



Intense Emotion SOS: TIPP Skills for When Feelings Are Overwhelming

An explainer and TIPP skills card · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- When emotions are extremely intense, thinking skills go offline. You need body-based skills first.
- TIPP is a set of four DBT skills that work quickly by changing your body's chemistry.
- These skills are for getting through a crisis moment, not for solving the problem.

Why "just calm down" doesn't work

At very high emotional intensity, the parts of the brain that plan and reason become less available. That's why advice like "think positive" can feel useless in the moment. TIPP skills, from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), work from the body up. They lower arousal quickly so you can think again.

The four TIPP skills

Skill	How to do it	Why it works
T: Temperature	Hold a cool pack or splash cool water on your face for 15–30 seconds while holding your breath briefly (only if safe for you).	Cool water on the face can trigger the "dive response," which slows heart rate.
I: Intense exercise	Do 5–20 minutes of vigorous movement: brisk walking, running on the spot, jumping jacks, stairs.	Uses up the energy your body has mobilized for fight-or-flight.
P: Paced breathing	Slow your breath to about 5–6 breaths per minute, with the exhale longer than the inhale.	Activates the parasympathetic ("rest and digest") nervous system.
P: Paired muscle relaxation	While breathing in, tense a muscle group. While breathing out, release it and say "relax."	Releases physical tension and pairs relaxation with breath.

Safety note: The temperature skill can lower heart rate significantly. If you have a heart condition, low blood pressure, an eating disorder, or other health concerns, check with your doctor before using it. Skip any skill that doesn't feel safe for you.

What the research says

TIPP skills are part of the distress tolerance module of DBT, a therapy with strong evidence for people who experience intense emotions (Linehan, 2015).

Slow, paced breathing is associated with reduced physiological arousal and improved mood (Balban et al., 2023).

Tool: My Emotion SOS Card and Intensity Plan

EMOTION SOS (cut out and keep)

1. **Rate it:** How intense is this, from 0–10? If 7 or higher, use TIPP.
2. **T:** Cool water on face or hands.
3. **I:** Move hard for 5+ minutes.
4. **P:** Breathe out longer than in.
5. **P:** Tense and release.
6. **Re-rate:** When it's under 5, decide what to do next.

My intensity plan

Intensity	What it looks like for me	What I'll do
0–3 Low		
4–6 Medium		
7–8 High		
9–10 Crisis		Use TIPP. Reach out to my support person. If unsafe, call or text 9-8-8 or 911.

Strategies to try

- **Practise when calm.** Skills are easier to use in a crisis if you've rehearsed them.
- **Prepare your environment.** Keep a cool pack in the freezer or know where you could go to move.
- **Pair with a support person.** Let someone know you're practising these skills and how they can help.
- **Follow up.** Once calmer, notice what triggered the intensity and what you need.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Surf the urge.** Picture an urge as a wave. Rate it every two minutes and watch it rise, crest, and fall without acting on it. This "urge surfing" technique comes from relapse prevention research.
- **Talk to yourself by name.** Silently coach yourself using your own name or "you": "You can get through this." Research shows this self-distancing reduces emotional reactivity.
- **Write it out later.** Once the peak has passed, write about the experience for 15 minutes. Expressive writing has been linked with improved wellbeing over time.
- **Change the scene.** Moving to a different room, or simply going outside, can interrupt an emotional loop.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What situations tend to push my emotions to a 7 or higher?

What do I usually do when emotions feel unbearable? How does it help or hurt?

Which TIPP skill do I think would work best for me, and why?

What would I want to remember about this moment once it has passed?

When to reach out for support

If you often feel overwhelmed by emotions, act on urges you later regret, or feel unsafe, DBT and other therapies can help. If you are thinking about harming yourself, call or text 9-8-8 any time, or call 911.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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