

Distress tolerance skills are healthy ways to face the moment of distress or crisis, without making it worse. These skills will not solve the problem and should only be used in the short term to help get us through the current moment and back into a calmer state of being. There is a lot about our world that can be distressing and over which we have little or no control. The combination of these two things can lead us into moments of feeling overwhelmed emotionally. While this is a predictable way to feel, we can do things to tolerate these feelings and increase our ability to be resilient.

When to use distress tolerance skills:

- When the problem can't be immediately solved (if you have the solution and it is an appropriate time, then do it!)
- When the problem can be solved and you have the skills, but you can't use them because you are overwhelmed, tired, etc.
- When you are experiencing intense urges to behave in a way that you are likely to later regret.

Distraction

There are times we may find ourselves in painful situations or experiencing painful emotions, and it is not an appropriate time to deal with that pain, or work to solve the cause. In these situations, distracting ourselves from the pain can be a useful short-term strategy.

There are a number of reasons why we should use distraction as a skill when we are distressed. When we experience distress, we tend to narrow our focus to only concentrating on what it was that caused us distress. This increases the levels of the distressing emotions we are experiencing, which then focuses us more on the distress, and the cycle continues.

Distraction works by reducing our contact with the event or thing that triggered our emotional distress, or by helping us to change the unhelpful

part of our response to that emotion. We then can find our way back to a calmer frame of mind.

When thinking of distractions, it's important to remember the two most important factors: that these are skills to use in the short term, to help us through a painful or distressing moment, and that they should be things that won't make the problem worse in the long run. Watching TV for a while can be really helpful, but doing nothing all day but watching TV could have a negative impact on your health, your relationships, and your ability to problem-solve.

Possible Distractions:

- Watching TV
- Spending time on the Internet (be wary of social media! Sometimes it can be full of more distressing stuff.)
- Spending time doing a hobby (taking care of plants, sewing, knitting, reading)
- Talking with a friend
- Exercise

What do I currently use to distract myself?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What should I try not to use from this list?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

5.

What could I add to this list?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

For each distraction, set a reasonable limit on how long to use it.

Acceptance

Sometimes, the most distressing thing about a situation is our resistance to it. There is a saying in many mindfulness teachings: pain x resistance = suffering. What this means is that pain and distress are inevitable parts of being alive, but suffering does not have to be. Suffering is our interpretation of events or the story we tell ourselves about what is happening. It's the combination of thoughts, beliefs and judgements that we make about the situation we are in.

For example, the situation might be that my gym is closed and I can't go and work out as I usually do. This causes me distress, because my workout is an important part of my coping, and without it, I am more likely to experience anxiety. As a result, I have a lot of thoughts about how unfair it is so I tell myself that without the gym, I won't be able to cope at all. I become sure that I'm going to have a panic attack this evening because of this story that I am telling myself.

If I decide to accept that this is the situation and that I cannot change it, I am free to problem solve other strategies to manage my anxiety. Can I work out at home? Is this an opportunity to try a different kind of coping? Should I instead distract myself? There is also room for me to remind

myself that the gym will reopen at some point, and that this state of affairs isn't going to go on forever.

TIPPs

Sometimes the distress we feel in our bodies is so intense that it is hard to think about distraction or acceptance. In those moments, it may be more useful to go directly to trying to calm ourselves down.

TIPP is an acronym that stands for temperature, intense exercise, paced breathing and paired muscle relaxation.

Temperature

Temperature can be a great way to calm down. A hot or cold drink is a good way to use temperature, both by holding the cup and drinking the drink. Holding an ice cube can also be effective, or wrapping up in a towel or blanket warm from the dryer.

Another way to use temperature is to briefly hold your breath and use very cold water or an ice pack over your eyes, eyebrows and cheekbones. This can trigger an automatic response from your body called the “diving reflex”. It slows your heart rate and drops the amount of oxygen in your blood, both of which can calm you down.

Intense Exercise

Intense exercise, for a brief period, can be helpful. It can be a distraction and can interrupt a loop of anxious thoughts. Exercising intensely can help your body get rid of negative energy that can sometimes be stored from strong emotions. Running, walking at a fast pace or doing jumping jacks help. Exercise naturally releases endorphins, which can help combat emotions like anger, anxiety, or sadness.

Paced breathing

Using a breathing exercise can help regulate our breath, focus our mind on something other than the distressing situation, and calm our body. There are many breathing exercises on the internet. Searching for “breath grounding” or “breath meditation” will provide a variety of resources.

Paired muscle relaxation

This is a technique to relax and calm our bodies that can be done anywhere, any time. It works best if you are lying down on a relatively firm surface but can be done sitting or standing. You start with your toes, and engage both sides of your body at the same time.

1. Breathe in and tense the first muscle group (hard, but not to the point of pain or cramping) for 4 to 10 seconds.
2. Breathe out and suddenly and completely relax the muscle group (do not relax it gradually).
3. Relax for 10 to 20 seconds before you work on the next muscle group. Notice the difference between how the muscles feel when they are tense and how they feel when they are relaxed.
4. When you are finished with all of the muscle groups, count backward from 5 to 1 to bring your focus back to the present.

Not all skills are going to work for all people and sometimes it takes a bit of practice to get them working really well. Remember to be patient with yourself as you are learning these, and try each one a few times to see if it's a fit for you.