

REHABILITATION SERVICES  
PATIENT EDUCATION MANUAL

**DISTRESS  
TOLERANCE  
SKILLS**



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN FRANCISCO  
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# THE GOALS OF DISTRESS TOLERANCE SKILLS



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*.

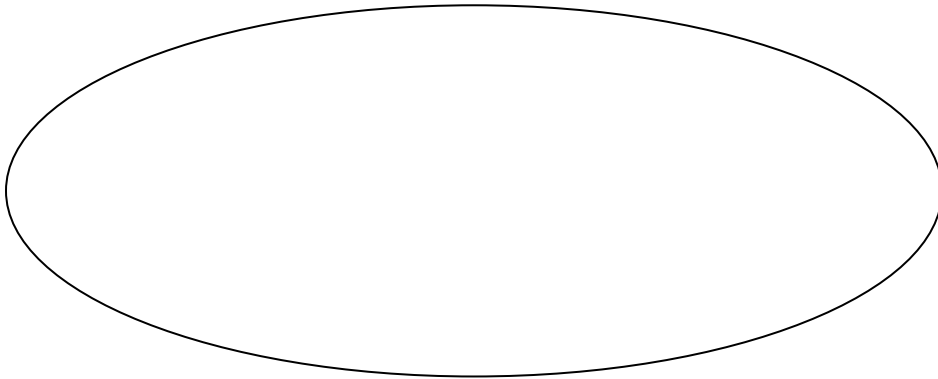
## TOUCH

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.

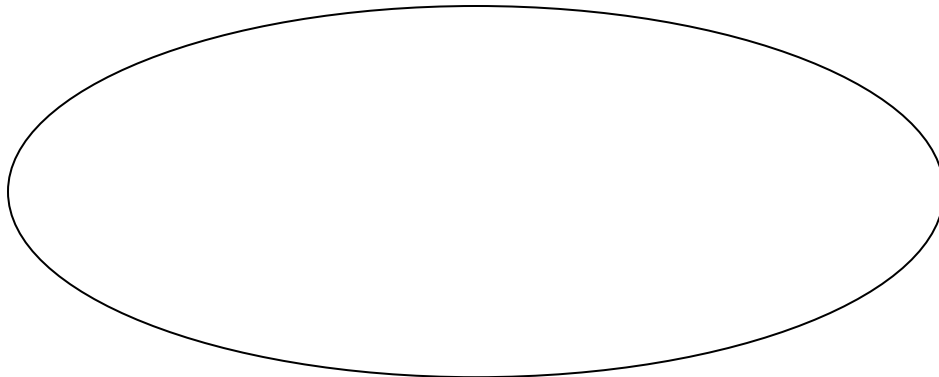
# SELF-SOOTHING SKILLS I HAVE USED

Write down your experiences

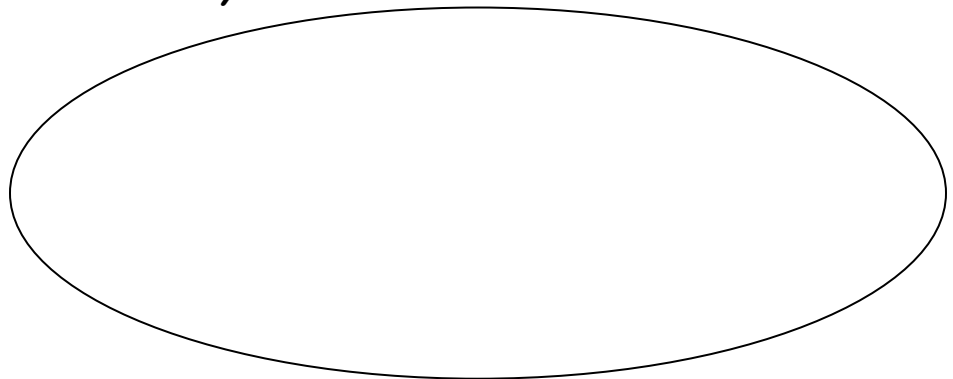
*These worked for me*



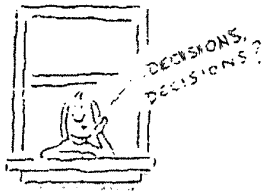
*These did not work for me*



*I'd like to try these*



# learning to love yourself...



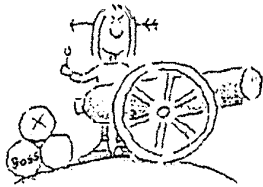
Choose to be happy.



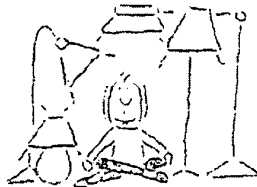
Lighten up.



Get a new perspective



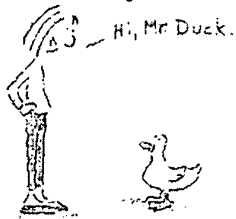
Stop being a victim.



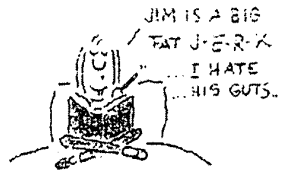
Surround yourself with light.



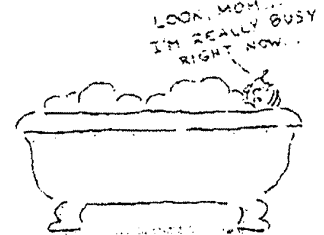
Demand your space.



Get in touch with nature.



Keep a journal.



Cancel if you want to.



Buy yourself flowers



Praise yourself



You rule.

CARTOON BY MONICA SHEP

## 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.

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2. Complete the following sentences:

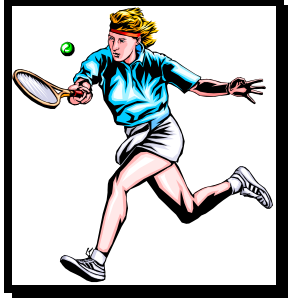
- YES, I don't feel like doing a pleasant activity, BUT \_\_\_\_\_

- If I do a pleasant activity, I *will* feel \_\_\_\_\_

- If I do a pleasant activity, I *might* feel \_\_\_\_\_

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# TAKE ("opposite") ACTION, START NOW

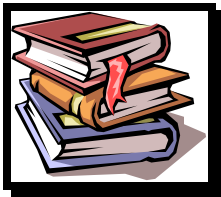


*Make a list*

*Make a poem*



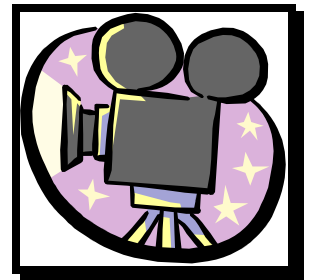
*Make a collage using magazines and newspapers of things that make you feel*



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...



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the **COURAGE** to change  
the things I can...

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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:

**Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life: How Dialectical Behavior Therapy Can Put You in Control** by Scott E. Spradlin, MA, New Harbinger Publications, 2003.

**The Feeling Good Handbook** by David D. Burns, M.D., Penguin Books, 1999.

**Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness** by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., Dell Publishing, 1990.

**Guided Meditations, Explorations and Healings** by Stephen Levine, Doubleday, 1991.

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

**Practicing the Power of Now** by Eckhart Tolle, publisher New World Library, ([www.newworldlibrary.com](http://www.newworldlibrary.com)), 1999.

**The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook** by Martha Davis, Ph.D., New Harbinger Publications, 2000.

**The Spirituality of Imperfection** by Ernest Kurtz, Ph.D., Bantam Books, 1994.

**Turning Suffering Inside Out: A Zen Approach to Living with Physical and Emotional Pain** by Darlene Cohen, Shambhala Publications, 2000.

**Women, Anger & Depression: Strategies for Self Empowerment** by Lois P. Frankel, Ph.D., Health Communications, Inc., 1992.

## **TAPES AND CDs**

Guided Mindfulness Meditation by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Stress Reduction CDs and Tapes, P.O. Box 547, Lexington, MA 02420 or [www.mindfulnessstapes.com](http://www.mindfulnessstapes.com)

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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.