

Distress Tolerance-Managing Intense Emotions

BHSU Counseling Center



This packet includes the following:

- ❖ Ted Talks regarding emotion management, radical acceptance and living your best life.
- ❖ Worksheets to soothe and direct emotion overload and managing your emotions so they do not manage you.
- ❖ Cognitive techniques, mindfulness, and coping skills.
- ❖ Mood chart to monitor your emotional wellbeing

Ted Talks about emotion management, radical acceptance and living your best life

You aren't at the mercy of your emotions-Your brain creates them | Lisa Feldman Barrett | TED@IBM

https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_feldman_barrett_you_aren_t_at_the_mercy_of_your_emotions_your_brain_creates_them

All it takes is ten mindful minutes | Andy Puddicombe | TEDSalon London

https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_feldman_barrett_you_aren_t_at_the_mercy_of_your_emotions_your_brain_creates_them/transcript

The gift and power of emotional courage | Susan David | TEDWomen 2017

https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_the_gift_and_power_of_emotional_courage/transcript

Distress Tolerance

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Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) distress tolerance skills address the tendency of some individuals to experience negative emotions as overwhelming and unbearable. People with a low tolerance for distress can become overwhelmed at relatively mild levels of stress, and may react with negative behaviors. Many traditional treatment approaches focus on avoiding painful situations, but in the distress tolerance module of DBT, clients learn that there will be times when pain is unavoidable and the best course is to learn to accept and tolerate distress.

A key ingredient of distress tolerance is the concept of radical acceptance. This refers to experiencing the situation and accepting the reality of it when it is something the person cannot change. By practicing radical acceptance without being judgmental or trying to fight reality, the client will be less vulnerable to intense and prolonged negative feelings. Within the distress tolerance module, there are four skill categories:

1. Distracting
2. Self-soothing
3. Improving the moment
4. Focusing on pros and cons

These skills are aimed at helping individuals cope with crisis and experience distress without avoiding it or making it worse.

Skill No. 1: Distracting

The first skill, distracting, helps clients change their focus from upsetting thoughts and emotions to more enjoyable or neutral activities. This skill is taught with the acronym

ACCEPTS:

A – is for activities and distracting oneself with healthy, enjoyable pursuits such as hobbies, exercise, and visiting with friends.

C – is for contributing and doing things to help others, through volunteering or just a thoughtful gesture.

C – is for comparing oneself to those less fortunate, finding reasons to be grateful.

E – is for emotion; identifying the current negative emotion and acting in an opposite manner, such as dancing or singing when one is feeling sad.

P – is for **pushing away**, by mentally leaving the current situation and focusing on something pleasant and unconnected to the present circumstances.

T – is for **thoughts**; diverting one's attention from the negative feelings with unrelated and neutral thoughts, such as counting items or doing a puzzle.

S – is for **sensations**, and distracting oneself with physical sensations using multiple senses, like holding an ice cube, drinking a hot beverage, or enjoying a warm foot soak.

Skill No. 2: Self-Soothing

The second skill in distress tolerance is self-soothing; clients can use the five senses to nurture themselves in a variety of ways:

1. **Vision:** Look at beautiful things such as flowers, art, a landscape, or an artistic performance.
2. **Hearing:** Listen to music, lively or soft, or enjoy the sounds of nature such as birds chirping and waves crashing. Savor the voice of a relative or friend.
3. **Smell:** Use a favorite lotion or perfume, light a scented candle, notice the scents of nature, or bake an aromatic recipe.
4. **Taste:** Enjoy a hearty meal or indulge in decadent dessert. Experiment with a new flavor or texture, and focus on the food's flavors.
5. **Touch:** Pet an animal or give someone a hug. Have a massage, rub on lotion, or snuggle up in a soft blanket.

Skill No. 3: Improving the Moment

In the third distress tolerance skill, the goal is to use positive mental imagery to improve one's current situation. The acronym for this skill is **IMPROVE**:

I – is for **imagery**, such as visualizing a relaxing scene or a successful interaction. Imagine negative feelings melting away.

M – is for creating **meaning** or purpose from a difficult situation or from pain, i.e., finding the silver lining.

P – is for **prayer**—to God or a higher power—for strength and to be open in the moment.

R – is for **relaxation**, by breathing deeply and progressively relaxing the large muscle groups. Listen to music, watch a funny television show, drink warm milk, or enjoy a neck or foot massage.

O – is for **one thing** in the moment, meaning the individual strives to remain mindful and focus on a neutral activity in the present moment.

V – is for vacation, as in taking a mental break from a challenging situation by imagining or doing something pleasant. This could also be taking a day trip, or ignoring calls and emails for a few hours.

E – is for encouragement, by talking to oneself in a positive and supportive manner to help cope with a stressful situation.

Skill No. 4: Focusing on Pros and Cons

In focusing on pros and cons, the individual is asked to list the pros and cons of tolerating the distress and of not tolerating the stress (i.e., coping through self-destructive behaviors). It can be helpful to remember the past consequences of not tolerating distress, and to imagine how it will feel to successfully tolerate the current distress and avoid negative behaviors. Through evaluating the short-term and long-term pros and cons, clients can understand the benefits of tolerating pain and distress, and thereby reduce impulsive reactions.

The distress tolerance skills are valuable tools in helping individuals maintain balance in the face of crises, teaching them to accept the distress and cope with it in healthier ways. By practicing the skills of distracting, self-soothing, improving the moment, and focusing on pros and cons, clients can weather stressful circumstances and decrease painful feelings and destructive impulses.

Challenging Negative Thoughts

Depression, poor self-esteem, and anxiety are often the result of irrational negative thoughts. Someone who regularly receives positive feedback at work might feel that they are horrible at their job because of one criticism. Their irrational thought about job performance will dictate how they feel about themselves. Challenging irrational thoughts can help us change them.

Answer the following questions to assess your thought:

- ◆ Is there substantial evidence for my thought?

- ◆ Is there evidence *contrary* to my thought?

- ◆ Am I attempting to interpret this situation without all the evidence?

- ◆ What would a friend think about this situation?

- ◆ If I look at the situation positively, how is it different?

- ◆ Will this matter a year from now? How about five years from now?

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness: a state of nonjudgmental awareness of what's happening in the present moment, including the awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings, and senses.

Components of Mindfulness

Awareness. During a state of mindfulness, you will notice your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations as they happen. The goal isn't to clear your mind or to stop thinking—it's to become aware of your thoughts and feelings, rather than getting lost in them.

Acceptance. The thoughts, feelings, and sensations that you notice should be observed in a nonjudgmental manner. For example, if you notice a feeling of nervousness, simply state to yourself: "I notice that I am feeling nervous". There's no need further judge or change the feeling.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety

Improved memory, focus, and mental processing speed

Improved ability to adapt to stressful situations

Greater satisfaction within relationships

Reduced rumination (repetitively going over a thought or problem)

Improved ability to manage emotions

Mindfulness Practice

Note: Mindfulness is a state of mind, rather than a particular action or exercise. However, without practice, mindfulness is difficult to achieve. These techniques are designed to help you practice.

Mindfulness Meditation

Sit in a comfortable place, and begin paying attention to your breathing. Notice the physical sensation of air filling your lungs, and then slowly leaving. When your mind wanders—which it will—simply notice your thoughts, and turn your attention back to breathing.

Mindfulness Walk

While walking, make a point to practice mindfulness. Start by noticing how your body moves and feels with each step. Then, expand your awareness to your surroundings. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Feel? This technique can also be expanded to other daily activities.

Body Scan

Pay close attention to the physical sensations throughout your body. Start with your feet, and move up through your legs, groin, abdomen, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, and face. Spend anywhere from 15 seconds to 1 minute on each body part.

Five Senses

Make a conscious effort to notice the present moment through each of your senses.

- 5 things you see
- 4 things you feel
- 3 things you hear
- 1 thing you taste
- 1 thing you smell

Mindfulness Meditation

The goal of **mindfulness meditation** is simple: to pay attention to the present moment, without judgement. However, as you practice, you'll find that this is easier said than done.

During mindfulness meditation, you will focus on your breathing as a tool to ground yourself in the present moment. It's normal that your mind will wander. You'll simply bring yourself back into the moment by refocusing on your breathing, again and again.

Follow the instructions below to begin practicing mindfulness meditation.

Time & Place

Aim to practice **daily** for **15-30 minutes**. More frequent, consistent, and longer-term practice leads to the best results. However, some practice is better than no practice.

Find a time and place where you are unlikely to be interrupted. Silence your phone and other devices, and set a timer for your desired practice length.

Posture

- ❖ Sit in chair, or on the floor with a cushion for support.
- ❖ Straighten your back, but not to the point of stiffness.
- ❖ Let your chin drop slightly, and gaze downward at a point in front of you.
- ❖ If in a chair, place the soles of your feet on the ground. If on the floor, cross your legs.
- ❖ Let your arms fall naturally to your sides, with your palms resting on your thighs.
- ❖ If your pose becomes too uncomfortable, feel free to take a break or adjust.

Awareness of Breathing

Because the sensations of breathing are always present, they are useful as a tool to help you focus on the present moment. Whenever you become distracted during meditation, turn your focus back to breathing.

Notice the sensation of air as it passes through your nose or mouth, the rise and fall of your belly, and the feeling of air being exhaled, back into the world. Notice the sounds that accompany each inhalation and exhalation.

Wandering Mind

It's normal that your thoughts will wander during mindfulness meditation. At times, it might feel like a constant battle to maintain focus on your breathing. Don't worry—that's normal. Instead of struggling against your thoughts, simply notice them, without judgment. Acknowledge that your mind has wandered, and return your attention to breathing. Expect to repeat this process again and again.

improving how you feel

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are caused by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we might hear ourselves say, "My partner made me so angry," "My boss made me so nervous," "This trip down south made me feel so relaxed," or "I'm depressed because I didn't get the job I wanted." What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

What Influences My Feelings?

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person's actions. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our feelings and actions.



Here's an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, "Boy, this guy is so rude! He won't even look at me while I'm talking with him! How nasty!" What if you thought, "Mike must think that I'm really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!" What about if you were to think, "Mike's probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he's getting a bit anxious." You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

Why do I feel distressed?

We've talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is very likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or anxious, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you often feel distressed or upset, you might need to examine your thinking in order to improve how you feel.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same

remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying "I think I'm anxious," but they're probably *thinking* "Everyone will laugh at me," and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like "I feel that my boyfriend doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," when they are actually *thinking* "My boyfriend doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," and *feel* hurt.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

What sorts of thoughts are unhelpful? Unhelpful thoughts are those that tend to focus on the negative aspects of a situation, or those that overestimate the chances of a negative event occurring, or those that place unrealistic demands on yourself or others. These are also often known as unhelpful thinking styles because they are patterns of thinking that have become a habit and contribute to a person feeling unhelpful negative feelings.

What Can I Do?

Plenty! There are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better, and this next suggestion has been proven to be pretty effective. If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do would be to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones! Yeah? Okay, so, how can you do that?

First, identify how or what you are feeling. Then, ask yourself "What am I thinking? What conclusions am I making?" to see how and why you are feeling distressed. Remember, unhelpful thoughts will lead to you feeling upsetting emotions.

The next step is to challenge your thinking by exploring other possible explanations and looking at a situation from different points of view. You might ask yourself, "What other ways are there of viewing this situation? How might someone else view this situation? What other explanations could there be?"



The final step is to ask yourself, "How can I revise my original thoughts to take into account these other possible viewpoints?" Then, think of an alternative explanation. This becomes your new, balanced, and helpful thought. A balanced and helpful thought or belief is one that takes into consideration alternative viewpoints and helps you feel better. Replace your original, unhelpful thought with this new, balanced, and helpful belief. Once you have done this, you will probably find that you feel better and your mood will be improved.

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staying healthy

Whatever form of treatment you have been receiving for your difficulties – medication or psychotherapy – it's important that you maintain whatever gains you have made. If you have been seeing a mental health practitioner, keep practising the strategies you might have learned in therapy. This means continuing to apply all the useful skills and insights about yourself you might have gained and they will soon be integrated into your lifestyle.

There are also some other things you can do in order to make the most of what you have learned to stay well or gain that extra improvement. Here are some suggestions:

1. Keep to a balanced routine & lifestyle

A chaotic lifestyle can be stressful in itself. Try to keep to a reasonably structured routine and a balanced lifestyle. This means making sure you maintain good eating, sleeping, and exercising habits, and engage in social activities that can be both fun and challenging.

2. Develop a good social support network

It is wise to find someone with whom you can sit down and have a good talk. This doesn't mean a therapy session where you pour out your heart but rather just a chance to talk through what's going on in your life, what your goals are, and generally just to ventilate with someone you trust. Often, problems seem bigger than they really are when a person tries to deal with them on their own. Hearing yourself talk through something can help to put it into perspective. Socialising is also fun and will help you to keep on track with scheduling of pleasant events.

3. Develop a good professional support network

Professional help is an important resource. Find a doctor or mental health practitioner with whom you can have a good professional relationship based on mutual trust and respect. Talk to them about your needs and concerns. Learn as much as possible about your illness and take an active role in making decisions about treatment and after-care.

4. Expect slip-ups and down days

Slip-ups in progress can happen at any time and are to be expected. Try not to fall into the trap of believing that you are 'back to square one' as this will only make you feel worse. Use your skills of challenging your thinking to help when this situation occurs. It might be useful to remind yourself that most people have 'down days' or days where life's hassles are harder to deal with – its part of being human! Also, you can use setbacks as a way of learning something new about yourself to help avoid similar problems in the future.

Remember – progress may be a bumpy road at times but it will be a rewarding journey on the whole!!!

Use the spaces below to jot down a few things you could do to remain healthy.

Thinking	
Social Activities	Pleasant Activities
Healthy  ME	
Exercise	Relaxation
Professional Support	Social Support

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