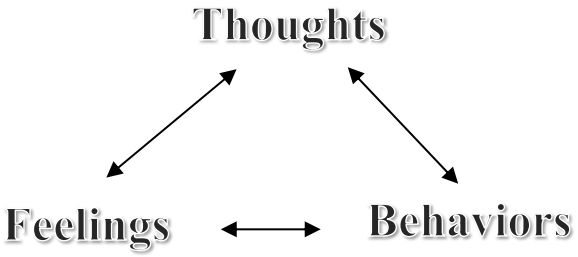
Mental Health in Times of Crisis

A mental health crisis can be one of the scariest and most stressful situations that someone can experience. Common crisis emotions can include feeling afraid or anxious, feeling overwhelmed with negative emotions, or feeling like things are out of control. When these feelings occur, it is important to utilize tools to stay safe and to help the crisis pass.

The tools shared below are meant to help you in times of crisis and can help prompt you to get yourself into a better place. If these tools are practiced daily, they can help you to feel safer, improve your mood, and make your day-to-day activities things feel more manageable.

Tool #1: The Thoughts-Feelings-Behavior Chain



Your thoughts affect your feelings and your behavior. If you have a thought that you are useless, then you will likely feel useless and act that way. In contrast, if you have a thought that you are worthwhile, you are more likely to feel **and** act worthwhile. It is up to you to decide which part of the Thoughts-Feelings-Behavior Chain you feel is your weakest link. Once you identify the weak link, try using the two stronger links to help strengthen the weaker link. Most often, if you can change your thoughts, then changes in your feelings and behaviors will follow.

Tool #2: Affirmations

Affirmations are positive "I am" statements that can help you think about yourself in a good way. "I" statements should speak to how you would like to feel and be. Some examples of affirmations include:

"I am a worthwhile person. I deserve love and happiness."

"I am respectful of others. I deserve to be treated with respect and dignity."

These statements can help to change your thoughts about yourself. In turn, they can help to change your feelings and behaviors.

In the space below, write your own "I" statement. Be careful to be realistic about what you expect.

"I am _____."

"**I deserve**_____."

Now, take a moment to practice it and believe it! Practice your "I" statements a few times each day. You can say them in silence, in front of a mirror, or with a friend. Say them with confidence and conviction. Say them over and over.

Tool #3: Things to Do, People to Call

In times of crisis or when you are stressed, it is helpful to have a ready list of things to do and people to call for help. Take time **now** to list activities that soothe you and help you to relax. The things you list should be pleasant. Also, write down family members or friends that you can call in time of need. Think about who is most helpful to you.

Things That Help to Soothe and Relax Me	Who to Call and How to Reach Them
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

You are encouraged to keep this list accessible. When you begin to feel stressed or are in crisis, use this list to calm yourself and ease your worries. Find something to do that helps you regain a sense of calm. Then go and do it!

For some people, taking a walk or watching a funny movie is enough to distract them and get them back on track. Others call friends and talk through their crisis. Whatever your approach, plan for it and, when in need, practice it.

#4: HALT
It is also important to know whether your distress relates to a physical need. Are you **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, or simply **T**ired?

All these factors change the way we think, feel, and behave. In times of stress, take a moment to think about what you should do if you have one of these needs.

Remember: I always have options. This too shall pass.

Notes:

Hungry	Eat something healthy. Enjoy a comfort food. Plan your meals and snacks for when you are hungry.
Angry	Talk with a trustworthy friend. Take a walk. Exercise. Clean your house. Write in a journal. Try creative therapy. Take a warm bath. Vent to yourself. Scream if you feel like it. Pray. Forgive. Accept.
Lonely	Contact a friend or loved one who supports you and cares for you. Write a letter. Cuddle with your pet. Enjoy a good book or movie. Look through photo books and reminisce. Plan to visit a dear friend soon. Build a better support system, as you are able.
Tired	Sleep. Take a nap or rest on the couch. Take time out. Cancel whatever you can. Do not be active and just relax. Light some candles and drink chamomile tea. Build rest and sleep into your schedule.

Tool # 5: Calming Quotes
Recall a soothing poem or quote and ponder it.

Tool #6: A Checklist for Getting Through the Day to Day
When you are depressed or feeling blue, it is good to think about things you can do for yourself. What helps one person may be quite different from what helps the next person. Here is a checklist of ideas from which you can pick and choose.

Food and Drink

- Eat well. A well-nourished body helps to keep a healthy mind.
- Try to alternate food you like (junk food) with food that is good for you.
- Eat both nourishing and refreshing things.
- Notice if eating or drinking certain things changes how you feel.
- Avoid sugar, caffeine, chocolate, nicotine, and fats.
- Abstain from alcohol. Alcohol is a depressant and can make you feel worse.
- Make yourself a fancy dinner. Invite someone over to join you.
- Remember to eat, when needed.

Exercise and Activity
When you are having trouble staying focused or remembering things, it is good to be more active.

- Go outside and look at the sky. Look at the clouds during the day, the stars and moon at night.
- If it is a sunny day, close your eyes for a moment and let the sunlight warm your eyelids.
- Get some exercise while you are out (with your doctor's approval).
- Pull some weeds. Dig in the dirt. Plant something that you would like to watch grow.
- Play sports.
- Go for a long walk or a bike ride.

- Dance either alone in your home or while out with a friend.
- Clean your house, garage, or yard.
- Get up and get going! You may feel like staying in bed and not going out. This can make you feel even more hopeless and helpless.
- After eight hours of sleep, get up and take care of yourself.
- Do not do too much, especially at first.

Leisure
Take time to take it easy and relax.

- Listen to your favorite songs. Choose ones that are uplifting and positive to you.
- Sing or "make a joyful noise." If you are self-conscious, sing in the shower or in the car. Sing soothing oldies or lullabies.
- Relax in a warm, soapy tub.
- Play around on the computer.
- Watch a comedy or a funny video. Let yourself laugh freely.
- Buy yourself a present.
- Do something nice for yourself or for someone else.
- Buy or pick some flowers. Relax and look at them.
- Get pet, such as a cat. Cats are clean, warm, furry, and huggable.

Reading and Writing
Writing things down helps to keep the misery from running around and around in circles.

- Keep a journal.
- Write morning pages – usually 3 pages of your first thoughts of the day.
- Keep a list of goals. Do one task at a time. Celebrate what you have done.
- Read all you can – books, magazines, newspapers, the comics.
- Go to the library or bookstore for books on humor, fiction, spirituality, depression, morality, and biographies of others who struggled with depression and thrived.
- Read self-help books on depression.

Sleep and Rest
Your body needs about 8 hours of sleep per day.

- Sleep, rest or take a nap, when needed.

Being with Others
If you might be a danger to yourself, do not be alone. Find someone to talk to or call them on the phone.

- If there is no one that you feel you can call, suicide hotlines can be helpful to provide the support you need.
- Volunteer. Put your focus on others for a while. Help someone in need.
- Give someone a hug. Get a hug.
- Spend time playing with a child.
- Figure out if it is better to be alone or with others, then enter that space.

Meditation

- Pick a small easy task – like sweeping the floor. Let it be a meditation. Focus on the present moment. Try not to judge your thoughts.
- If you are not able to meditate, read a calming book out loud.
- Pray or connect with your spiritual higher being for comfort and strength.

Keeping a Balance
Feeling better takes time. Do not overdo it or get upset if your mood does not greatly improve right away.

- Be patient with yourself. Do not set difficult goals or take on too much until your depression has lifted.

- Break large tasks into many smaller ones. Set goals. Do what you can, as you can.
- Pick something to do that is small and you know you can do.
- Do not expect too much from yourself. If you expect too much and try to be perfect, it can only lead to feelings of failure.
- If you are anxious and want to avoid something, try to get some support to face it.
- Do not get upset if your mood does not greatly improve right away.
- Do not make any major life decisions like quitting a job or getting divorced while you are depressed. Strong emotions can make it harder to think through major decisions.
- Be gentle with yourself. Depression can make you have negative thoughts. These thoughts are not a rational way to think of things. Do not accept them as being true.

Knowing Your Treatments

There are many treatments for depression. Treatment may include therapy, medicine, or both. Though they are helpful, both take time.

- If you are on medicine, be sure to take it as directed.
- Know about side effects and watch for them.
- Do not change or stop taking these drugs without first talking to your doctor or therapist.
- If you need a cold remedy, read the label with care. Many of them contain alcohol.
- Attend appointments. Skipping them because you feel "too bad" is likely not a good idea.
- Learn about treatments on your own. Do not rely on your mental health care provider to know it all.
- Seek second opinions if your needs are not being met.

Playing It Safe

Safety is always number one. Feeling that nothing can help is part of the illness. So, find help. Play it safe!

- If you are thinking about suicide, be sure to tell someone. Call your health care provider to get help.
- Call or text **988** for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
- If you are in immediate danger, call **911** or go to the nearest emergency department.

Getting Better Day by Day

Take time for yourself. Practice these tasks daily.

- Work through the Tools #1-6.
- Exercise 30 minutes a day.
- Enjoy a nice activity.
- Take care of yourself.

References

- National Alliance on Mental Illness (2023)
- Wisconsin Department of Health Services (2023)

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 10/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5299