

Distress Tolerance Activities

Review this list of activities which often help people manage distressing situations. There are seven different categories of activities from which to choose. Keep this list close at hand so you can more easily respond with intention rather than reacting with old habits or unconscious patterns.

BODY-MOVING ACTIVITIES

These activities encourage you to move your body to increase circulation, distract you from your worries, & burn off energy. They are most effective when you feel either agitated or lethargic.

- Bike ride
- Chop wood
- Clean
- Climb stairs
- Dance
- Garden
- Go for a run
- Hit or throw a ball
- Kick something
- Play a sport
- Stretch your body
- Walk or hike
- Work out/Exercise
- Wrestle
- Yoga, Tai Chi, or Qigong
- _____
- _____

SOCIALIZING ACTIVITIES

These activities engage you with others. They help you see that you are not alone.

- Ask for support
- Be with people you admire
- Call a friend or family member
- Give something to someone
- Go to a religious service
- Go to a support group
- Go to an event
- Help someone in need
- Listen to another's perspective
- Make eye contact and smile at others
- Random act of kindness
- Reconnect with an old friend
- Spend time with positive and uplifting people
- Visit family or a friend
- Volunteer
- Write, text, or email
- _____
- _____

IN-THE-MOMENT ACTIVITIES

These activities bring your focus to making things better, as best you can, in the moment. Some activities are easy to do without any preparation, some set you up for pleasurable experiences in the future, and others require that you prepare a space to make your situation different.

- Affirm yourself
- Be gentle with yourself
- Compare
- Distract yourself with entertainment
- Emulate someone you admire
- Imagine a wall
- Make a massage appointment
- Make therapy appointment
- Make a reservation
- Observe without judgment
- Packaging - box up a thought & set it aside
- Practice acceptance
- Practice gratitude
- Practice relinquishment
- Pray
- Read uplifting material
- Recall a past pleasant moment
- Repeat a mantra
- Reward yourself
- Root your feet
- Schedule a retreat or vacation
- Shout "stop"
- Sing or hum a joyous tune
- Speak up
- Visualize a screen or shield
- Wear your favorite color
- _____
- _____

SENSATION-FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

These activities shift your attention to your senses. They stimulate sensory awareness and can be used as a distraction. Most are pleasurable but some are not. Never do anything harmful to your body.

- Burn incense
- Buy or pick flowers
- Cup of tea or coffee
- Cold washcloth
- Crumble herbs
- Eat something tasty
- File your nails
- Five senses stimulation
- Go out to eat
- Go somewhere new
- Hold an ice cube
- Hot bath or shower
- Lay on a heating pad
- Light a candle
- Listen to a story
- Listen to music
- Listen to nature
- Paint your nails
- Pamper yourself
- Physical sensations in the moment
- Put on lotion
- Put on scented oils or perfume
- Seek beauty
- Sex
- Snap a rubber band
- Splash cold water on your face
- Suck on hard candy
- Warm your hands, cup over eyes, breathe
- _____
- _____



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RELAXING ACTIVITIES

These are activities that relax and calm your body.

- Breathe deeply
- Create art
- Create silence
- Exercise hard
- Fire in fireplace
- Go for a drive
- Go to bed early
- Hobby or craft
- Listen to a guided relaxation
- Massage
- Nap
- Play a game
- Play with an animal
- Play with clothes
- Progressive relaxation from toes to head
- Rock in a rocking chair
- Sauna
- Sit in the dark
- Sit in the sun
- Take a break from problem-solving
- Visualize a mini-vacation
- Visualize a peaceful place
- Visualize a secret room
- _____
- _____

EMOTIONAL-EXPRESSION ACTIVITIES

These activities get you in touch with your feelings and help you express them. Some activities require words but many are designed just to allow you to feel or see the extent of your distress.

- Assert feelings and needs
- Bite something
- Break plates
- Cry
- Empty-chair technique
- Grunt, stomp, shout
- Identify feelings and needs
- Journal or doodle
- Look for meaning & purpose in the struggle
- Pound a pillow
- Rip something
- Scream while driving
- Squeeze a rubber ball
- Stir opposite emotions
- Talk in a loving way
- Vesuvius release
- Visualize a drain
- Write a letter expressing yourself
- _____
- _____

THOUGHT-CHALLENGE ACTIVITIES

These activities take your mind to a task that requires thought or sharp focus. These actions help you steer your mind away from things that are troubling by giving you a problem to solve or question to ponder.

- Color name
- Count backwards by 3's from 100
- Count things
- Count to 10 slowly
- Creative writing
- Examine pros and cons
- Focus on what you like, not on what's wrong
- Identify your thoughts
- Mindfulness
- Name favorites
- Opportunity to learn
- Plan a joyous event
- Play a musical instrument
- Read
- Recite Serenity Prayer
- Sing something complex
- View long-term goals
- Visualize your success
- Work
- Work a puzzle
- _____
- _____

DISTRESS TOLERANCE CARD SET

You can find a set of the Distress Tolerance Cards at:
<http://elsbethmartindale.com/product/distress-tolerance-cards/>

The cards provide a detailed description of each strategy. You might find it helpful to have your clients sort the cards into piles of what works, what might work, and what does not work for them in managing distressful situations. Then, by marking this handout with your clients' preferred distress-managing strategies, you'll be able to offer them a roadmap for being proactive in calming themselves and responding mindfully to their next distressful situation.



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