

Make Every Session Count: A Coping Skills Manual

Acute Distress Tolerance Skills

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Acute Distress Tolerance Skills

REGARDLESS OF THE circumstance or specific stress symptoms, many people, at times, encounter very intense or overwhelming distress (anger, frustration, irritation, anxiety, tremendous uneasiness, or sadness). At such times there is obviously no 100 percent quick fix to eliminate distress. However, the following approaches have been shown to be very successful in helping people to quickly turn down the volume on intense distress. Not only can these approaches decrease emotional suffering, but when people get in the habit of using these, it can lead to a greater sense of emotional self-control.

Sixty-Second Reality Check

Especially during times of stress it's common to experience moments of strong, upsetting feelings. One form of "homework" that just takes a minute is what we call the *sixty-second reality check*. This is a simple but powerful technique that can often help you gain perspective and reduce distress in just a minute. Here's how it works: As soon as something has happened that has triggered a strong feeling, take just a moment to go through the following list:

1. Does this (what's just happened) really matter to me?
2. In the grand scheme of things, how big a deal is it?
 - o Is it a true catastrophe?
 - o Is it likely to seem like a big deal in twenty-four hours?
 - o Is it likely to seem like a big deal in one week?
3. Am I taking it personally?
4. If I react now will it:
 - o Probably be helpful?
 - o Probably make things worse?
5. Would it make sense to take time to think through the situation and then decide how to react?

6. Are my thoughts and actions helping me or hurting me?

- o What I'm thinking or telling myself right now—is it helpful or is it hurtful?

It is important to emphasize that this technique is *not* designed to help you talk yourself out of feeling the way you do. It's very important to be true to how you really feel. At the same time, reflect a bit on how you really see a situation, so that you may then choose wisely how you want to respond. This brief "reality check" is a good way to gain perspective quickly and avoid impulsive reactions.

Turning Down the Volume on Strong Feelings

Once again the intention here is *not* to deny or minimize real, honest feelings, but rather to do something that can help you feel in *control* of your emotions. People often say or think certain words and phrases that operate like emotion amplifiers. Often, simply rephrasing (or reframing) your thoughts and words de-intensifies emotions without negating how you truly feel. Here is a very brief list of rephrases that you may find helpful.

You Say or Think	Rephrased
I really need it!	It's not that I absolutely need it...rather, I really want it
I feel guilty and am a bad person	I am not a bad person, but I do feel regret
It shouldn't be that way	It is and I don't like it
I'm being too sensitive	I do have strong feelings about this
It's a catastrophe	It's important and it matters a lot...although it may not be a complete catastrophe

Quickly Reducing Physical Aspects of Intense Emotions

The following have been shown to be effective ways to reduce some aspects of overwhelming emotions. Please keep in mind that these approaches are not designed to completely block out feelings. As we've stated before, most times people need to be aware of inner emotions. However, the following five techniques can help you reduce emotional intensity. Don't be fooled by the apparent simplicity of these approaches!

Exercise

Very vigorous exercise for a period of ten to twenty minutes is considered to result in increases of the neurochemical serotonin in the brain. Increases in serotonin levels are often accompanied by noticeable and rapid decreases in emotional distress (especially anger and irritability). The benefits are short term (lasting for twenty to thirty minutes generally), but the decrease in physical arousal often greatly facilitates one's ability to think more clearly, regain perspective, and counter the tendency to react in impulsive or maladaptive ways.

Crying

A perfectly natural and normal response to stress (not just sadness, but also frustration and anger) is to cry. Despite our society's prohibition on crying (especially for men: "Don't be a crybaby"... "Don't cry over spilt milk"...), scientific evidence exists to suggest that a "good cry" can dramatically reduce stress. Dr. William Frey (1983) has found that emotional tears contain stress hormones that are secreted and eliminated from the body. Additionally, the majority of people studied report a significant decrease in arousal and a sense of relief after crying (85% for women and 73% for men in these studies). The key is to give yourself permission to cry, without guilt or self-criticism. The research on the biology of crying reveals this to be a remarkable, built-in mechanism for rapid tension reduction and emotional self-soothing.

Dietary Solutions

A highly complex carbohydrate snack (without protein) is felt to increase absorption of essential amino acids into the brain, and may result in a degree of emotional calming (which can begin to be felt quickly and may last for one to one and a half hours). Except when excessive weight gain is a problem, this is a viable approach for some people.

Muscle Relaxation

Most states of intense distress involve considerable physical arousal and increased muscular tension. Relaxation techniques may be difficult to use in the throes of intense distress; however, soaking in a hot bath can often rapidly reduce some of the physical arousal.

Eye-Movement Techniques

In the 1990s it was discovered that back-and-forth eye movements can often rapidly produce a calming effect. This technique involves a set of twenty to thirty, back-and-forth eye movements. The person can, while holding the head still, gaze from side to side (shifting right and then left at the rate of about once a second). Initially, this is best done with the eyes open, but can eventually be done with your eyes closed. Exactly how this works to reduce distress is not well understood. Some research has suggested that it blocks anxious thoughts, while other research has demonstrated that it can lead to metabolic changes in the brain (as demonstrated in studies using PET: a sophisticated technique for observing brain activity). Generally the twenty to thirty back-and-forth eye movements are repeated three or four times, with a few minutes between each series of movements when the person relaxes.

All of these approaches can be taught and practiced in therapy sessions, and then used between sessions during times of increased distress. At the heart of such techniques is acquiring effective coping skills and the restoration of a sense of emotional control.