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.

STRATEGIES INCLUDE

1. Learning how to distract or refocus yourself away from the pain

2. Learning how to self-soothe, comfort and nurture yourself

3. Learning how to improve the moment by replacing negative events with more positive ones.

4. Learning how to accept the things you have no control over.
DISTRACTION or “REFOCUSING”
Reducing contact with events that set off painful emotions

ACTIVITIES
Watch TV, attend a group activity, engage in exercise, do art or 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

(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, put “pain in a box” and put it away for a while, refuse to think about painful situations, censor ruminating

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, anything, work puzzles, watch TV, read

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 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 around the unit. 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.
SELF-Soothing with YOUR Senses
Learning to be gentle and kind to 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.
COPING 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 Shef
**PLEASANT EVENTS LIST**

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.

**Check off the items that help. Which are your favorites? Which are new?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Blue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❑ Soaking in the bathtub</td>
<td>❑ Writing books (poems, articles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Listening to favorite music</td>
<td>❑ Discussing books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Lying in the sun</td>
<td>❑ Gardening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Planning a career change</td>
<td>❑ Early morning coffee and newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Laughing</td>
<td>❑ Daydreaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Thinking about my past trips</td>
<td>❑ Planning to go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Listening to others</td>
<td>❑ Thinking about sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Reading magazines, newspapers or books</td>
<td>❑ Completing a task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Planning a day’s activities</td>
<td>❑ Eating healthy “comfort” foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Meeting new people</td>
<td>❑ Helping another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Remembering beautiful scenery</td>
<td>❑ Staying on a diet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Practicing karate, judo, yoga, tai chi...</td>
<td>❑ Writing in a journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Remembering words or deeds of loving people</td>
<td>❑ Being alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Doodling</td>
<td>❑ Writing a letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Exercising</td>
<td>❑ Cleaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Having a discussion with friends</td>
<td>❑ Giving someone a compliment or smile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Singing around the house</td>
<td>❑ Having lunch with a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Practicing religion (going to church, group praying, etc.)</td>
<td>❑ Playing cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Going to the beach</td>
<td>❑ Writing a list of things to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Thinking “I’m an OK person”</td>
<td>❑ Doing a crossword puzzle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Being outside in nature</td>
<td>❑ Dressing up to look nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Painting</td>
<td>❑ Talking on the phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Doing something spontaneously</td>
<td>❑ Saying “I love you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Sleeping</td>
<td>❑ Doing arts or crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Thinking about a new relationship</td>
<td>❑ Thinking about volunteering in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Singing with groups</td>
<td>❑ Doing a jigsaw puzzle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Playing musical instruments</td>
<td>❑ Thinking “I’m a person who can cope”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ Meditating</td>
<td>❑ Other:__________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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??**

1. What *thoughts* might help you *do* pleasant activities even when you don’t feel like it? Write down the thoughts 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 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

Make up your own

What did you observe about your mood as you worked on this project?
...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 four manual 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, Hazeldon Foundation Meditation Series, 1990.


**Audio**
Guided Mindfulness Meditation by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Stress Reduction CDs and Tapes, P.O. Box 547, Lexington, MA 02420 or www.mindfulnesscds.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 Guilford Press, 1993.