

Common Helpful DBT Distress Tolerance Skills

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is a form of psychotherapy. It helps people manage emotions, improve relationships, and reduce self-destructive behaviors. This handout will discuss how to use radical acceptance, self-soothing senses, and distraction to manage distress.

Radical Acceptance

(Adapted from Radical Acceptance: Skills, Worksheets, Videos, Exercises)

Problems that happen outside of your control can lead to thoughts like “this is not fair” or “I should not have to deal with this.” These are typical and normal thoughts to have. However, allowing repetitive thoughts of this nature can make the pain and frustration worse.

Radical acceptance is a practice of accepting situations both mentally and emotionally. This does not mean that you like or approve of something. It means you are able to accept the facts of a given situation. Practicing radical acceptance can help reduce the overall emotional impact of something.

Example

- Someone eats your lunch out of the break room refrigerator.
 - **Typical Thinking:** “This is not fair! Someone must be out to get me!”
 - **Radical acceptance:** “I am frustrated, but there is nothing I can do to change that this happened. I will order an enjoyable lunch.”

Self-Soothing Using Senses

(Adapted from Self Soothing: DBT Skills, Worksheets, Videos, Exercises)

Everyone feels overwhelmed by their surroundings at times. Loud noises, heat, bright lights, or unfamiliar smells can overwhelm the nervous system.

We can soothe our senses and reduce feelings of overstimulation. Engaging in pleasurable and enjoyable activities help.

Examples

- **Vision:** Go outside and play a game of “I Spy”. Look for five things that are the color red.
- **Hearing:** Listen to nature sounds or a song you enjoy with your headphones.
- **Touch:** Hold an object that “feels” good, like a smooth rock or a fluffy pillow. Fidget toys work great too!
- **Taste:** Eat a piece of candy or have a small snack.
- **Smell:** Pick an essential oil that you like the smell of to sniff for a few seconds.

Distraction

(Adapted from ACCEPTS: DBT Skills, Worksheets, Videos, Exercises)

When a flood of emotion arrives, it can feel like it will never pass. Giving that emotion time and space can lessen the impact of overwhelming feelings. Emotions can change in seconds, minutes, and sometimes hours. Structured distractions can help lessen the impact.

The acronym **ACCEPTS** can offer some tips for how to lessen the emotional impact.

- **A: Activities**
 - Find an activity that requires thought and focus. Do a puzzle, homework, or practice an instrument.
- **C: Contributing**
 - Find an activity that has you focus on something other than yourself. Volunteer or help your child with homework.
- **C: Comparisons**
 - Compare your situation to something worse, like when you were in emotional pain.
- **E: Emotions**
 - Find an activity that will create a competing emotion. Watch stand-up comedy when you are feeling sad.
- **P: Pushing Away**
 - “Push” negative thoughts away through a visual or physical exercise. Imagine throwing the problem into the wastebasket or write it down on paper and throw it in the wastebasket.
- **T: Thoughts**
 - Do something that will have you think too hard to stay stuck with difficult emotions. Try naming an animal starting with each letter of the alphabet in order.
- **S: Sensations**
 - Find a physical sensation to distract you from negative emotions. Eat sour candy or hold an ice cube in your hand. Hold it long enough to distract yourself.

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 © 9/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8544.