

Distress Tolerance

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Distress tolerance is the ability to handle negative emotions, accept what is happening, and cope with difficult situations. Here are some ways you can improve your distress tolerance skills and manage difficult circumstances more calmly and effectively.

The STOP Skill

S: Stop.

When you notice that you are upset, pause whatever you are doing or saying at the moment. Physically “stop” to prevent yourself from acting in a way that is not in line with your morals or values. This gives you a chance to reflect and can help you avoid acting impulsively in ways you’ll regret later. In addition, it’s very empowering to realize that you have control over your mind and body, even in distressing situations.

T: Take a step back.

Take a few deep breaths. If you feel anxious, unsafe, or distressed, remove yourself from the situation to give yourself the time and space you need to cope with your emotions. Taking a step back also allows you to realize what others in the situation may be feeling or thinking.

O: Observe.

Check in with yourself. What are you thinking? What emotion are you feeling right now? Who is around you? What is around you? Be aware of your surroundings. It is important to be mindful of your feelings and your environment so that you can proceed in a way that feels right for you.

P: Proceed mindfully.

What is the ideal solution to this situation? How would you act in this situation if you weren’t feeling intense emotions? What actions can you consider doing that align with your morals and values?

When emotions are high, it’s often hard to act in ways that would make situations better. Using the STOP skill can help you act in ways that align with your personal and professional goals.

TIP Skills: Changing Your Body Chemistry

T: Temperature.

Try placing cold water on your face for 30 seconds (make sure the water is not below 50°F). Doing this can help you manage intense emotions and bring your attention back to your goals.

I: Intense Exercise.

Get up and move around! Intense exercise such as going to the gym, running, or even walking can help you release excess energy. Be sure to check with your doctor first to be sure that intense exercise is safe for you.

P: Paced Breathing or Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Paced Breathing: Breathe slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try breathing in to a count of four, and out to a count of eight. This can help you refocus your attention away from the upsetting situation, relaxing your body and calming your mind.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation: To engage in this skill, start by focusing either at the top or bottom of your body. You can start by clenching your toes or facial muscles. What does that tension feel like? Work up or down your body, clenching and unclenching each muscle group. Be aware of what you experience during the tension and afterwards. This skill can help you release muscle tension and relax your body. You may want to try it before bed to help with sleep.

The 5-4-3-2-1 Skill

When we get overwhelmed, it can be really difficult to calm down and regain control of your emotions. The 5-4-3-2-1 skill can help ground you, as well as quickly provide a brief distraction until you are ready to get back to the situation at hand. Start by focusing your attention on your breathing. If it's rapid or shallow, this can cause even more anxiety or panic. Slow down your breathing by taking a deep breath in through your nose and a deep breath out through your mouth. Then follow these steps as described by Sanjana Gupta (2024) to help manage some of those overwhelming emotions:

- Name **5** things you can **see**
- Name **4** things you can **touch**
- Name **3** things you can **hear**
- Name **2** things you can **smell**
- Name **1** thing you can **taste**

For more information and examples of how to use this skill, please use this link:

<https://www.verywellmind.com/5-4-3-2-1-grounding-technique-8639390>

These simple exercises can be very helpful during periods of high emotion by helping to ground you in the present moment and giving you tools to calm down and think clearly. Remember, practicing these skills, even when you are not in distress, will help you use them effectively when you need them most.