

# The soothing effect of images: A qualitative mediation study with young people.

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## Abstract

**Background:** Scientific evidence suggests that externally presented images (EPIs), such as pictures or photographs, can be an effective therapeutic tool for individuals who struggle with visualisation exercises. However, research investigating the psychological mechanisms underlying the soothing experience of externally presented images has been limited thus far. This holds true especially for young people. To support future research efforts, a theoretical conceptualisation of the soothing experience in young people with a qualitative evidence base may be helpful in developing effective hypotheses that can be assessed in quantitative studies.

**Aims:** This study sought to explore potential psychological mechanisms underlying the soothing experience for young people when presented with soothing EPIs. Specifically, the study aimed to identify variables that can be hypothesised as potentially mediating or moderating the soothing experience in young people.

**Methods:** Four focus groups with secondary school students were conducted. Participants were presented with 20 images from the Project Soothe gallery ([www.projectsoothe.com/gallery](http://www.projectsoothe.com/gallery)) and asked to discuss their experiences for images that elicited a soothing response as well as for images that did not. The data was qualitatively examined using thematic analysis within an essentialist epistemological framework. A total of 30 students (73.3% female; 26.7% male aged 12 to 16) participated in the study.

**Results:** The analysis yielded five themes: (1) The ‘soothing experience’ phenomenologically explores the emotional qualities that constitute soothing; (2) ‘individual differences’ relays the importance of personal attitudes, experiences and memories in the processes underlying soothing; (3) ‘levels of processing’ describes the implicit and explicit processes that interact with individual differences to produce two states identified as necessary conditions in the soothing experience; (4) ‘feeling safe’ is an emotional quality in the perceived absence of threat that constitutes the first precondition to feeling soothed; and (5) ‘being positively engaged’ is facilitated by positive stimuli that retain the viewers’ sustained attention and constitutes the second precondition to feeling soothed. These interconnected themes embody this paper’s hypothesised theoretical framework of the EPI soothing processes – the ‘EPI Soothing System’.

**Conclusions:** Our thematic analysis suggests that two preconditions must be met to facilitate soothing: *feeling safe* and *being positively engaged*. We stipulate that only when both conditions are met can a soothing response arise. Additionally, our analysis yielded that the lived experience of soothing is processed on multiple levels, and includes the autonomic processing system (APS), the reflective processing system (RPS), and the positive appraisal loop (PAL). Based on our preliminary analysis, we think that the relative activation of the APS and the RPS could be linked to *individual differences*, such as past experiences, salient memories, and personal attitudes. Equally, there is some indication that the PAL can be employed by means of guided memory activation, storytelling, and imagining sensory stimuli to either amplify arousal of a positively valenced soothing response or ameliorate a negatively valenced one.

Keywords: soothe; compassion; mental health; wellbeing; young people