

# Distress Tolerance Skills



Sometimes when we experience difficult situations and emotional pain, we can't solve the problem right away. Quite often when these things happen, we have an urge to do something that, in the long term, isn't helpful (e.g. eating too much/little, drinking excessively, over exercising, overspending, social withdrawal etc). These are sometimes called urges. During these times, we need to be able to tolerate the difficult situation/emotion without using unhelpful coping strategies or acting on unhelpful urges.



## Why Bother *Tolerating* Painful Feelings and Urges?

**1. Pain is part of life and can't always be avoided.**

**2. If you can't deal with your pain, you may act impulsively. Trying to avoid pain may lead to more problems than it solves.**

**3. When you act impulsively, you may end up hurting yourself, hurting someone else, or not getting what you want.**



For example, when you are experiencing a strong emotion (such as sadness) and your impulse is to avoid going to work, this may work in the short term and make you feel better. However, long-term avoiding work may result in you losing your job, which is likely to lead to even more sadness. Often, a distressing situation can't be changed immediately so it is important to have:

- **Ways of coping with and accepting distress.**
- **Skills to survive and do well in tough situations without using unhelpful coping strategies that will make things worse in the long run.**

# Crisis Survival Skills



## “Wise Mind ACCEPTS”

This is an acronym for a set of distraction techniques...

It is important to remember when using these skills that some skills help **some people some of the time**. If one distraction technique doesn't work, don't give up – try some others until you find one that works in that moment. You might even have to use several different skills over a period for them to work. When one does work, try to remember this if you end up in a similar situation again.

### Activities

**Do something (that is healthy and you enjoy).** E.g. Contact or visit a friend; watch your favourite movie or TV show; play your instrument or sing; play videogames; draw, cook or bake; write in a journal; clean your room; go for a walk/exercise; listen to music.

### Contributing

**Contribute to (do something nice for) someone.** E.g. Help a friend or sibling with their work; make something nice for someone else; donate something you don't need; volunteer.

### Comparison

**Compare yourself to those less fortunate.** Compare how you are feeling now compared to a time you felt worse. Think about others who are coping the same or less well than you.

### Emotions

**Create different emotions.** Watch a funny TV show or emotional movie; listen to music you find soothing or upbeat; get active when you are sad; read a funny book.

### Pushing

**Push the painful situation out of your mind temporarily.** Leave the situation mentally by moving your attention and thoughts away; build an imaginary wall between you and the situation. Put the pain in a box on a shelf for a while.

### Thoughts

**Replace your thoughts.** Read; do word or number puzzles; count numbers, or colours in a poster, tiles on a wall; repeat the words to a song in your mind. Basically, do anything to move your thoughts from the distress to another task.

### Sensations

**Intensify other sensations.** Hold or chew ice; listen to loud music; take a warm or cold shower; squeeze a stress ball; do sit-ups and push-ups; pet your dog or cat.

# Self-Soothe with Six Senses



**Vision**



**Smell**



**Touch**



**Hearing**



**Taste**



**Movement**

Self-soothing is a form of self-care during a crisis. It uses each of your senses to help you cope. Below are some examples of each of the senses and what you could do/use to help activate them. By using each of the senses, it can act as a distraction as well as grounding you, reducing the intensity of heightened emotions.

It can be helpful to have a box with various items in to target each of the senses sometimes called a 'self-soothe box'. This is helpful because, in times of crisis, it can be hard to remember the skills and even think about doing something 'self-soothing', so if everything is in one place it isn't as hard to think about.

**For example your box might contain:**

- A picture of your favourite person (vision)
- An old iPod and earphones with your favourite music on (hearing)
- Your favourite aftershave/perfume (smell)
- Your favourite chocolate bar (taste)
- A stress ball (touch)
- An exercise ball (movement)



**Vision**

Go to your favourite place and take in all the sights; look at a photo album; look at a picture of your favourite person/animal (e.g. a family member, celebrity or your pet; notice the colours in a sunset.

**Hearing**

Listen to your favourite music and play it on repeat; pay attention to the sounds in nature (e.g. birds, rain thunder); play an instrument or sing; listen to a sound machine.

**Smell**

Put on your favourite lotion/perfume/aftershave; bake something you like the smell of; coffee; essential oils.

**Taste**

Eat your favourite food; drink your favourite non-alcoholic drink; really notice what you are tasting eating it mindfully, but don't overdo it!

**Touch**

Take a long bath or shower; pet your dog or cat; get a massage; brush your hair; change into your most comfortable clothes (e.g. your favourite hoodie or dressing gown).

**Move**

Rock yourself gently; stretch; go for a walk/run; do yoga; dance.

When people experience extreme emotional arousal, the ‘emotion mind’ can take over; this makes it hard to think clearly using ‘reasonable mind’. In these times, it can be hard or even impossible to use distress tolerance skills, because we aren’t thinking rationally.

The purpose of **TIPP Skills** is to help to bring down these extreme emotions to a point where we can think more rationally again to think about and use other skills (like ACCEPTS and self-soothe) to further reduce our distress.

**TIPP skills aren’t a long-term solution. They are a strategy to then be able to determine which skill to use next.**

When we are feeling emotions like anger, anxiety or fear, our body enters what is known as “fight-or-flight”. In these situations, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is activated, meaning that: heart rate and blood pressure increases; pupils dilate; digestion slows down and muscles become tense. These physical reactions are also responsible for maintaining the emotion that we are feeling.

TIPP skills activate the opposite system (the parasympathetic nervous system - PNS), which quickly decreases the physical aspects of the emotion, in turn reducing the intensity. This is what makes it easier to think clearly so we are less likely to act impulsively.

## Temperature



One way to quickly activate the PNS is to reduce our body temperature. This can be done by exposing our faces to colder temperatures. This could be done by splashing the face with cold water or using a bowl of cold water and submerging the face (up to the temples) for a short period – 10 to 20 seconds or less depending on how long you are comfortable holding breath for - then lifting the head out, taking a few breaths and repeating **up to three times**.

**NOTE: It is important not to make the water too cold as this could cause some pain.**

**NOTE: This technique works by rapidly reducing the heart rate to activate the PNS. People with a heart disorder/condition, lower than normal heart rate (e.g. due to medications), other medical problems, or anorexia or bulimia should only use this procedure with permission from a medical professional. Anyone with an allergy to cold should not participate unless cleared by a medical professional. It is a good idea to check with a medical professional if uncertain and adolescents should seek parental permission.**

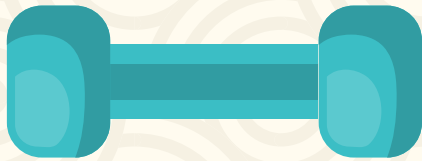
An alternative to splashing or immersion (particularly useful when not available or during times of high distress), could be using an icepack, ziploc bag of cold water or cold compress and placing it on the cheek bones just below the eyes.



# TIPP Skills

Great Minds Together

## Intense Exercise



Emotions (particularly strong ones) prepare the body for action. E.g. fear prepares the body to run, and anger prepares us to attack. When emotions are intense, it can be hard not to act impulsively so instead, we can intensively exercise. This re-regulates the body, reduces emotional intensity, and allows us to gain control over behaviour.

This could include 10-20 minutes of running, swimming or skipping for example.

Any physical activity can be used here, as long as it is done intensely so, if you can, try to do something you would normally enjoy as well.

**NOTE: It is also important to remember that exercise can be overdone and must be done safely. Exercise should be intense but brief – minutes, not hours – and should be within your personal fitness levels.**

## Paced Breathing



When experiencing intense emotion our breathing tends to increase; this is to provide the body with more oxygen preparing it to act.

Paced breathing helps us to slow our breathing, by exhaling longer than we inhale.

By slowing the breathing, we are activating the PNS, effectively telling the body there is no 'real' threat, allowing us to think more clearly to continue to use other skills (like self-soothing) to continue tolerating the emotion.

### How to do it:

You can use a clock or watch, or count your breaths in your head.

Slow your breaths so that out-breaths are longer than in-breaths.

Try breathing in, counting to 4 seconds.

Then breathe out for longer, counting to 6-8 seconds.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Progressive muscle relaxation is the process of tensing and relaxing your muscles, head to toe, one group at a time. Tense a muscle group (e.g. scrunch up the forehead and eyes) for 5 seconds, then let go; relax the muscles all the way. Repeat this a couple more times. Then, move on to the next muscle group (e.g. tense your shoulders) and repeat.