REHABILITATION SERVICES
PATIENT EDUCATION MANUAL

DISTRESS TOLERANCE SKILLS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN FRANCISCO
Langley Porter Psychiatric Hospital & Clinics
Distress Tolerance Skills help you to cope with, tolerate or accept pain and distress as part of life. Together with the Mindfulness Skills, Emotion Regulation Skills and Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills discussed in the other three Patient Education Manuals, the skills discussed in this manual are meant to help you to tolerate and survive crisis and to accept life as it is in the moment.

THESE STRATEGIES ARE INTRODUCED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES

Pages 3 - 4: Learning how to distract or refocus yourself away from the pain

Page 5 - 7: Learning how to self-soothe, comfort and nurture yourself

Pages 8 - 10: Learning how to improve the moment by replacing negative events with more positive ones

Pages 11 - 12: Learning how to accept the things you have no control over
DISTRACTION or “REFOCUSING”
Reduce contact with events that set off painful emotions by trying some of these skills

ACTIVITIES
Watch TV, attend a group activity, engage in exercise, do art, a crafts, work a puzzle, talk to a friend, read a book.

CONTRIBUTING TO OTHERS
Make something nice for someone else, do a surprising, thoughtful thing, make a special card for a friend, give a compliment, say thank you.

COMPARISONS
Compare yourself to people less fortunate than you. Watch soap operas, read about other people’s suffering. Some people find this helpful because doing so helps give perspective or provides inspiration.

(OPPOSITE) EMOTIONS
Do things that create a different emotion. Watch scary movies, watch comedies, listen to emotional music.

PUSHING AWAY
Push the situation away by blocking it out of your mind, place pain in a “box” and put it away for a while, refuse to think about painful situations. Do this to stop your mind from ruminating or from dwelling on distressing thoughts.

OTHER (BUSY) THOUGHTS
Count to 10, count the colors in the room or in paintings, find all things in your living space that are green or yellow, work puzzles, watch TV, read.

TRY SOME OTHER (INTENSE) SENSATIONS
Hold an ice-cube in your hand, stand under a very hot shower, put a rubber band around your wrist and snap it hard.
MATCHING YOUR REFOCUSING OR DISTRACTION TO HOW YOU'RE FEELING

Refocusing works better when you match what you do with how you are feeling in the moment. First take a minute and figure out what the distressing feeling is. Next match the activity to the feeling. (If you're on the inpatient unit and are using a loud or expressive technique, let staff know so they can be aware and supportive.)

ANGRY, FRUSTRATED OR RESTLESS
Try something physical. Stomp around, exercise, clean your living space, go for a walk, make a soft clay model and smash it...

SAD, SOFT, MELANCHOLY, DEPRESSED, UNHAPPY
Do something slow and soothing. Take a hot bath, listen to soothing music, call a friend and just talk about things you like, watch TV or read a book.

CRAVING SENSATIONS, FEELING DEPERSONALIZED, DISSOCIATING, FEELING UNREAL
Do something that creates sharp physical sensations. Squeeze ice hard, put a finger into ice cream for a minute, chew a piece of ginger-root, rub liniment under your nose, slap a table top hard, snap your wrist with a rubber band, take a cold bath, stomp your feet on the ground, focus on how it feels to breathe.

WANTING FOCUS
Do a task that requires focus and concentration. Practice walking meditation. Choose an object in the room and examine it carefully, then write a detailed description of it, include everything: size, weight, texture, color, possible uses, feel, etc. Choose a random object, like a pen, and try to list 20 different uses for it. (Our Patient Education Manual on MINDFULNESS has more good suggestions for improving focus.)
LEARNING HOW TO SELF-SOOTHE WITH YOUR SENSES
Learning to comfort and nurture yourself

VISION
Make one space in your room beautiful, look at everything you see as art, fix your nails so they look pretty, look at beautiful pictures in a magazine, be mindful of each sight that passes in front of you without lingering on any.

HEARING
Listen to beautiful soothing music or invigorating and exciting music, sing your favorite songs, hum a soothing tune, play a musical instrument, observe the sounds in the room and hear them as music, be mindful of any sounds that come your way, letting them go in one ear and out the other...

SMELL
Use your favorite perfume or lotion, wash your clothes with your favorite smelling detergent, breathe in fresh smells of nature when outside, get some coffee and smell the aroma.

TASTE
Chew your favorite gum, suck on a piece of peppermint candy, savor a piece of chocolate, really taste the food you eat, eat one thing mindfully.

TOUCH
Take a bath, put lotion on your whole body, massage your feet, put on clean clothes, brush your hair for a long time, massage your hands and put lotion on them, experience whatever you’re touching, notice touch that is soothing.
SELF-SOOTHING SKILLS I HAVE USED

Write down your experiences

These worked for me

These did not work for me

I’d like to try these
learning to love yourself...

Choose to be happy
Lighten up
Get a new perspective

Stop being a victim
Surround yourself with light
Demand your space

Hi, Mr. Duck.
Jim is a big J-E-R-K... I hate his guts.
Look, Mom. Busy I'm really now.

Get in touch with nature
Keep a journal
Cancel if you want to

Buy yourself flowers
Praise yourself
You rule

Cartoon by Monica Shee
IMPROVING THE MOMENT

Do pleasant things that are possible now. Doing a pleasant activity is like saving pennies in a piggybank towards a life worth living. Begin to accumulate the positives... those things that prompt positive emotions for you, such as love, joy, pride, self-confidence and calm. Find something from the Pleasant Events List below.

Do not wait until you feel “good” to do a pleasant activity. Begin to do a pleasant activity when you’re feeling distressed and notice how doing so begins to “improve the moment”, replacing negative events with more positive ones.

- Soaking in the bathtub
- Listening to favorite music
- Lying in the sun
- Planning a career change
- Laughing
- Thinking about past trips
- Listening to others
- Reading magazines, newspapers or books
- Planning a day’s activities
- Meeting new people
- Remembering beautiful scenery
- Practicing karate, judo, yoga, tai chi...
- Remembering words or deeds of loving people
- Doodling
- Exercising
- Having a discussion with friends
- Singing around the house
- Practicing religion (going to church, group praying, etc.)
- Going to the beach
- Thinking “I’m an OK person”
- Being outside in nature
- Painting
- Doing something spontaneously
- Sleeping
- Thinking about a new relationship
- Singing with groups
- Playing musical instruments
- Meditating

- Writing books (poems, articles)
- Discussing books
- Gardening
- Early morning coffee and newspaper
- Daydreaming
- Planning to go to school
- Thinking about sex
- Completing a task
- Eating healthy “comfort” foods
- Helping another person
- Staying on a diet
- Writing in a journal
- Being alone
- Writing a letter
- Cleaning
- Giving someone a compliment or smile
- Having lunch with a friend
- Playing cards
- Writing a list of things to do
- Doing a crossword puzzle
- Dressing up to look nice
- Talking on the phone
- Saying “I love you”
- Doing arts or crafts
- Thinking about volunteering in the community
- Doing a jigsaw puzzle
- Thinking “I’m a person who can cope”
- Other:_______________________
A COMMON PROBLEM...

Doing pleasant activities will make me feel better, but when I’m depressed, I don’t feel like doing anything.

WHAT CAN I DO??

Use “opposite action” (doing what you don’t feel like doing anyway). Not only do emotions cause actions, but actions can cause emotions. Sometimes we can change our emotions by changing what we do. Try this exercise:

1. What thoughts might help you do pleasant activities even when you don’t feel like it? Write down the actual words that you can say to yourself.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. Complete the following sentences:
   • YES, I don’t feel like doing a pleasant activity,
     BUT______________________________________________________________
     ________________________________________________________________
   • If I do a pleasant activity, I will
     feel______________________________________________________________
     ________________________________________________________________
   • If I do a pleasant activity, I might
     feel______________________________________________________________
     ________________________________________________________________
TAKE ("opposite") ACTION, START NOW

Make a list
Make a poem
Make a collage using magazines and newspapers of things that make you feel

STRONG
COURAGEOUS
GROUNDED
CALM
HAPPIER
HEALTHIER

Pick one or do them all

What did you observe about your mood as you worked on this project?
LEARNING HOW TO ACCEPT THE THINGS YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER

“RADICAL ACCEPTANCE”

The skills mentioned earlier in this manual (distraction, self-soothing, opposite action) offer the opportunity to change our experience for at least a brief respite from emotional pain, while we rebuild our strength. Beyond these skills, the idea of acceptance is a way out of extreme distress. The concept of Radical Acceptance suggests that we suffer less if we let go of struggling with what is occurring. This does not mean that we endorse as “good” what is going on, or that we never try to make changes in the long run. Radical Acceptance suggests that in this moment, what is happening is happening, whether we like it or not. Screaming about it in our mind will not help, but merely exhaust us. Acceptance mode is the fastest way out of pain; we save our strength until we can find a way to change the situation.

- Freedom from suffering requires ACCEPTANCE from deep within of what is. Let yourself go completely with what is. Let go of fighting reality
- ACCEPTANCE is the only way out of hell
- Pain creates suffering only when you refuse to ACCEPT the pain
- ACCEPTANCE is acknowledging what is
- To ACCEPT something is not the same as judging it “good”

HELPFUL STEPS

Some of us find it easier to think of this as “acknowledgement” rather than “acceptance”.

Remind yourself that “acceptance” is not the same as “approval”.

The worksheet on the next page, adapted from the “Serenity Prayer”, may be a helpful way to enter into acceptance. Try it.
...grant me
the SERENITY
to accept the things
I cannot change...

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________

the COURAGE to change
the things I can...

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________

And the
WISDOM
to know the
difference.
RESOURCE LIST FOR ADDITIONAL READINGS

This manual is part of a series discussing Mindfulness Skills, Distress Tolerance Skills, Emotion Regulation Skills and Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills. If you would like additional reading materials or resources related to the skills discussed in these manuals, we would like to direct you to the following:


**The Language of Letting Go** by Melody Beattie, Hazelden Foundation Meditation Series, 1990.


**TAPES AND CDs**

Guided Mindfulness Meditation by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Stress Reduction CDs and Tapes, P.O. Box 547, Lexington, MA 02420 or www.mindfulness tapes.com

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Many of the materials discussed in these manuals are based on the works of Marsha M. Linehan, Ph. D. as presented in her books *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder* and *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*. Both are available through the Guilford Press, 1993.