

Why Skills Don't Work (Yet)

If a skill didn't help or made things worse that does not mean you failed, resisted, or did it wrong. It means we learned something important about timing, fit, or your nervous system.

Below are common reasons skills don't work yet and what to do instead.

1. The Skill Was Tried When Distress Was Too High

What's happening:

When emotions are at peak intensity, the thinking part of the brain goes offline. Cognitive or reflective skills can't access the system.

What helps instead:

- Body-based or sensory skills
- Temperature change or brief movement
- Very short (10–30 second) interventions

The skill didn't fail; it was asked to work outside its zone. It'd be like saying a car failed to come to a complete stop in one second after going 90 mph.

Additional Recommendation:

- Explore the Emotional Exploration Scale to better understand what it looks like for you when you are in a low, midrange, or high emotional state

2. The Skill Felt Like a Demand or Loss of Control

What's happening:

Being told what to do, even by yourself, can trigger threat, resistance, or shutdown.

What helps instead:

- Using menus instead of instructions
- Trying skills as experiments

You're allowed to refuse skills. That information matters. Remember, you are allowed to take care of yourself.

Additional Guidance:

- Check out the Dopamine Menu to identify different activities that may be helpful depending on what you need
<https://www.additudemag.com/download/dopamine-menu-template-adhd/?src=>

embed link (helpful even if you don't have ADHD)

- Create a coping skills list of skills you've tried and found benefit from, review those skills during times of resistance

3. The Skill Was Used to Avoid, Not Pause

What's happening:

Distraction or pushing away becomes permanent avoidance, which often leads to emotional rebound later.

What helps instead:

- Making skills time-limited
- Pairing skills with a return plan
- Reminding yourself: "This is a pause, not an escape."

Additional Guidance:

- Write down the event that triggered the emotional distress to review later
- Talk to your therapist about what you've avoided to help hold you accountable

4. The Skill Conflicted With Beliefs or Identity

What's happening:

Skills may feel fake, patronizing, weak, or unnecessary, especially if you value competence, logic, or independence.

What helps instead:

- Translating skills into your own language
- Focusing on function, not form
- Using skills as tools, not self-improvement tasks

Additional Guidance:

- Clarify your values when it comes to your personal growth/health
 - Using a Values Card Sort or <https://www.think2perform.com/values/#start>
 - Complete the Values Bullseye https://thehappinesstrap.com/upimages/Long_Bull%27s_Eye_Worksheet.pdf
 - Connect with what value would be driving you to engage in a skill (e.g., self-compassion, comfort)
- Explore self-compassion exercises to begin to strengthen the belief that pain is a part of the human experience and everyone deserves kindness self-compassion.org

5. Trauma or Nervous System Patterns Interfered

What's happening:

Slowing down, relaxing, or going inward can increase distress if calm has not felt safe in the

past.

What helps instead:

- Keeping eyes open
- Using external grounding
- Choosing movement or sensation over stillness

Your nervous system isn't broken; it's protective. At the end of the day, it's just trying to keep you safe. However, the nervous system is automatic and uses quick judgments based on subconscious associations. We want to slow down and do the things that are in our control to positively influence the nervous system. This will help it move from hyperaroused to appropriately aroused or from hypoaroused to aroused.

Additional Guidance:

- Thank the part that helped you stay busy or focus outside of yourself when you were experiencing trauma or chronic stress. Remind that part you are no longer in that space and are learning ways to healthily experience calm and relaxation.
- Experiencing calmness and activation is a part of a healthy nervous system. We are trying to help the nervous system flow in and out of those states more easily to have greater balance.

6. The Skill Was Judged Too Quickly

What's happening:

Skills are often evaluated on whether you got rid of your pain, rather than whether harm was reduced.

Try measuring instead:

- Did the urge last a shorter time?
- Did intensity drop even slightly?
- Did you delay a reaction?

Sometimes the goal is to not feel better or relaxed, but rather to have a different relationship with an emotion so that it is understood and comforted. We want to work with rather than against emotions.

Additional Recommendation:

- Use the SUDS to gauge where you are at on a 0-10 scale of intensity (10=most intense, 0 = complete calm) before, during, and after the exercise
- You can also use the Green, Yellow, Red labels of Polyvagal Theory or label yourself as Inside/Outside your Window of Tolerance before, during, and after the exercise
- Check out The Struggle Switch video
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCp1l16GCXI>

7. There May Be a Reason Part of You Doesn't Want Change

What's happening:

Distress can protect relationships, identity, or safety. Change, even positive, can feel risky because it is new.

What helps instead:

- Naming mixed feelings
- Respecting protective parts
- Going slowly on purpose

A Helpful Reframe

If a skill doesn't work, it gives us data. We are working to build flexibility in what skills work when and radically accepting when having to shift to another skill or stop entirely.

You are allowed to experiment, modify, pause, or stop at any point.