

Crisis Survival Skills Workbook

Crisis survival skills are effective for short-term, highly stressful situations that are emotionally overwhelming. This workbook presents four of our favorites from DBT:

- **STOP Skill: think before you act**
- **TIPP Skill: calm down fast**
- **ACCEPTS Skill: distract yourself**
- **IMPROVE Skill: tolerate a tough situation**

Crisis Survival Skills

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

Emotional crises can feel painful and overwhelming, making it difficult to make mindful decisions and resist unhelpful impulses. **This workbook presents four skills from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), a type of therapy that is effective for problems of emotional crisis and dysregulation.** To note, these skills are best used for emotional crises, not everyday problems, and with the guidance of a mental health professional.

Here is a brief introduction to each worksheet included in this package:

STOP Skill: think before you act

When we're in emotional crisis, we often act without thinking. This STOP skill worksheet helps us to Stop, Take a step back, Observe the situation and ourselves, and Proceed mindfully towards actions that make the situation better, not worse.

TIPP Skill: calm down fast

This worksheet uses powerful somatic (body-based) techniques to calm down emotional crises fast by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms us down. TIPP stands for Temperature, Intense exercise, Paced breathing, and Paired muscle relaxation.

ACCEPTS Skill: distract yourself

This worksheet helps you distract yourself until intense emotions pass by using Activities, Contributing, Comparisons, Emotions, Pushing away, Thoughts, and Sensations.

IMPROVE Skill: tolerate a tough situation

This worksheet helps you improve the current moment through Imagery, Meaning, Prayer, Relaxing, focusing on One thing at a time, taking a mini Vacation, and Encouragement and re-thinking. These skills help us tolerate lasting, difficult situations.

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*



STOP Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

The STOP Skill is a distress tolerance technique from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) that helps you manage impulsive behaviors and emotions. This worksheet will guide you through the STOP steps when you feel overwhelmed, distracted, or triggered.

S

Stop: when distress arises, freeze!

- Don't react or take action yet
- Your strong emotions might be trying to override your ability to think clearly and make good choices
- Stay in control!

T

Take a step back: pause and take a deep breath

- Take a break or leave the situation for the moment
- Take a deep breath into your diaphragm
- You may be feeling very strongly that you have to act *right now*. Remind yourself that you can pause

O

Observe: notice yourself and the situation

- What are your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behavior urges?
- What is the situation? What are you reacting to?
- What are other people saying or doing?

P

Proceed mindfully: choose your next steps with awareness

- Think about the situation, your thoughts and feelings, and others' thoughts and feelings
- Think about your goals, and what actions will help you get closer to them
- Ask wise mind which actions will make the situation better or worse

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STOP Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

Work through a past situation again

Use this page to get familiar with the STOP skill by reflecting on a past situation.

Think about a time in the past when you acted or reacted **impulsively**. This might look like:

- Saying or doing things you later regret
- Making choices without thinking about the consequences
- Doing things you're specifically trying *not* to do (e.g., smoking, substance use)

What triggered or caused your impulsive action? (e.g., *an argument with my partner about X*)

.....

.....

In a few words, what did you do impulsively? (e.g., *said Y, slammed the door, drove away*)

.....

.....

S Stop How long was the **pause** between the trigger and your action?

- No pause Seconds Minutes Hours Longer

T Take a step back If there was a pause, why did it happen?

- N/A I tried to stay in control I was feeling such intense emotions that I froze
 Other:

.....

O Observe Think back. What were your:

Thoughts:

Emotions:

Body sensations:

Actions:

P Proceed mindfully If you could try this situation again, what would you do differently?

.....

.....

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STOP Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

Use the STOP Skill in the moment

Use this page to try the STOP Skill in a moment of distress or impulsive urges. This page shows an example, and the next page is blank.

S Stop Freeze! Don't react or take action.

T Take a step back Pause and take a deep breath. How did you pause?

- Took deep diaphragmatic breaths Left the room Took a break Changed the subject
 Other:

O Observe Notice yourself and the situation:

What's happening? *My ex just broke up with me few days ago. I'm out at the bar with a friend to talk about it and he just walked in with a big group of people. He looks like he's having the time of his life and I'm miserable. I can't handle this. I ran into the bathroom for a second to get a grip.*

Thoughts: *He's going to see me and think I'm pathetic. I want to scream at him, make him realize what he's missing, get drunk, and beg him to get back together all at the same time.*

Emotions: *Surprised, sad, angry, distressed*

Body sensations: *My stomach dropped, fast heart rate, sweaty, red face, tearful*

Behavior urges: *Yell, flirt with a stranger in front of him, drink a lot, talk to him, sneak out*

What are others doing and saying? *My friend is with me in the bathroom. He's drinking with friends and watching the game. His friends are talking and laughing together. I don't think they noticed me.*

P Proceed mindfully Use wise mind to brainstorm actions that can make things better or get you closer to your goals.

All my urges might feel good temporarily, especially making him jealous or numbing the pain with drinking, but I'll probably feel embarrassed about it tomorrow. I guess the goal is to keep my dignity. I could:

- stay, ignore him and all my feelings - stay, say hi, and appear as unbothered as possible

- go home with my friend and talk about it - go to another bar with my friend and talk about it

What is the best choice? *- go home with my friend and talk about it*

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Other:

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What's happening?

.....

.....

Thoughts:

.....

Emotions:

.....

Body sensations:

.....

Behavior urges:

.....

What are others doing and saying?

.....

P Proceed mindfully

Use wise mind to brainstorm actions that can make things better or get you closer to your goals.

.....

.....

.....

.....

What is the best choice?

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TIPP Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

The TIPP skill from DBT is designed to help you quickly reduce intense emotions and regain control. It uses somatic techniques (focused on the body) to bring down emotional arousal by activating your parasympathetic nervous system. This worksheet will guide you through each step.

T

Temperature: use cold water and hold your breath

Putting cold water on your face while holding your breath activates a reflex that slows down your heart rate and calms down your body. Here are three ways you can try this technique when you feel distressed or out of control:

- Hold your breath and put your face into a **bowl of cold water** for 30-60 seconds. Make sure your face is submerged up to your temples.
- Wrap an **ice pack** or bag full of ice water in a towel. Get the bottom of the wrapped ice pack wet and place this side on your eyes and upper cheeks. Hold your breath.
- Hold your breath and **splash cold water** on your face.

Be careful: don't hurt your skin with extremely cold water (<50°F). If you have heart problems, ask your doctor before trying this, because this skill reduces the heart rate very rapidly.

Why does this work? Humans and other mammals have a “dive reflex” that helps us survive. When the brain senses that the body is submerged in water, it automatically slows down the heart rate to conserve oxygen. The reflex is activated specifically when someone’s face becomes wet and/or cold and they hold their breath. When in distress, we can use cold water on purpose to calm ourselves down.



I

Intense Exercise: do intense aerobic exercise for at least 20 min

Intense aerobic exercise changes our emotions for the better. When your fight or flight instinct is activated, your body is flooded with energy. Using that energy up quickly tells your body that the danger is over and it’s time to rest. You might try:

- Running
- Swimming
- Biking
- Jumping rope
- Jumping jacks
- Martial arts
- Dancing
- Heavy yardwork
- Hiking uphill

Why does this work? Our heart rates and emotions are connected. Research has shown that when you raise your heart rate to 70% of the maximum for your age, anxiety decreases significantly. Positive emotions increase when you raise your heart rate to 55-70% of the maximum for your age, with best results at 70%. You can figure out your maximum heart rate at this [website](#), or you can subtract your age from 220.



TIPP Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

P

Paced Breathing: breathe slowly into your diaphragm

When we're at rest, we naturally breathe slowly into our diaphragms. Slow, deep breathing on purpose tells our bodies it's time to be calm by activating the parasympathetic nervous system - the system that's involved with resting.

- Breathe into your diaphragm by placing one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Inhale and exhale so that **the hand on your stomach rises and falls**, but the one on your chest stays still.
- Slow your breathing to about 5-6 breaths per minute. You can do this by **breathing in for 4-5 seconds and out for 7-8 seconds**. Make sure the exhales are longer than the inhales.

P

Paired Muscle Relaxation: tense and release muscles

We hold a lot of physical tension in our bodies, especially when we're distressed. By tensing and releasing groups of muscles, they become more relaxed. When we bring attention to relaxed physical sensations, we are more likely to stay relaxed.

- Mentally rate how distressed or tense you feel from 0 (none) to 10 (maximum).
- For each muscle group (see the next page), breathe in and **tense the muscles** for 5-10 seconds, then breathe out and **let all the tension go** for 5-10 seconds.
- When you let go of the tension, focus on how it feels in your body. Feel the tension and energy draining away. Say to yourself, "**Relax,**" ** each time.
- Mentally rate how distressed or tense you feel from 0-10 again.

See the next page for a list of muscle groups to tense and relax



You can access a script for paired muscle relaxation, as well as a link to an accompanying video, on our [Paired Muscle Relaxation Script worksheet](#).



If you would rather access an *unscripted* one-page summary of paired muscle relaxation, so you can lead someone through the exercise on your own, see our [How to Do Paired Muscle Relaxation handout](#).

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TIPP Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

1. Tense and release each of the 16 muscle sets individually (i.e., start with just hands and wrists, then lower and upper arms, then shoulders).
2. Then try tensing and releasing small groups of muscle sets, which are grouped with dotted brackets (i.e., start by tensing hands, wrists, lower arms, and upper arms at the same time).
3. Then try tensing and releasing large groups of muscle sets, which are grouped with solid brackets (i.e., start by tensing hands, wrists, lower arms, upper arms, and shoulders).
4. Finally, try tensing your entire body at once.

hands and wrists: make fists and bend wrists in

lower and upper arms: make fists and pull them to shoulders

shoulders: pull shoulders to ears

forehead: pull eyebrows together and wrinkle forehead

eyes: shut eyes tightly

nose and upper cheeks: scrunch nose, pull lips and cheeks towards eyes

lips and lower face: press lips together, pull lips back towards ears

tongue and mouth: press teeth together, press tongue to roof of mouth

neck: push head into chair, floor, or bed, or pull chin to chest

chest: expand chest with a deep breath

back: arch back, bring shoulder blades together

stomach: squeeze stomach muscles in

buttocks: squeeze buttocks together

upper legs and thighs: stretch legs out and tense thighs

calves: stretch legs out, point toes

ankles: stretch legs out, point toes together with heels out and toes curled

An alternative to Paired Muscle Relaxation: Effective Rethinking

** If you're experiencing a stressful situation, you may be having difficult thoughts like "I'm going to fail," "This is a disaster," "They hate me," or "I can't do this." When you're distressed, it makes sense to have these kind of thoughts - *and* - replacing them with more effective, helpful, realistic thoughts can help reduce distress.

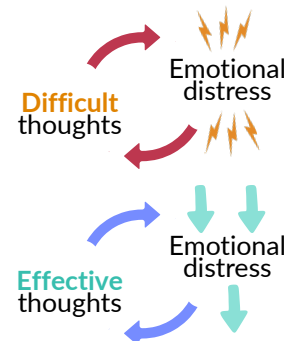
What are you thinking? (For example, "I'm going to fail.")

.....

More effective thoughts (For example, "I prepared. I can do it.")

.....

Try repeating your more effective thought when releasing tension.



You can access a script for effective rethinking, as well as a link to an accompanying video, on our [Effective Rethinking Script worksheet](#).



Use this page to record your practice of the TIPP Skill.

Describe the stressful situation. What happened and how are you feeling?	Which TIPP skill did you try?	Rate the effectiveness of the skill	Notes
	<input type="checkbox"/> Temperature <input type="checkbox"/> Intense exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Paced breathing <input type="checkbox"/> Paired muscle relaxation	☆☆☆☆	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Temperature <input type="checkbox"/> Intense exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Paced breathing <input type="checkbox"/> Paired muscle relaxation	☆☆☆☆	
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Scan or [click here](#) to learn more about DBT:

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ACCEPTS Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

When you're feeling overwhelmed or distressed, the ACCEPTS skill offers ways to distract yourself until the intense emotions pass. This worksheet helps you plan and practice healthy ways to cope during difficult times.

A

Activities

Do activities to stay busy

- Do chores
- Engage in a hobby
- Walk or exercise
- Call a friend
- Go out to eat
- Read
- Watch a show or movie
- Spend time with others
- Play games or sports

C

Contributing

Shift the focus by helping others

- Send a kind text
- Volunteer
- Surprise someone with something nice
- Make a donation
- Express gratitude
- Help a friend
- Give someone support

C

Comparisons

Change perspectives by making comparisons

- Think about others coping similarly (or less well) than you
- Compare your current struggle to a time in the past
- Consider ways the situation could be much more difficult

E

Emotions

Do something to create different emotions

- Read emotional stories
 - Watch emotional shows or movies
 - Listen to emotional music
- Be sure to create emotions that are different from your distress. Leaning into your distress with emotionally matching media may make it stronger.*

P

Pushing Away

Mentally set aside the distressing situation

- Imagine placing your problem in a mental box and closing it for now
- Catch your mind returning to the distressing situation and say, "No"
- Push the problem away; know it will still be there later, when you're calm

T

Thoughts

Focus your mind on something else

- Count down from 100
- Count objects of one color
- Do crossword puzzles or sudoku
- Repeat song lyrics in your mind
- List as many names, foods, places, etc. as possible starting with the same letter

S

Sensations

Use intense physical sensations to ground yourself

- Hold a piece of ice
- Go out in the rain or snow
- Take a cold shower
- Listen to loud music
- Do bodyweight exercises
- Drink/eat something cold in a hot bath

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Use this page to record your practice of the ACCEPTS Skill.

Describe the stressful situation. What happened and how are you feeling?	Which ACCEPT skill did you try?	Rate the effectiveness of the skill	Notes
	<input type="checkbox"/> Activities <input type="checkbox"/> Contributing <input type="checkbox"/> Comparisons <input type="checkbox"/> Emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Pushing Away <input type="checkbox"/> Thoughts <input type="checkbox"/> Sensations	☆☆☆☆☆	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Activities <input type="checkbox"/> Contributing <input type="checkbox"/> Comparisons <input type="checkbox"/> Emotions <input type="checkbox"/> Pushing Away <input type="checkbox"/> Thoughts <input type="checkbox"/> Sensations	☆☆☆☆☆	
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IMPROVE Skill

DBT: Distress Tolerance Skills

When you're feeling overwhelmed, the **IMPROVE** skill offers ways to make even distressing times slightly more positive by shifting your focus. This helps us tolerate lasting, difficult situations. When relatively calm, circle or highlight any ideas you think might help when you are very distressed. When you are very distressed, try one or more selected skills and check them off. Use the next page to reflect on how well they worked for you.

I

Imagery

- Imagine the most relaxing place in the world. Feel you're there with all your senses
- Imagine emotions drifting or draining away
- Recall a favorite memory in detail
- Imagine everything going well
- Imagine your favorite place

M

Meaning

- Find purpose or meaning in a challenging or painful situation
- Find any silver linings that you can
- Remind yourself of your spiritual values
- See yourself growing stronger, smarter, kinder, etc. because of this experience

P

Prayer

- Hold to your faith in God or the universe
- Open your heart to your own wisest self
- Pray or meditate on inner strength
- Turn things over to God or the universe
- Remember and have faith in your own strength and wisdom

R

Relaxing

- Take a hot bath or shower
- Drink a warm beverage
- Stretch or do yoga
- Breathe deeply into your diaphragm
- Notice and release tension in your shoulders, neck, face, hands, etc.

O

One thing in the moment

- Focus on where you are and what is happening in your environment *right now*
- Do one thing at a time and focus on it
- Brush away memories or future worries
- Focus on your senses and body sensations
- Do a grounding exercise

V

(Mini) Vacation

- Lay in bed or take a nap
- Go out into nature, fresh air, sunlight
- Eat a snack and watch your favorite show
- Mute your notifications for the day
- Get a massage or facial
- Purposely take breaks and rest

E

Encouragement and re-thinking

- Remind yourself: "This too shall pass"
- "This won't last forever"
- "I'm doing the best I can"
- Remind yourself of the facts relevant to the situation (e.g., "They care about me," "I've done this before," "Everyone make mistakes")



Use this page to record your practice of the IMPROVE Skill.

Describe the stressful situation. What happened and how are you feeling?	Which Self-Soothing skill did you try?	Rate the effectiveness of the skill	Notes
	<input type="checkbox"/> Imagery <input type="checkbox"/> Meaning <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxing <input type="checkbox"/> One thing... <input type="checkbox"/> Vacation <input type="checkbox"/> Encouragement	☆☆☆☆☆	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Imagery <input type="checkbox"/> Meaning <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxing <input type="checkbox"/> One thing... <input type="checkbox"/> Vacation <input type="checkbox"/> Encouragement	☆☆☆☆☆	
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Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



325+
Companies Reviewed



3,625+
Hours of Firsthand Experience



1,545+
Data Points Analyzed



[Best Online Therapy](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

[Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



[Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

[Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.





Tools for Self-Assessment and Psychoeducation

Figuring out the next step in your mental health journey can be overwhelming. Developed by psychologists, the tools at [ChoosingTherapy.com](https://www.ChoosingTherapy.com) can help. Our mental health self-assessment quizzes can help you explore common symptoms of mental health concerns, as well as find the best therapy style for you. Our mental health worksheets can guide you through therapy concepts and how to use them in your life.

[Learn More with Mental Health Quizzes](#)

Our collection of psychologist-developed mental health quizzes can help you learn if you are experiencing mild, moderate, or concerning levels of anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and more. Each quiz also provides targeted resources based on your answers. These self-assessments are designed to offer insight, not diagnoses, and can be a helpful first step in recognizing symptoms and deciding whether to seek further support. If you have concerns about your mental health or your quiz results, we recommend you reach out to a licensed mental health professional.



[Free Mental Health Worksheets](#)

Search our collection of therapy worksheets by mental health topic, therapy modality, or demographic group. Our free, psychologist-developed worksheets make therapy exercises understandable and relevant to daily life. Find worksheets for help with ADHD, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, and other common mental health challenges.