



SIFTing as a Resource

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 to SIFT. 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 where you begin the SIFTing process. When the starting point has been identified, begin the SIFT process by repeating your client's statement for that element. The remaining layers are then added one element at a time.

As your client shares each element, repeat the description, offering your client's 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 your client to take with them.

Once a SIFT has been created, the next step is to test it and strengthen its availability as a resource. Peter Levine 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, you can use a pendulation process to strengthen the SIFT's availability as a resource. Clients naturally tend to turn toward one of the elements of the SIFT, identifying it as the easiest pathway to engage. The first step in exploring the use of pendulation is to identify which of the four layers is the easiest for your client to activate as they begin to recreate the SIFT.

- 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. Your client may choose to tell you what the challenge is but it is not necessary. In this exercise, the autonomic challenge is only used as a way to exercise the vagal brake and increase ventral vagal flexibility. 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.
- As soon as your client identifies their state shift, help them return to ventral vagal regulation by recalling the SIFT. Begin by describing the element your client identified as the easiest pathway back, and then add the other layers until the full SIFT has been re-created and your client identifies a return to ventral vagal regulation.
- 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 doesn't 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.

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.

While the SIFT is not used to resolve a challenging experience it can be used to explore bringing more ventral vagal regulation to an upcoming event that a client identifies as distressing. Clients can create many SIFTs over the course of therapy. By writing each on an index card, a client has a simple, accessible way to remember and reconnect to their SIFTing resources. My practice is to use fluorescent index cards, which have proved to be easy for my clients to keep track of and make a colorful stack over time. With attention to reciprocity, I write the SIFT for my clients and hand it to them, adding my own ventral vagal energy.