

Introduction to SUDS

In order to find out how much discomfort or anxiety certain situations cause you, you and your therapist will use a SUDS scale. This 0 – 100 scale stands for Subjective Units of Discomfort. A SUDS rating of 100 indicates that you are very upset, the most you have ever been in your life. A 0 indicates no discomfort at all. Usually when people say they have a SUDS level of 100, they may be experiencing physical reactions, such as sweaty palms, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, feelings of dizziness, and intense anxiety. So a rating of 100 is really extreme. Because people are different, a situation that makes one person feel a SUDS level of 100 may not be that bad for someone else. This is why we call it a subjective scale. For example, imagine that you and a friend are standing near a deep pool and someone pushes you both in the water. If your friend cannot swim, he may feel a SUDS level of 100. However, if you can swim, or are not afraid of deep water, you may feel a level of zero.

Here is a guide to help you think about how these numbers feel

SUDS	Distress Intensity		Examples
0 – 12:	None		
		Physical	Relaxed with normal heart rate and breathing
		Thoughts/ Feelings	"I am relaxed, peaceful, total relief, and serene." Feeling basically good. With special effort you might feel something unpleasant but not much.
		Behaviors	No signs of outward distress displayed. Other cannot see this.
13 – 37	Low		
		Physical	Slight increase in muscle tension and changes in breathing rate
		Thoughts/ Feelings	"I am a little upset" Generally not noticeable to yourself unless you pay attention to your feelings and then realize, "Yes, there is something bothering me." Worried, bothered to the point that you notice it

		Behaviors	Others may notice changes if they attend to this especially. Generally no large outward changes.
38 – 67	Moderate	Physical	Changes in breathing, increase in heart rate, starting to sweat, increased muscle tension in back, jaw, etc.
		Thoughts/ Feelings	"I am definitely upset." This is at a level that you cannot easily ignore an unpleasant thought. Unpleasant feelings are still manageable with some effort.
		Behaviors	Jaw clenching, looking agitated, increased difficulty communicating with others. Others notice strain and may ask about this or react.
68 – 87	High	Physical	Shaky, breathing difficulties, stomach pain, headaches, back pain
		Thoughts/ Feelings	"I am going to panic" "I need to get out of here" Begin thinking that something ought to be done about the way you feel now. You can maintain control only with great effort.
		Behaviors	Escaping from the situation. Other people see the distress in you.
88-99	Severe	Physical	Very fast heartbeat, breathing difficulties, sweating, vomiting
		Thoughts/ Feelings	"I am freaking out." "I cannot bear this." "I am going to die." To the point that it almost feels unbearable and you are getting scared of what you might do. Unable to focus on anything else Losing control of your emotions with blind panic.
		Behaviors	Actively escaping the area Freezing Fighting
100	Maximum	Physical	Severe shaking, vomiting, severe sweating, headache

Thoughts/ Feelings	Completely unable to communicate, feeling unbearably bad, out of control as in a nervous breakdown, inconsolable
Behaviors	Curled up in a corner, others calling 911 or other emergency response

In order to make this SUDS scale fit you and your fears, you and your therapist will need to find out which situations represent different levels on the scale. Someone else's example may help.

0 = Watching TV in bed, very relaxed

25 = Taking a bus across town

50 = Making a mistake and being asked to meet your boss to explain it

75 = Getting a phone call from his child's teacher

100 = During the worst moment of the trauma