during the therapy session and choose that moment for the exercise. A second way is to decide to engage in the SIFT exercise and have your client actively retrieve a ventral vagal memory to use.

- Once the experience to SIFT has been agreed on, have your client tell the story of the memory and, together, listen for the element (sensation, image, feeling, thought) that feels most alive and accessible to begin the SIFT exercise. It doesn't matter which element begins the SIFTing process. With the first element in place, the remaining layers are added one element at a time.
- As your client shares each element, repeat the description, offering their words back to them so they can receive the experience. As each successive element is added, build the layers of the SIFT, repeating the entire sequence each time. In this way, you are holding the SIFT with your client, voicing back to them their own rich description of each layer and building their ventral vagal experience.
- When the four layers are complete, narrate the full SIFT for your client, inviting them to rest in the completed SIFT and let it fill their body and mind.
- Ask your client to give their SIFT a title as a way of easily reconnecting with the new resource, and write the title and layers on a card for the client to take with them .

Peter Levine (2010) developed the idea of using pendulation (oscillating between) as a way to safely and intentionally move between activation and ease. Once a SIFT has been created, a pendulation process exercises the vagal brake, strengthening the SIFT's availability as a resource.

- Help your client bring the SIFT to life by narrating the four elements.
- Then ask your client to identify an experience that will bring a “neural challenge” to exercise

their vagal brake. This first test should be a small challenge—just enough to bring a bit of autonomic dysregulation.

- Your client moves from the ventral vagal state of the SIFT into increased influence of their sympathetic or dorsal vagal system, putting attention on the identified challenge and telling you when they feel the autonomic state shift.
- Help your client engage their vagal brake and bring a return to ventral vagal regulation by recalling the SIFT.
- Repeat the pendulation process in a different test experience with either the same degree of neural challenge or a slightly stronger one depending on your client's response. It is important that your client does not move into a fully mobilized sympathetic state or dorsal vagal collapse. The goal is to successfully release and reengage the vagal brake and build your client's confidence in their capacity to return to regulation. In this exercise, the event identified as the autonomic challenge is not addressed. It is simply used as a way to strengthen the SIFT. The exercise is about increasing ventral vagal flexibility through exercising the vagal brake.
- If your client has a hard time returning to the regulation of their SIFT, use your Social Engagement System to send stronger cues of safety (increased use of prosody, use of proximity, facial expression).
- At the end of the exercise, review the SIFT and pendulation experience, bringing explicit attention to your client's vagal braking capacities and their ability to successfully move between states.

This exercise is adapted from Dan Siegel's use of SIFT to identify the activities of the mind and move into a process of discernment. Discernment is a way of dis-identification, and used in this way SIFTing is a process of separating. SIFTing can also be used as a process of incorporating. Using SIFTing to savor a ventral vagal experience is a process of bringing the elements of sensation, image, feeling, and thought together, thoroughly mixing, and creating a resource that can be returned to as desired.