DBT Distress Tolerance Skills: Helping the Clients Through the Tough Times (and Yourself)

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Overview

Goals of distress tolerance skills

Teaching the Skills

• Distraction
• Self-Soothing
• IMPROVE the moment
• Pros and Cons

Clinical applications

• For clients
• For yourself
What is a Crisis?

A crisis is when you have a serious problem but you can’t solve it (at least not now).

In a crisis, there is a pressure to solve the problem and it is difficult to stop trying.

In a crisis, emotions are high so the problem is distressing and having high emotions generally makes things worse.

A crisis is short-term.
- If it is happening all the time, it isn’t a crisis, it’s your life!

Can you Solve the Crisis?

If yes, **SOLVE IT**

- Stick with it, don’t take your eye off the ball, and do what it takes.

If no (or not right now), **STOP trying to solve it**

- Trying to solve something you can’t will often make it worse and send your emotions through the roof.
- Focus on distress tolerance skills during an unsolved crisis.

These skills taught in this webcast are designed just for an unsolved crisis.
Distress tolerance skills are for...

**Clients** face many stressors

- Housing
- Money
- Drugs and alcohol
- Dangerous neighborhoods or bus lines
- Trouble finding and keeping work
- Long waits for social services
- Medical problems and chronic pain

**Clinicians** face many stressors

- Large caseloads
- Difficult clients
- Hearing many traumatic stories
- Inability to help their clients
- Lack of time or resources to help their clients
- Frustrating interactions with social services
- Unhelpful rules or regulations
- Paperwork

Distress tolerance is surviving without making the situation worse.

**Tolerating distress is not solving the problem.**

- There are other skills for problem-solving.

**Remember**

- Don’t hit your head on a brick wall by trying to solve a crisis that can’t be solved now.
- Figure out another way to solve the problem.
- Then practice distress tolerance until that other way can work.
Distress tolerance is surviving without making the situation worse.

Tolerating distress is not removing – or sometimes even reducing – distress.

- There are other skills for reducing emotions.

Don’t expect distress tolerance skills to make you “feel better”.

- The fact is that you often may feel better, but that is not the purpose of the skill.
- The skills are so you won’t make the situation worse.
- If the skills prevent the crisis getting worse but don’t make you feel better, DON’T STOP! If you do, things may get worse.

How can you make a crisis worse?

- Yelling at someone
- Using drugs or alcohol
- “Retail therapy” with money you can’t afford to spend
- Giving up on solving the crisis altogether
- Complaining so much folks don’t want to talk to you
- Eating too much
So, if you use distress tolerance skills,

The more you learn to tolerate a crisis without making it worse,

And...

you survive as well as you can be and “live to fight another day” on your crisis.

the more competent and confident you will become.

So what are the Distress Tolerance skills

• Distract
• Self-Soothe
• IMPROVE the moment
• Pros and Cons
Distraction is deliberately turning your attention away from the crisis.

Remember, wise mind **ACCEPTS**

- **Activities**
- **Contributing**
- **Comparisons**
- opposite **Emotions**
- **Pushing away**
- **Thoughts**
- **Sensations**

**Distracting with...**

**Activities**

- Use an activity that fits the moment or what you would be doing if you weren’t distressed
- Sports or exercise
- Hobbies or using your talents
- Be with other people and DON’T talk about the crisis
- Watch a movie
- Go to the zoo, park, beach
Distracting by Contributing

- Volunteer
- Bake someone cookies
- Listen to someone else’s problems
- Write to someone who is lonely

Contributing is doing an activity that primarily serves others. Usually more distracting than an activity for yourself.

Distracting by Comparisons

- Get attention of the crisis but thinking about other crises that are worse than yours.
- Someone or people who are suffering more than you.

A time in your life when you were doing worse. Remember – your pain is still valid but put it on a continuum from easiest to hardest to bear and focus attention on the harder.
**Distracting by Emotions**

When we are distressed, one or two negative emotions dominate the scene. Figure out an emotion different from the negative one you are feeling and try and bring it on.

- If angry, watch a comedy
- If scared, watch someone daring
- If sad, listen to upbeat music

**Distracting by Pushing Away**

This means deciding that something cannot be dealt with now and putting it out of your mind.

- Imagine putting it on a shelf, in a time-release safe, in another room
- Imagine a Lucite wall between you and the problem so you may be aware of it but you are cut off
- Imagine the “volume” of the problem being turned down
Distracting with **Thoughts**

The idea is to fill your brain with other thoughts, so there is no room for the crisis

- Sing song lyrics you don’t quite remember
- Do the times tables to a number you have to calculate
- Decide what profession everyone on the bus does
- Imagine decorating your future home

Distracting with **Sensations**

This is **THE BEST** strategy to get unstuck when you are very distressed

Mobilize your body and it will bring your mind and emotions with it

- Put your face in ice water or hold ice
- Run up and down stairs
- Take cold shower
- If you are inside got outside or if you are outside go inside
What would you do if you lived with a loved one going through a crisis?

How would you soothe them?

That is what you want to do for yourself

Don’t make a situation harder by being more uncomfortable than required

For instance, don’t wear tight shoes to the dentist

Self-Soothe with Five Senses

Vision: Decorate your space, go somewhere inspiring

Sound: Music, soothing voices, nature sounds

Smell: Cooking, lavender, the beach

Touch: Comfortable clothes, pet animal, foot massage

Taste: Favorite food, hard candy or mint, good cup of coffee
**IMPROVE the moment**

Skills to accept pain and reduce suffering

- Imagery
- Meaning
- Prayer
- Relaxation
- One thing in the moment
- Vacation
- Encouragement

**Imagery**

Picture a place you feel

- Happy a beach, a hike, with friends
- Safe place far away, place with locks
- Relief like when the crisis will be solved
- Relaxed on a warm, comfortable couch
**Meaning**

What can this crisis or tolerating this crisis do for you? What will you get out of this?

What are your core beliefs or religious traditions?

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”

“God doesn’t give me more than I can handle”

“This too shall pass”

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**Prayer**

Use and connect to the religious or spiritual traditions that are meaningful to you

**Examples**

Serenity Prayer

May I be filled with loving kindness.
May I be well.
May I be peaceful and at ease.
May I be happy.

Ancient Tibetan Buddhist meditation
**Relaxation**

**Progressive relaxation**
- Tighten each part of your body fully for 5 seconds and then completely relax it
- Start at toes and work through full body

**Walk, yoga, other exercise that relaxes your muscles**

**One thing in the Moment**

Bring all of your attention to what is happening right in this moment

Let go of thoughts about the past and future

Describe (in your mind, out loud, in writing) what you notice in this moment to bring your attention just to now

A lot of distress is not in the present – it is in the past or is anticipated for the future

The goal is to reduce suffering by removing physical stress from the body
**Vacation**

A vacation is when you deliberately step away from your life to do something more relaxing, fun, or peaceful.

**Take a small vacation to tolerate the distress**
- Don’t talk to anyone for an hour
- Go to bed and forget the rest of the day
- Decide everyone can do without you for a while
- Get take out rather than cook

**Key, as with all vacations, is plan it ahead of time and have a “return ticket”**
- Otherwise you are running away!

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**Encouragement**

Be your own cheerleader
- “I can do it”
- “Only 3 more days... 2 more... 1 more...”
- “I have been through worse and I can do this too”

*Similar to positive self-talk*
### Pros and Cons

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making it worse</td>
<td></td>
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### Scenario: 10pm Sun night and you found an eviction notice on your door

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Pros</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making it worse</td>
<td></td>
<td>-won’t be able to function tomorrow when have to call guy back</td>
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<td>by: <strong>getting drunk</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-get to relax</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-won’t have to think about it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerating</td>
<td></td>
<td>-will be worried all night</td>
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<tr>
<td>distress by:</td>
<td></td>
<td>-probably won’t sleep</td>
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<td><strong>self-soothing</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>-get some relaxation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>-will be clear minded tomorrow</td>
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### Scenario: Thurs afternoon and you have a new referral a lot like last 3 who dropped

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
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| Making it worse by: *just go through the motions* | - don’t have to focus when tired  
- don’t get my hopes up  
- self-fulfilling prophesy  
- person will think you don’t care |
| Tolerating distress by: *IMPROVE with meaning, prayer, and encouragement* | - feel proud of the quality of my work  
- have hope  
- treatment more likely to work  
- takes a lot of effort  
- may be disappointed (again) |

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### Do Pros and Cons at your best moment and make list for darkest moment.

- Do with client or colleague or friend
- Afterwards, copy the Cons of making it worse and the Pros of tolerating distress onto one list
- Keep the list where you need it most!

If you are at your darkest moment, you will not be able to see the pros and cons at all clearly
So those are the DBT Distress Tolerance skills. Not new ideas – just conceptualized and organized in systematic way.

Few Tips

- Make sure the distress tolerance skill is close to the intensity of the distress
  - If you have the urge to die, ironing is probably not going to help!

- Make sure the timing of the skill matches the situation
  - Distracting with Sensations is a great way to get started but doesn’t last; so if crisis is long, pair with Activities or Contributing
  - Distracting with Thoughts lasts for minutes to maybe an hour – good for the bus, traffic, staff meetings, or the line at the DMV
  - Take a “vacation” for as long as time allows
Few Tips

Any Distress Tolerance skills overused can make things worse

- Soothing by taste is not a good idea if you are a compulsive eater or are gaining weight
- Take too many vacations, you don’t get anything done
- Distracting by watching a DVD TV series or reading novels can take over your life

Avoid Distraction when it is avoidance

- Often people see distraction - getting your mind off it - as the only way to cope when you can’t do anything about the problem
- Sometimes you need to stay with the problem such as staying in class or on the worksite or with your children (or with your clients)
- Be sure to learn Self-Soothing and IMPROVE as much as Distract for this

Practice DBT Distress Tolerance skills

Teach yourself before teaching your clients

- Observe what you do when the skill doesn’t work
- Observe how you go about using the skill
- Do each skill on purpose (even if it is something you do all the time)
- Practice each skill till you are good at it
- Challenge yourself to use the skills when your distress is high

This is what to coach clients to use
And, most of all, practice them when your distress is high so you can tolerate your crises too...

Thank you.