Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Skills for Tolerating Emotional Distress

SKILL 1 = DISTRACT using wise mind ACCEPTS

Activities
Contributing
Comparisons
Emotions
Pushing Away
Thoughts
Sensations

When to choose to DISTRACT?

1) Experiencing painful emotions or urges that are too hot to handle - there is no obvious solution or you can’t come up with one now

2) You just want a short amount of time out

3) It is safe to take time out & it won’t make the situation worse

WARNING - distraction is not avoidance:

- Often people are good at distraction but over use it or use it at the wrong time
- Distraction needs to be done for the right amount of time for the situation

Examples: Stressed at work take 5 to distract; Stressed at sleep time get up for 2-20 minutes; Stressed on a holiday you can distract all day if you like.
### Activities

**Engage in an activity...** call or visit a friend, play sport, play a computer game, read a book or magazine, watch a favourite movie, exercise, do art, go for a walk, do a crossword, bake cookies or a cake, listen to music, play an instrument, learn something new.

### Contributing

**Do something nice for someone...** compliment someone, do volunteer work or a random act of kindness, make something & give it as a gift, help a friend or sibling with homework, cook dinner, do the dishes, do a surprising or thoughtful thing, play with your pet.

### Comparisons

**Gain perspective by remembering there are others facing more difficult situations...** compare yourself to a time when you had worse distress and notice that it got better eventually.

### Emotions

**Do something that will make you feel a different emotion...** watch a scary or funny movie, listen to soothing music, listen to loud & energetic music when you are feeling down, get active when you are sad, slow down when you are wound up, look up funny/comic stories on the net, practise breathing techniques.

### Pushing away

**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, stop yourself repeatedly going over the situation, practice putting the pain and situation in a box, on a shelf, in a drawer, leave it there for a while.

### Thoughts

**Replace your thoughts...** read, do word puzzles, count to 10, count backwards from 1000, repeat the words to a song in your mind or aloud, imagine people as vegetables or animals, go to “Factual Mind” and stay there for a while.

### Sensations

**Intensify other sensations...** take a cold or hot shower/bath, eat something spicy or minty, hold or chew ice until it’s all melted, run fast, squeeze a rubber ball or toy.
SKILL 2 = SELF-SOOTHE using six senses

V vision
H hearing
S smell
T taste
T touch
M movement

When to choose SELF-SOOTHING?

1) Experiencing painful emotions or urges that are too hot to handle
2) Need to cool down, calm down, come back to the present
3) Feeling physiologically aroused and wound up
4) Feeling the mind is not able to think of a healthier way to cope

Potential problems with SELF-SOOTHING:

- Sometimes people don’t want to self-soothe when in distress because of judgments
  - Judgment examples: “I deserve to feel this pain” “I don’t deserve to soothe myself” “I shouldn’t have to soothe myself because others should care for me”
- If you feel this way practice self-soothing skills when you are not in crisis
- Remember self-soothing should not become avoidance... don’t use self-soothing too much or for too long...
- Choose the right self-soothing activity & the right amount of time for this situation
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Vision</strong></th>
<th><strong>Treat your eyes</strong>... look at nature around you, check out the colours of leaves, the tracks raindrops leave on windows, the sunlight on water, watch the sunset, or the stars at night, look at a beautiful picture, fill your room with things you love to look at, light a candle and watch the flame dance, blow some bubbles with dishwashing liquid and watch them float and pop.</th>
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<td><strong>Hearing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Comfort your ears</strong>... listen to calming, chilled-out music or to funky music that makes you want to dance (choose your music wisely), tune in to the sounds of nature around you (waves at the beach, birds singing, leaves rustling, rain pattering), hum or sing your favourite song, burn a CD with songs that get you through the tough times, hang some wind chimes in your bedroom window, be mindful of any sound that your ears tune in to.</td>
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<td><strong>Smell</strong></td>
<td><strong>Delight your nose</strong>... Put on some aftershave/perfume you love and breathe in the scent, light a scented candle or burn some incense or fragrant oils, put fragrant oils or bubbles in your bath and swim in scent, notice the smells of nature that appeal to you (the soft scent of a flower, fresh cut grass, salty ocean air), notice yummy food smells – popcorn at the movies, freshly baked cookies or bread, or dinner cooking when you are hungry, be mindful of your nose and the smells that delight it.</td>
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<td><strong>Taste</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tantalise your taste buds</strong>... really taste the food you eat, eat one thing mindfully, treat yourself to something delicious, drink your favourite non-alcoholic beverage, savour the flavour of each different thing on your plate.</td>
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<td><strong>Touch</strong></td>
<td><strong>Get in touch with your world</strong>... cuddle your dog or cat and notice how their fur feels, put clean sheets on your bed enjoy the feeling on your skin, have a massage, rub hand-cream onto your hands and spend time working it mindfully into your skin, brush your hair, wear something soft and snuggly and curl up in your favourite spot, hug someone, wrap yourself in a doona or blanket.</td>
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<td><strong>Move</strong></td>
<td><strong>Get that body moving</strong>... rock yourself gently, stretch, go for a run, do yoga, dance, go to the gym, go for a walk, swim, bounce or kick a ball, surf, sprint around the block.</td>
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SKILL 3 = IMPROVE the moment

- Imagery
- Meaning
- Prayer (or Meditation)
- Relaxation
- One thing at a time
- Vacation
- Encouragement

When to choose IMPROVE the moment skills?

1) Experiencing painful emotions or urges but able to tolerate them
2) Motivated to change the way the mind deals with these painful emotions
3) Able to remain calm enough to focus the mind on the current moment or a positive future event

Tips for using IMPROVE skills:

- The IMPROVE skills can be richly rewarding and provide long-terms benefits for dealing with painful emotions
- They are about linking to something that holds deep personal meaning or significance
- IMPROVE skills do not provide the same quick fix and may be difficult to practice at first (developing these skills is a slightly longer-term project)
- IMPROVE skills can often be developed more broadly in life… they can be useful at different times & will benefit more and more through regular practice.
**Imagery**

**Use your imagination...** Imagine a secret room within yourself and go into it when you feel threatened, close the door on things that can hurt you, imagine coping well (what would that be like? what would you do? how would you feel?), imagine very relaxing places you’ve been to or would like to see (the beach, the woods, a lake, a waterfall), make up a fantasy place where you can go to calm yourself. Imagine going there for comfort when you are feeling upset.

**Meaning**

**Focus on things that give you a sense of purpose, meaning or value...** read about or listen to spiritual and philosophical values, focus on what is important to you, focus on whatever positive aspects of a painful situation you can find (for example, a friendship can be made stronger when it survives a disagreement).

**Prayer & Meditation**

**Let go...** open your heart to a greater wisdoms, your own Wise Mind, God, or some higher power, ask for strength to help you through hard times, surrender and turn things over to a higher power.

**Relaxation**

**Try relaxation strategies...** try progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and then relaxing each large muscle group in your body working from your fingers to the top of your head), make a tight fist and then let it go, exercise hard, then relax, listen to a relaxation tape, take a hot bath, drink hot milk or herbal tea, massage your hands with hand cream, breathe deeply and slowly, half smile.

**One thing**

**Stay in the present...** focus your entire attention on just what you are doing right now, focus all your attention on how your body moves, focus on your senses (what you see, hear, feel, touch, smell and taste when you are doing ordinary daily tasks), bring your mind back to just what you are doing over and over.

**Vacation**

**Give yourself a holiday...** take a breather, give yourself time-out (e.g. get in bed and pull the covers up over yourself for 20 minutes), take a break by reading a favourite book or magazine, plan a day at the beach, meet up with a friend over coffee or tea, take a break from homework when you’ve finished something particularly challenging.

1) **Don’t take vacations that can harm you.**  
2) **Plan short vacations to avoid exacerbating the problem.**

**Encouragement**

**Treat yourself like you would a good friend...** repeat thoughts that are helpful for you over and over (e.g. “I can do this” “I will make it out of this” “You’re doing the best you can” “I’ve coped before, I can cope again”, think of how you would support a friend in a similar situation and do the same for yourself!