

You can't always anticipate when the bee will sting you or when something will make you sad. Often, the best you can do is to use the coping skills that you have and hope that they work.

First developed for treating borderline personality disorder, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has proven effective as treatment for a range of other mental health problems, especially for those characterized by overwhelming emotions. Research shows that DBT can improve your ability to handle distress without losing control and acting destructively. In order to make use of these techniques, you need to build skills in four key areas -- distress tolerance, mindfulness, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.

This book, a collaborative effort from three esteemed authors, offers straightforward, step-by-step exercises for learning these concepts and putting them to work for real and lasting change. Start by working on the introductory exercises and, after making progress, move on to the advance skills chapters. Whether you are a professional or a general reader, whether you use this book to support work done in therapy or as the basis for self-help, you'll benefit from this clear and practical guide to better managing your emotions.

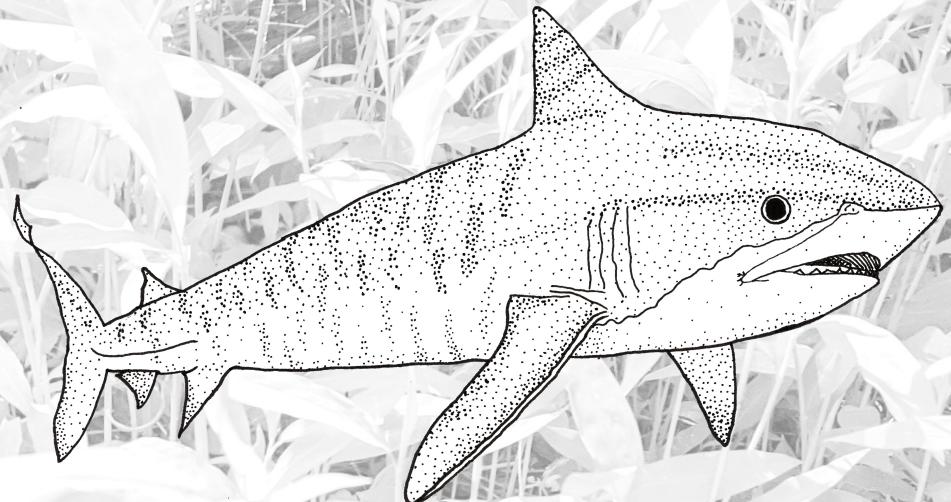
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# The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook

volume 1



## Distress Tolerance Skills

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## MY EMERGENCY COPING PLAN FOR DEALING WITH SITUATIONS

### *When I'm Upset and Alone*

First, I'll \_\_\_\_\_

Next, I'll \_\_\_\_\_

Then, I'll \_\_\_\_\_

Finally, I'll \_\_\_\_\_

Then, when you've finished making both plans, copy each of them on a single note card and keep the plans with you in your wallet or purse. This strategy will provide you with constant reminders about your new distress tolerance skills, and you'll no longer have to rely on your old, ineffective strategies. Plus you won't have to try to remember what to do the next time you're feeling angry, hurt, or upset. You can simply pull out your card and follow your own Emergency Coping Plan.

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## CONCLUSION

Remember to practice your new distress tolerance skills as often as possible, and don't get frustrated if you don't get them right on the first try. Learning new skills is hard, and it often feels awkward. But anyone can learn these distress tolerance skills, and they have already helped thousands of people just like you. Good luck.

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Use the examples provided to guide you, and make photocopies of the worksheets if you need additional space.

## CREATE AN EMERGENCY COPING PLAN

Hopefully, you've been practicing the new distress tolerance skills from chapters 1 and 2 and you now have a good idea about which ones work best for you. Or maybe using the New Coping Strategies worksheet in the last section helped you predict which ones are going to work best for you. Now you'll be ready for the next step, which will help you create a personally tailored plan for dealing with some common distressing situations, both when you're with other people and when you're alone.

For situations when you're with other people, list four coping strategies that you think will be the most effective for you. Again, be specific and include as many details about that strategy as you can. Begin with your most effective strategy, then the second most effective strategy, and so on. The plan is that you'll try the first strategy to see if it helps you cope with the distressing situation; then if it doesn't, you'll move on to the next strategy, and so on. Again, refer to any distress tolerance skills you found helpful in chapters 1 and 2, your New Coping Strategies worksheet in the last section, and any experience you have using the distress tolerance skills so far.

### MY EMERGENCY COPING PLAN FOR DEALING WITH SITUATIONS

#### *When I'm Upset and Dealing with Other People*

First, I'll \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Next, I'll \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Then, I'll \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Finally, I'll \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## CREATE NEW COPING STRATEGIES FOR DISTRESSING SITUATIONS WHEN YOU'RE ALONE

Distressing Situation	Old Coping Strategies	Unhealthy Consequences	New Coping Strategies	Healthier Possible Consequences
Example: Sometimes I feel scared when I'm alone.	I smoke pot. I go to the bar and drink. I cut myself. I spend money on my credit cards.	I feel sick after smoking or drinking too much. I get into fights at the bar. I bleed. I spend too much money for things I don't need.	Use mindful breathing. Remember my connection to the universe. Use safe-place visualization. Remember what I value.	I won't feel as anxious. I won't hurt myself. I'll have more money. I'll feel more relaxed.
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

On each worksheet, pick four distressing situations from the past and examine how you coped with them. Identify the unhealthy coping strategies you used and what the consequences were for you and anyone else who was involved. Then record which new distress tolerance skills could have been used to cope with those situations in a healthier way. Review chapters 1 and 2 and pick the distress tolerance skills that you found to be helpful. Consider these to be options for the “New Coping Strategies” column as you’re completing the two worksheets. Most importantly, be specific. If you write, “Use a new coping thought,” write what that thought is. Or if you write, “Take a time-out,” include what you’re going to do. Be specific so you don’t forget in the future. Finally, record what the healthier consequences would have been if you had used your new distress tolerance skills.

## INTRODUCTION

# Dialectical Behavior Therapy: An Overview of the Treatment

Dialectical behavior therapy, developed by Marsha Linehan (1993a, 1993b), is extraordinarily effective at helping people manage overwhelming emotions. Research shows that dialectical behavior therapy strengthens a person’s ability to handle distress without losing control or acting destructively.

A lot of people struggle with overwhelming emotions. It’s as if the knob is turned to maximum volume on much of what they feel. When they get angry or sad or scared, it shows up as a big, powerful wave that can sweep them off their feet.

If you’ve faced overwhelming emotions in your life, you know what we’re talking about. There are days when your feelings hit you with the force of a tsunami. And when that happens, it makes you—understandably—afraid to feel things because you don’t want to get swept away by your emotions. The trouble is, the more you try to suppress or put a lid on your emotions, the more overwhelming they can get. We’ll talk about that in chapters 6 and 7 on emotional regulation. What’s important to know right now is that trying to stop your feelings doesn’t work.

There’s a fair amount of research to suggest that the likelihood of developing intense, overwhelming emotions may be hardwired from birth. But it can also be greatly affected by trauma or neglect during childhood. Trauma at critical points in our development can literally alter our brain structure in ways that make us more vulnerable to intense, negative emotions. However, the fact that a propensity to intense emotions is often rooted in genetics or trauma doesn’t mean the problem can’t be overcome. Thousands of people have used the skills you’ll learn in this book to achieve better emotional control. They have changed their lives—and you can too.

So what are these skills, and how will they help you? Dialectical behavior therapy teaches four critically important skills that can both reduce the size of emotional waves and help you keep your balance when those emotions overwhelm you.

1. *Distress tolerance* will help you cope better with painful events by building up your resiliency and giving you new ways to soften the effects of upsetting circumstances.
2. *Mindfulness* will help you experience more fully the present moment while focusing less on painful experiences from the past or frightening possibilities in the future. Mindfulness will also give you tools to overcome habitual, negative judgments about yourself and others.
3. *Emotion regulation* skills help you to recognize more clearly what you feel and then to observe each emotion without getting overwhelmed by it. The goal is to modulate your feelings without behaving in reactive, destructive ways.
4. *Interpersonal effectiveness* gives you new tools to express your beliefs and needs, set limits, and negotiate solutions to problems—all while protecting your relationships and treating others with respect.

This book is structured to make learning easier. Each of the key skills is covered in two chapters—basic and advanced—except mindfulness, which has a third, more advanced chapter. The basic skills chapters teach necessary concepts, identify the components of the new skill, and lead you through initial steps for acquiring the skill. The advanced skills chapters take you through the remaining components of the skill, building level by level. There will be examples to make each step clear as well as assessments, exercises, and worksheets to help you practice each thing you learn. Then in the final chapter, Putting It All Together, you'll learn how to integrate all those skills, in order to make them a regular part of your life.

*The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook* is written to make learning easy. The hard part will be making the commitment to do the exercises and put your new skills into practice. Nothing will change by just reading. The words on these pages will have no impact on your life unless you implement—behaviorally—the new techniques and strategies you will learn here. So now is a good time to think about why you are reading this book and what you want to change. Right here, on this page, write down three ways you currently react to your emotions that you want to change. In other words, what three things do you do when upset or overwhelmed that are damaging—and that you are committed to replace with better ways to cope?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## CREATE NEW COPING STRATEGIES FOR DISTRESSING SITUATIONS WHEN YOU'RE WITH SOMEONE ELSE

Distressing Situation	Old Coping Strategies	Unhealthy Consequences	New Coping Strategies	Healthier Possible Consequences
Example: When I'm with my brother, he always corrects everything I do.	We fight. I eat too much. I scratch myself. I think about all the times he's insulted me in the past.	We both get angry. I gain weight. I get cuts all over my face and arms. I feel horrible for days thinking about the past.	Take a time-out. Use my new coping thought: "I'm strong and I can deal with him." Radically accept myself and situation in a new way.	We won't fight as much. I won't eat as much. I'll feel stronger. Maybe I can deal with the situation better in the future.
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

## WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

There are two intended audiences for *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook*. The first is people who are in dialectical behavior therapy (either group or individual) and need a workbook to help learn the four key skills. We also wrote this book so it could be used independently by anyone who struggles with overwhelming feelings. All the tools are here to achieve significant changes in your ability to control emotion. With that said, if you are reading this workbook on your own and are having a hard time implementing the new skills, we strongly recommend seeking the services of a qualified dialectical behavior therapist.

## THERE IS HOPE

Life is hard. You already know that. But you are not stuck or helpless in your struggle with your emotions. You can expect, if you really do the work to implement these skills, that how you react to feelings will change. That's because—regardless of genetics or early pain—the key skills you'll learn here can affect the outcome of every conflict and every upset and can literally alter the course of your relationships. There is every reason to hope. All you have to do is turn the page and begin. Then keep working at it.

new coping strategies you can use in the future if you experience similar situations and what the healthier consequences might be as a result of using those new strategies.

But as you'll notice, you've been given two different New Coping Strategies worksheets. This is because you'll need different coping strategies to use in situations when you're alone or when you're with someone else. For example, when you're alone and feel overwhelmed, it might be most effective to use cue-controlled relaxation or mindful breathing techniques to soothe yourself. But these techniques might be awkward or impossible to use when you're with someone else. So you'll need to be prepared with other skills for those situations.

Here's an example of preparing for both kinds of situations. Carl identified a distressing situation that occurred when he was with someone else. He wrote: "When I'm with my brother, he always corrects everything I do." This is a good situation for Carl to examine because it's predictable that the next time he's with his brother, Carl will experience a similar distressing situation. Next, Carl identified how he usually coped with that situation with his brother, using his old coping strategies. He wrote: "We fight. I eat too much. I scratch myself. I think about all the times he's insulted me in the past." Then Carl recorded the unhealthy consequences of his actions: "We both get angry. I gain weight. I get cuts all over my face and arms. I feel horrible for days thinking about the past." Obviously, none of Carl's strategies has had any long-term benefits. Next, Carl identified new distress tolerance skills he could use the next time this situation arose with his brother. Under "New Coping Strategies," Carl wrote the most appropriate distress tolerance skills for this type of situation. He chose them from the skills he found helpful in the last two chapters. He wrote: "Take a time-out. Use my new coping thought: I'm strong and I can deal with him. Radically accept myself and the situation in a new way." Then he predicted what the healthier possible consequences of these new strategies would be: "We won't fight as much. I won't eat as much. I'll feel stronger. Maybe I can deal with the situation better in the future." Obviously, the consequences of using his new distress tolerance skills would have been much healthier for Carl.

But these coping strategies are probably different from the strategies he might choose when he's in a distressing situation by himself. So Carl also filled out the worksheet for coping with distressing situations when he's alone. The situation he selected was: "Sometimes I feel scared when I'm alone." Again, this is a good situation for Carl to examine because it's predictable that he will experience this same overwhelming feeling the next time he's alone. The old coping strategies that Carl used to deal with this situation were: "I smoke pot. I go to the bar and drink. I cut myself. I spend money on my credit card." And the unhealthy consequences of these actions were: "I feel sick after smoking or drinking too much. I get into fights at the bar. I bleed. I spend too much money for things I don't need." Next, in order to prepare for the future, Carl chose new coping strategies to deal with this situation: "Use mindful breathing. Remember my connection to the universe. Use safe-place visualization. Remember what I value." And finally, the healthier possible consequences that he predicted were: "I won't feel as anxious. I won't hurt myself. I'll have more money. I'll feel more relaxed." Again, it's easy to see that Carl's new distress tolerance skills are much healthier for him than his old coping strategies. The same results can also benefit you if you take the time to prepare for predictable situations in your own future.

- "I'm a good person, not a mistake."
- "I'm good and nobody's perfect."
- "I embrace both my good and bad qualities."
- "Today I take responsibility for everything I do and say."
- "I'm becoming a better person every day."
- "I'm a sensitive person who experiences the world differently."
- "I'm a sensitive person with rich emotional experiences."
- "Each day I do the best I can."
- "Even though I forget sometimes, I'm still a good person."
- "Even though bad things happened to me in the past, I'm still a good person."
- "Even though I've made mistakes in the past, I'm still a good person."
- "I'm here for a reason."
- "There's a purpose to my life, even though I might not always see it."
- "I radically accept myself."
- Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

Some people find it helpful to write their self-affirming statements on index cards and then post them throughout their homes. One woman wrote her statement on her bathroom mirror with an erasable marker so it was the first thing she saw in the morning. One man wrote his on a sticky note and kept it posted on his computer as he worked. You can choose to remind yourself of your self-affirming statement in any way that works. But choose a technique that will remind you many times throughout the day. The more often you can see the statement, the more it will help change the way you think about yourself.

---

## CREATE NEW COPING STRATEGIES

Now that you're familiar with all the distress tolerance skills, you can create new coping strategies for your future. The easiest way to do this is to examine some of the distressing situations you've experienced in the past and to identify how you've coped with them. Often, people with overwhelming emotions go through similar distressing situations over and over again. So in some ways these situations are predictable. In this exercise, you'll identify what those past situations were, how you coped with them, and what the unhealthy consequences were. Then you'll identify what

# CHAPTER I

## Basic Distress Tolerance Skills

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### DISTRESS TOLERANCE SKILLS: WHAT ARE THEY?

At some point in our lives, we all have to cope with distress and pain. Either it can be physical, like a bee sting or a broken arm, or it can be emotional, like sadness or anger. In both cases, the pain is often unavoidable and unpredictable. You can't always anticipate when the bee will sting you or when something will make you sad. Often, the best you can do is to use the coping skills that you have and hope that they work.

But for some people, emotional and physical pain feels more intense and occurs more frequently than it does for other people. Their distress comes on more quickly and feels like an overwhelming tidal wave. Often, these situations feel like they'll never end, and the people experiencing them don't know how to cope with the severity of their pain. For the purposes of this book, we'll call this problem *overwhelming emotions*. (But remember, emotional and physical pain often occur together.)

People struggling with overwhelming emotions often deal with their pain in very unhealthy, very unsuccessful ways because they don't know what else to do. This is understandable. When a person is in emotional pain, it's hard to be rational and to think of a good solution. Nevertheless, many of the coping strategies used by people with overwhelming emotions only serve to make their problems worse.

Here's a list of some common coping strategies used by people dealing with this problem. Check (✓) the ones that you use to cope with your stressful situations:

- You spend a great deal of time thinking about past pains, mistakes, and problems.
- You get anxious worrying about possible future pains, mistakes, and problems.
- You isolate yourself from other people to avoid distressing situations.

- \_\_\_ You make yourself feel numb with alcohol or drugs.
- \_\_\_ You take your feelings out on other people by getting excessively angry at them or trying to control them.
- \_\_\_ You engage in dangerous behaviors, such as cutting, hitting, picking at, or burning yourself or pulling out your own hair.
- \_\_\_ You engage in unsafe sexual activities, such as having sex with strangers or having frequent unprotected sex.
- \_\_\_ You avoid dealing with the causes of your problems, such as an abusive or dysfunctional relationship.
- \_\_\_ You use food to punish or control yourself by eating too much, not eating at all, or by throwing up what you do eat.
- \_\_\_ You attempt suicide or engage in high-risk activities, like reckless driving or taking dangerous amounts of alcohol and drugs.
- \_\_\_ You avoid pleasant activities, such as social events and exercise, maybe because you don't think that you deserve to feel better.
- \_\_\_ You surrender to your pain and resign yourself to living a miserable and unfulfilling life.

All of these strategies are paths to even deeper emotional pain, because even the strategies that offer temporary relief will only cause you more suffering in the future. Use the Cost of Self-Destructive Coping Strategies worksheet to see how. Note the strategies that you use as well as their costs, and then include any additional costs that you can think of. At the end of the worksheet, feel free to add any of your own strategies that aren't included as well as their costs.

- How could you have changed your response to this situation so that it led to less suffering for yourself and others? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- How could the situation have occurred differently if you had decided to radically accept the situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

It's very important to remember that radical acceptance also applies to accepting yourself. In this case, radical acceptance means embracing who you are without judging or criticizing yourself. Or, to put it another way, radically accepting yourself means loving yourself just the way you are, with all of your goodness and all of your faults. Finding the goodness inside of yourself might be a difficult challenge, especially if you're struggling with overwhelming emotions. Many people with this problem often think of themselves as being defective, bad, or unlovable. As a result, they overlook their good qualities and add more pain to their lives. This is why radically accepting yourself is so extremely important.

---

## SELF-AFFIRMING STATEMENTS

To begin building a healthier self-image, many people find it helpful to use self-affirming statements. The purpose of these statements is to remind yourself of the good qualities you possess in order to give you strength and resilience when confronted with distressing situations. This type of statement will remind you that hidden underneath your sometimes overwhelming emotions is a caring, loving person who is capable of handling a distressing situation in a healthier way.

### *Example: Self-Affirming Statements*

Here are some examples of self-affirming statements. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to use, and then create your own:

- \_\_\_ "I might have some faults, but I'm still a good person."
- \_\_\_ "I care about myself and other people."
- \_\_\_ "I accept who I am."
- \_\_\_ "I love myself."

- What past events happened that led up to this situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What role did you play in creating this situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What roles did other people play in creating this situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What *do* you have control of in this situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What *don't* you have control of in this situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What was your response to this situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How did your response affect your own thoughts and feelings? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How did your response affect the thoughts and feelings of other people? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## THE COST OF SELF-DESTRUCTIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Self-Destructive Coping Strategy	Possible Costs
1. You spend a great deal of time thinking about past pain, mistakes, and problems.	Miss good things that might be happening now and then regret missing those things, too; depression about the past Other: _____ _____
2. You get anxious worrying about possible future pain, mistakes, and problems.	Miss good things that might be happening now; anxiety about the future Other: _____ _____
3. You isolate yourself to avoid possible pain.	Spend more time alone and, as a result, feel even more depressed Other: _____ _____
4. You use alcohol and drugs to numb yourself.	Addiction; loss of money; work problems; legal problems; relationship problems; health consequences Other: _____ _____
5. You take your painful feelings out on others.	Loss of friendships, romantic relationships, and family members; other people avoid you; loneliness; feel bad about hurting other people; legal consequences of your actions Other: _____ _____
6. You engage in dangerous behaviors, like cutting, pulling out hair, and self-mutilation.	Possible death; infection; scarring; disfigurement; shame; physical pain Other: _____ _____

7. You engage in unsafe sexual activity, like unprotected sex or frequent sex with strangers.	Sexually transmitted diseases, some life threatening; pregnancy; shame; embarrassment Other: _____ _____
8. You avoid dealing with the causes of your problems.	Put up with destructive relationships; get burned-out doing things for other people; don't get any of your own needs met; depression Other: _____ _____
9. You eat too much, restrict what you eat, or throw up what you eat.	Weight gain; anorexia; bulimia; health consequences; medical treatment; embarrassment; shame; depression Other: _____ _____
10. You have attempted suicide or engaged in other nearly fatal activities.	Possible death; hospitalization; embarrassment; shame; depression; long-term medical complications Other: _____ _____
11. You avoid pleasant activities, like social events and exercise.	Lack of enjoyment; lack of exercise; depression; shame; isolation Other: _____ _____
12. You surrender to your pain and live an unfulfilling life.	Lots of pain and distress; regrets about your life; depression Other: _____ _____
13.	_____ _____
14.	_____ _____

- *What doesn't Christine have control of in this situation?* Ultimately, it is John who has to seek help to stop his alcohol addiction. Christine can't make him stop drinking. She also doesn't have control of how John chooses to behave toward her in this situation.
- *What was Christine's response to this situation?* She tried to kill herself, and then she smashed John's windshield.
- *How did her response affect her own thoughts and feelings?* Her actions made her feel worse about herself and her relationship, and she kept thinking about why she was still in this destructive relationship.
- *How did her response affect the thoughts and feelings of other people?* Christine and John were arrested, which made both of them feel worse than they already did about themselves and their relationship.
- *How could Christine have changed her response to this situation so that it led to less suffering for herself and John?* She could have used other distress tolerance skills to cope with her pain and anger. She could also have used radical acceptance to reevaluate the situation so that she could choose to react in a different way. And perhaps she could even have chosen to leave John that evening, even temporarily, which might have been less painful for the both of them.
- *How could the situation have occurred differently if Christine had decided to radically accept the situation?* If she had used some type of distress tolerance skills that evening, maybe she could have waited until the next morning to talk to John about how angry she felt at work and how upset his drinking made her feel. Or maybe if she had ended the relationship, she could have made space in her life for a healthier relationship or simply spared herself the reoccurring pain of a destructive relationship.

---

### Exercise: Radical Acceptance

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Now answer the same questions for yourself. Think of a distressing situation that you experienced recently. Then answer these questions that will help you radically accept the situation in a new way:

- What happened in this distressing situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Example: Using Radical Acceptance**

Christine and her boyfriend John had a difficult relationship. John spent a lot of his free time at the bar drinking with his friends, and in response, Christine would get mad, threaten to leave him, and then do something destructive to “piss him off.” This occurred regularly for five years. Then one night Christine came home from work angry, and when John wasn’t around to talk to, she suddenly felt hopeless about their relationship. So she called John at the bar to tell him that she was going to kill herself because she couldn’t put up with his behavior any longer. John raced home to find Christine swallowing a handful of pills, and he made her spit them out. Then he made her promise that she wouldn’t do it again. She promised, and then John left, taking the keys to Christine’s car so that she couldn’t go anywhere. Now Christine got even angrier and called the police to report that her keys had been stolen. Then she walked up to the bar, found John’s car, and smashed his windshield with a brick. She would have broken the other windows too, but the police stopped her and arrested her. Needless to say, neither Christine nor John gave any consideration to using radical acceptance in this situation. Both of them were angry at each other, and by acting on their anger, they both ended up hurting themselves and the other person.

So how could this situation have occurred differently if radical acceptance had been used? Let’s consider the situation from Christine’s point of view. Instead of threatening to kill herself, maybe she could have used one of the distress tolerance skills you learned in the last chapter. Remember your strategy for dealing with distressing situations is to distract, relax, and cope. Maybe Christine could have screamed into a pillow and then gone outside for a long walk. Or maybe she could have called one of her friends to talk for a little while. Then after she’d cooled off a bit, maybe she could have asked herself the following questions and used radical acceptance to reexamine her situation.

- **What events led up to Christine’s situation?** She and John had been behaving and fighting like this for years. This night was nothing new. But she had come home angry about work, and she became even angrier with John because he wasn’t around.
- **What role did Christine play in creating this situation?** Instead of trying to cope with her anger and frustration in a healthy way, she took her emotions out on herself and John. Also, Christine had had many reasons and opportunities in the past to end this relationship if she wanted to, but she had chosen to stay in this destructive relationship.
- **What role did John play in creating this situation?** John had an alcohol addiction that had been interfering with their relationship for five years. This night, he also didn’t take the time to discuss Christine’s suicidal behaviors with her. Instead, he chose to return to the bar, which made her even angrier.
- **What does Christine have control of in this situation?** She can end the relationship if she wants to, or she can choose a different way to cope with this distressing situation.

The costs of these self-destructive coping strategies are clear. All of them lead to your pain being prolonged into long-term suffering. Remember, sometimes pain can’t be avoided, but many times suffering can.

Take, for example, an argument between friends Maria and Sandra. For Maria, who doesn’t have overwhelming emotions, the argument was initially painful. But after a few hours, she began to realize that she and Sandra were both to blame for the argument. So by the next day, Maria was no longer upset or mad at Sandra. But for Sandra, who struggles with overwhelming emotions, the argument was replayed in her memory over and over again for three days. Each word and gesture was remembered as an insult from Maria. So the next time Sandra saw Maria, three days later, Sandra was still angry and she restarted the argument just where it had ended. Both women experienced the initial pain of the argument, but only Sandra was suffering. Clearly, Sandra carried her emotional pain with her for days, and it made her life more of a struggle. While we can’t always control the pain in our lives, we can control the amount of suffering we have in response to that pain.

To avoid this type of long-term suffering, chapters 1 and 2 will teach you *distress tolerance skills*. These skills will help you endure and cope with your pain in a new, healthier way so that it doesn’t lead to suffering. The new plan outlined in these two chapters will teach you to “distract, relax, and cope.”

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## **ABOUT THIS CHAPTER**

The first distress tolerance skills you’ll learn in this chapter will help you distract yourself from the situations that are causing you emotional pain. Distraction skills are important because (1) they can temporarily stop you from thinking about your pain and, as a result, (2) they give you time to find an appropriate coping response. Remember how Sandra carried her pain with her for three days? She couldn’t stop thinking about her argument with Maria. Distraction can help you let go of the pain by helping you think about something else. Distraction also buys you time so that your emotions can settle down before you take action to deal with a distressing situation.

However, do not confuse distraction with avoidance. When you avoid a distressing situation, you choose not to deal with it. But when you distract yourself from a distressing situation, you still intend to deal with it in the future, when your emotions have calmed down to a tolerable level.

The second group of distress tolerance skills you’ll learn in this chapter are self-soothing skills (Johnson, 1985; Linehan, 1993b). It’s often necessary to soothe yourself before you face the cause of your distress because your emotions might be too “hot.” Many people with overwhelming emotions panic when faced with an argument, rejection, failure, or other painful events. Before you can address these problems with your new emotion regulation skills (chapters 6 and 7) or your new interpersonal effectiveness skills (chapters 8 and 9), it’s often necessary to soothe yourself to regain your strength. In situations like these, distress tolerance skills are similar to refilling the gas in your car so that you can keep going. Self-soothing is meant to bring you some amount of peace and relief from your pain so that you can figure out what you’re going to do next.

Self-soothing skills also serve another purpose. They'll help you learn to treat yourself compassionately. Many people with overwhelming emotions have been abused or neglected as children. As a result, they were taught more about how to hurt than to help themselves. The second purpose of the self-soothing skills, therefore, is to teach you how to treat yourself kindly and lovingly.

## HOW TO USE THIS CHAPTER

As you read the following groups of skills, mark the ones that are helpful to you. This will make it easier to create a distraction plan for emergencies when you get to the end of this chapter. You'll also be shown how to create a list of relaxation skills to help soothe yourself, both at home and when you're away. Then, in the next chapter, you'll learn more advanced distress tolerance skills.

## RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

Increasing your ability to tolerate distress starts with a change in your attitude. You're going to need something called *radical acceptance* (Linehan, 1993a). This is a new way of looking at your life. In the next chapter, you'll be given some key questions to help you examine your experiences using radical acceptance. But for now, it will be sufficient to cover this concept briefly.

Often, when a person is in pain, his or her first reaction is to get angry or upset or to blame someone for causing the pain in the first place. But unfortunately, no matter who you blame for your distress, your pain still exists and you continue to suffer. In fact, in some cases, the angrier you get, the worse your pain will feel (Greenwood, Thurston, Rumble, Waters, & Keefe, 2003; Kerns, Rosenberg, & Jacob, 1994).

Getting angry or upset over a situation also stops you from seeing what is really happening. Have you ever heard the expression "being blinded by rage"? This often happens to people with overwhelming emotions. Criticizing yourself all the time or being overly judgmental of a situation is like wearing dark sunglasses indoors. By doing this, you're missing the details and not seeing everything as it really is. By getting angry and thinking that a situation should never have happened, you're missing the point that it *did* happen and that you have to deal with it.

Being overly critical about a situation prevents you from taking steps to change that situation. You can't change the past. And if you spend your time fighting the past—wishfully thinking that your anger will change the outcome of an event that has already happened—you'll become paralyzed and helpless. Then, nothing will improve.

So, to review—being overly judgmental of a situation or overly critical of yourself often leads to more pain, missed details, and paralysis. Obviously, getting angry, upset, or critical doesn't improve a situation. So what else can you do?

The other option, which radical acceptance suggests, is to acknowledge your present situation, whatever it is, without judging the events or criticizing yourself. Instead, try to recognize that your present situation exists because of a long chain of events that began far in the past. For example,

## RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

The word *dialectic* (in *dialectical behavior therapy*) means to balance and compare two things that appear very different or even contradictory. In dialectical behavior therapy, the balance is between change and acceptance (Linehan, 1993a). You need to change the behaviors in your life that are creating more suffering for yourself and others while simultaneously also accepting yourself the way you are. This might sound contradictory, but it's a key part of this treatment. Dialectical behavior therapy depends on acceptance *and* change, not acceptance *or* change. Most of this book will focus on skills you can develop to change your life. But this section will focus on how to accept your life. In fact, it will teach you how to *radically* accept your life.

Radical acceptance is one of the hardest skills in this chapter to master because it will require you to look at yourself and the world in a different way. However, it's also one of the most important skills in dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan, 1993a). (You'll be exploring it further in chapters 3 through 5 on mindfulness skills.) Radical acceptance means that you accept something completely, without judging it. For example, radically accepting the present moment means that you don't fight it, get angry at it, or try to change it into something that it's not. To radically accept the present moment means that you must acknowledge that the present moment is what it is due to a long chain of events and decisions made by you and other people *in the past*. The present moment never spontaneously leaps into existence without being caused by events that have already taken place. Imagine that each moment of your life is connected like a line of dominoes that knock each other down.

But remember, radically accepting something doesn't mean that you give up and simply accept every bad situation that happens to you. Some situations in life are unjust, such as when someone abuses or assaults you. But for other situations in life, you share at least some responsibility. There's a balance between what you created and what others have created. However, many people struggling with overwhelming emotions often feel like life just "happens" to them, not recognizing their own role in creating a situation. As a result, their first reaction is to get angry. In fact, one woman said that anger was her "default emotion," meaning that when she was just being herself, she was angry. Her excessive hostility caused her to hurt herself—by drinking heavily, cutting herself, and constantly berating herself—and it also led to her hurting the people she cared about by constantly fighting with them.

In contrast, radically accepting the present moment opens up the opportunity for you to recognize the role that you have played in creating your current situation. And as a result, it also creates an opportunity to respond to that situation in a new way that's less painful for yourself and others. In many ways, radical acceptance is like the Serenity Prayer, which says: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." In the exercise below, you will find some questions to ask yourself when you want to use radical acceptance. But first, let's look at an example of how radical acceptance can help a person in a distressing situation.

## COPING THOUGHTS WORKSHEET

Distressing Situation	New Coping Thought
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
11.	

some time ago, you (or someone else) thought you needed help for the emotional pain you were experiencing. So, a few days later, you went to the bookstore and bought this book. Then today you thought about reading this chapter, and eventually you sat down, opened the book, and began reading. Now, you are up to the words you see here. Denying this chain of events does nothing to change what has already happened. Trying to fight this moment or say that it shouldn't be only leads to more suffering for you. Radical acceptance means looking at yourself and the situation and seeing it as it really is.

Keep in mind that radical acceptance does *not* mean that you condone or agree with bad behavior in others. But it does mean that you stop trying to change what's happened by getting angry and blaming the situation. For example, if you're in an abusive relationship and you need to get out, then get out. Don't waste your time and continue to suffer by blaming yourself or the other person. That won't help you. Refocus your attention on what you can do now. This will allow you to think more clearly and figure out a better way to cope with your suffering.

### ***Radical Acceptance Coping Statements***

To help you begin using radical acceptance, it's often helpful to use a coping statement to remind yourself. Below are a few examples and spaces to create your own. Check (✓) the statements that you would be willing to use to remind yourself that you should accept the present moment and the chain of events that created it. Then, in the next exercise, you'll begin using the statements that you chose.

- \_\_\_ “This is the way it has to be.”
- \_\_\_ “All the events have led up to now.”
- \_\_\_ “I can’t change what’s already happened.”
- \_\_\_ “It’s no use fighting the past.”
- \_\_\_ “Fighting the past only blinds me to my present.”
- \_\_\_ “The present is the only moment I have control over.”
- \_\_\_ “It’s a waste of time to fight what’s already occurred.”
- \_\_\_ “The present moment is perfect, even if I don’t like what’s happening.”
- \_\_\_ “This moment is exactly as it should be, given what’s happened before it.”
- \_\_\_ “This moment is the result of over a million other decisions.”
- \_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

## Exercise: Radical Acceptance

Now, using the coping statements that you checked, begin radically accepting different moments in your life without judging them. Naturally, it will be difficult to accept very painful situations, so start with smaller events. Here are some suggestions. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and add any of your own ideas. Then use your coping statements to radically accept the situation without being judgmental or critical.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Read a controversial story in the newspaper without being judgmental about what has occurred.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The next time you get caught in heavy traffic, wait without being critical.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Watch the world news on television without being critical of what's happening.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Listen to a news story or a political commentary on the radio without being judgmental.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Review a nonupsetting event that happened in your life many years ago, and use radical acceptance to remember the event without judging it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## DISTRACT YOURSELF FROM SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS

One of the most important purposes of dialectical behavior therapy is to help you stop engaging in self-destructive behaviors, such as cutting, burning, scratching, and mutilating yourself (Linehan, 1993a). No one can deny the amount of pain you are in when you engage in one of these behaviors. Some people with overwhelming emotions say that self-injury temporarily relieves them of some of the pain they're feeling. This might be true, but it's also true that these actions can cause serious permanent damage and even death if taken to an extreme.

Think about all the pain you've already been through in your life. Think about all the people who have hurt you physically, sexually, emotionally, and verbally. Does it make sense to continue hurting yourself even more in the present? Doesn't it make more sense to start healing yourself and your wounds? If you really want to recover from the pain you've already experienced, stopping these self-destructive behaviors is the first step you should take. This can be very hard to do. You might be addicted to the rush of natural painkillers called *endorphins* that are released when you hurt yourself. However, these types of self-destructive actions are highly dangerous and certainly deserve your best efforts to control them.

## EXAMPLE: USING COPING THOUGHTS

Distressing Situation	New Coping Thought
1. My boss yelled at me.	"This job stinks, but it's only temporary."
2. The weatherperson on television said that there is a really bad storm approaching that might cause some minor flooding.	"I can keep taking deep breaths and remind myself that this will pass soon. I can cope."
3. I couldn't get my gardening done before my friends came over, and I really wanted them to see how nice my backyard looks.	"It's disappointing, but I can cope. I'll talk about my plans for the backyard."
4. My sister called me "selfish" for not leaving work early to take her shopping.	"She lives in a world of pain herself; that's how she copes with disappointment."
5. I got sad while watching a movie.	"These are just my feelings, and eventually they'll go away. I can use my skills to cope."
6. I heard police sirens coming down the street, and it made me nervous.	"I'm not in danger right now. I'm safe and I'm comfortable behind the closed doors of my house."
7. The store clerk gave me the wrong change, and I have to go back and ask for more money.	"I can deal with this. I can say what I want, and deal with the disappointment if I don't get it."
8. My daughter is leaving for college, and I'm really going to miss her.	"My sadness won't kill me; it just doesn't feel good right now."
9. I get nervous when I don't have anything to keep me busy.	"I can take all the time I need right now to let go and relax."
10. I really hate to fly, but I need to go visit my grandmother in Tulsa.	"This is an opportunity for me to learn how to cope with my fears. I'll use my breathing and visualization skills."

\_\_\_\_ “It’s okay to feel sad/anxious/afraid sometimes.”

\_\_\_\_ “My thoughts don’t control my life, I do.”

\_\_\_\_ “I can think different thoughts if I want to.”

\_\_\_\_ “I’m not in danger right now.”

\_\_\_\_ “So what?”

\_\_\_\_ “This situation sucks, but it’s only temporary.”

\_\_\_\_ “I’m strong and I can deal with this.”

\_\_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Coping thoughts can help you tolerate distressing situations by giving you strength and motivation to endure those experiences. Now that you know about coping thoughts, you can begin using them immediately. Write your five favorite coping thoughts on an index card or a sticky note and keep it with you in your wallet or purse. Or put your coping thoughts in conspicuous places where you can see them every day, like on your refrigerator or mirror. The more you see your coping thoughts, the more quickly they will become part of your automatic thought process.

Use the following worksheet to record stressful situations in which you use your coping thoughts to give you strength. Make copies of the worksheet, and keep one with you so that you can record the experience as soon as it happens. Recording the experience quickly might be awkward or inconvenient for you, but doing it this way will help you remember to use your self-encouraging coping thoughts more often. Read the example worksheet for ideas about when coping thoughts might be helpful to you.

## Exercise: Distract Yourself from Self-Destructive Behaviors

Here are some safer actions that you can use to distract yourself from your self-destructive emotions and thoughts. Check (✓) the ones you’re willing to do, and then add any healthy, nonharming activities that you can think of:

- \_\_\_\_ Instead of hurting yourself, hold an ice cube in one hand and squeeze it. The sensation from the cold ice is numbing and very distracting.
- \_\_\_\_ Write on yourself with a red felt-tip marker instead of cutting. Draw exactly where you would cut. Use red paint or nail polish to make it look like you’re bleeding. Then draw stitches with a black marker. If you need to make it even more distracting, squeeze an ice cube in the other hand at the same time.
- \_\_\_\_ Snap a rubber band on your wrist each time you feel like hurting yourself. This is very painful, but it causes less permanent damage than cutting, burning, or mutilating yourself.
- \_\_\_\_ Dig your fingernails into your arm without breaking the skin.
- \_\_\_\_ Draw faces of people you hate on balloons and then pop them.
- \_\_\_\_ Write letters to people you hate or to people who have hurt you. Tell them what they did to you and tell them why you hate them. Then throw the letters away or save them to read later.
- \_\_\_\_ Throw foam balls, rolled-up socks, or pillows against the wall as hard as you can.
- \_\_\_\_ Scream as loud as you can into a pillow or scream some place where you won’t draw the attention of other people, like at a loud concert or in your car.
- \_\_\_\_ Stick pins in a voodoo doll instead of hurting yourself. You can make a voodoo doll with some rolled-up socks or a foam ball and some markers. Or you can buy a doll in a store for the specific purpose of sticking pins in it. Buy one that’s soft and easy to stick.
- \_\_\_\_ Cry. Sometimes people do other things instead of crying because they’re afraid that if they start to cry they’ll never stop. This never happens. In fact, the truth is that crying can make you feel better because it releases stress hormones.
- \_\_\_\_ Other healthy, nonharming ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Here's an example of using alternative actions to distract your self-destructive emotions. Lucy often cut herself when she felt upset or angry. She had dozens of scars on her wrists and forearms. She wore long-sleeve shirts even in the hot summer because she was embarrassed when other people saw what she had done to herself. But after getting some ideas from this workbook, she made a distraction plan. So the next time she got angry with herself and felt like cutting, she looked at her plan for alternative actions. She had written down the idea of drawing on herself with a red marker. She drew a line exactly where she would have cut herself. She even used red paint to make it look like she was bleeding. She carried the mark on her arm for the rest of the day to remind herself how sad and overwhelmed she felt. But then, before she went to sleep, she was able to erase the "scar" and "blood" from her arm, unlike the rest of the marks from her permanent injuries.

## DISTRACT YOURSELF WITH PLEASURABLE ACTIVITIES

Sometimes doing something that makes you feel good is the best way to distract yourself from painful emotions. But remember, you don't have to wait until you feel overwhelmed by painful emotions in order to do one of these activities. It's also helpful to engage in these types of activities on a regular basis. In fact, you should try to do something pleasurable every day. Exercise is also especially important because not only is it good for your overall physical health but it's also been shown to be an effective treatment for depression in some cases (Babyak et al., 2000). Plus, exercise makes you feel good almost immediately by releasing natural painkillers in your body called *endorphins* (the same painkillers that are released when you cut yourself).

Following is a list of over one hundred pleasurable activities you can use to distract yourself.

*each inhalation and falling with each exhalation. Keep counting each breath, and with each exhale, feel your body relaxing, deeper and deeper.*

*Keep breathing until your alarm goes off, and then slowly return your focus to the room you're in.*

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## USE SELF-ENCOURAGING COPING THOUGHTS

There are many distressing times in life when we all need to hear some encouraging words to keep us motivated or to help us endure the pain that we're experiencing. But there are many distressing times like these when you are also alone, and you need to encourage yourself to stay strong. Often, this can be done with self-encouraging coping thoughts. Coping thoughts are reminders of how strong you've been in the past when you survived distressing situations, and they're also reminders of encouraging words that have given you strength. Coping thoughts are especially helpful when you first notice that you're feeling agitated, nervous, angry, or upset. If you can recognize your distress early on, you'll have a better chance of using one of these thoughts to help soothe yourself. Maybe there are even situations in your life that occur on a regular basis, when you can predict that one of these coping thoughts might be useful.

### *List of Coping Thoughts*

Here is a list of some coping thoughts that many people have found to be helpful (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1997). Check (✓) the ones that are helpful to you and create your own.

- \_\_\_ "This situation won't last forever."
- \_\_\_ "I've already been through many other painful experiences, and I've survived."
- \_\_\_ "This too shall pass."
- \_\_\_ "My feelings make me uncomfortable right now, but I can accept them."
- \_\_\_ "I can be anxious and still deal with the situation."
- \_\_\_ "I'm strong enough to handle what's happening to me right now."
- \_\_\_ "This is an opportunity for me to learn how to cope with my fears."
- \_\_\_ "I can ride this out and not let it get to me."
- \_\_\_ "I can take all the time I need right now to let go and relax."
- \_\_\_ "I've survived other situations like this before, and I'll survive this one too."
- \_\_\_ "My anxiety/fear/sadness won't kill me; it just doesn't feel good right now."
- \_\_\_ "These are just my feelings, and eventually they'll go away."

get enough oxygen it can knock your biological system off balance. For this reason alone, taking full, slow breaths is important. But another benefit of breathing fully is that this simple technique can help you relax and focus. Many spiritual traditions combine slow breathing techniques with guided meditations to help people focus and relax.

Here's a breathing exercise that many people find helpful. This type of breathing is also called *diaphragmatic breathing* because it activates the diaphragm muscle at the bottom of your lung cavity. Engaging the diaphragm helps you take fuller, deeper breaths, which also helps you relax.

Read the instructions before beginning the exercise to familiarize yourself with the experience. If you feel more comfortable listening to the instructions, use an audio-recording device to record the directions in a slow, even voice so that you can listen to them while practicing this technique. Set a kitchen timer or an alarm clock for five minutes and practice breathing until the alarm goes off. Then as you get more accustomed to using this technique to help you relax, you can set the alarm for longer periods of time, like ten or fifteen minutes. But don't expect to be able to sit still that long when you first start. In the beginning, five minutes is a long time to sit still and breathe.

When using this new form of breathing, many people often feel as if they become "one" with their breathing, meaning that they feel a deep connection to the experience. If that happens for you, great. If not, that's okay, too. Just keep practicing. Also, some people feel light-headed when they first begin practicing this technique. This may be caused by breathing too fast, too deeply, or too slowly. Don't be alarmed. If you begin to feel light-headed, stop if you need to, or return your breathing to a normal rate and begin counting your breaths.

### Instructions

To begin, find a comfortable place to sit in a room where you won't be disturbed for as long as you've set your timer. Turn off any distracting sounds. Take a few slow, long breaths and relax. Place one hand on your stomach. Now slowly breathe in through your nose and then slowly exhale through your mouth. Feel your stomach rise and fall as you breathe. Imagine your belly filling up with air like a balloon as you breathe in, and then feel it deflate as you breathe out. Feel the breath moving in across your nostrils, and then feel your breath blowing out across your lips. As you breathe, notice the sensations in your body. Feel your lungs fill up with air. Notice the weight of your body resting on whatever you're sitting on. With each breath, notice how your body feels more and more relaxed.

Now, as you continue to breathe, begin counting your breaths each time you exhale. You can count either silently to yourself or aloud. Count each exhalation until you reach "4" and then begin counting at "1" again. To begin, breathe in slowly through your nose and then exhale slowly through your mouth. Count "1." Again, breathe in slowly through your nose and slowly out through your mouth. Count "2." Repeat, breathing in slowly through your nose, and then slowly exhale. Count "3." Last time—breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Count "4." Now begin counting at "1" again.

When your mind begins to wander and you catch yourself thinking of something else, return your focus to counting your breaths. Try not to criticize yourself for getting distracted. Just keep taking slow breaths into your belly, in and out. Imagine filling up your belly with air like a balloon. Feel it rising with

### THE BIG LIST OF PLEASURABLE ACTIVITIES

Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- \_\_\_ Talk to a friend on the telephone.
- \_\_\_ Go out and visit a friend.
- \_\_\_ Invite a friend to come to your home.
- \_\_\_ Text message your friends.
- \_\_\_ Organize a party.
- \_\_\_ Exercise.
- \_\_\_ Lift weights.
- \_\_\_ Do yoga, tai chi, or Pilates, or take classes to learn.
- \_\_\_ Stretch your muscles.
- \_\_\_ Go for a long walk in a park or someplace else that's peaceful.
- \_\_\_ Go outside and watch the clouds.
- \_\_\_ Go jog.
- \_\_\_ Ride your bike.
- \_\_\_ Go for a swim.
- \_\_\_ Go hiking.
- \_\_\_ Do something exciting, like surfing, rock climbing, skiing, skydiving, motorcycle riding, or kayaking, or go learn how to do one of these things.
- \_\_\_ Go to your local playground and join a game being played or watch a game.
- \_\_\_ Go play something you can do by yourself if no one else is around, like basketball, bowling, handball, miniature golf, billiards, or hitting a tennis ball against the wall.
- \_\_\_ Get a massage; this can also help soothe your emotions.
- \_\_\_ Get out of your house, even if you just sit outside.
- \_\_\_ Go for a drive in your car or go for a ride on public transportation.
- \_\_\_ Plan a trip to a place you've never been before.
- \_\_\_ Sleep or take a nap.
- \_\_\_ Eat chocolate (it's good for you!) or eat something else you really like.
- \_\_\_ Eat your favorite ice cream.
- \_\_\_ Cook your favorite dish or meal.
- \_\_\_ Cook a recipe that you've never tried before.
- \_\_\_ Take a cooking class.
- \_\_\_ Go out for something to eat.
- \_\_\_ Go outside and play with your pet.
- \_\_\_ Go borrow a friend's dog and take it to the park.
- \_\_\_ Give your pet a bath.
- \_\_\_ Go outside and watch the birds and other animals.
- \_\_\_ Find something funny to do, like reading the Sunday comics.
- \_\_\_ Watch a funny movie (start collecting funny movies to watch when you're feeling overwhelmed with pain).
- \_\_\_ Go to the movie theater and watch whatever's playing.
- \_\_\_ Watch television.
- \_\_\_ Listen to the radio.
- \_\_\_ Go to a sporting event, like a baseball or football game.
- \_\_\_ Play a game with a friend.
- \_\_\_ Play solitaire.
- \_\_\_ Play video games.
- \_\_\_ Go online to chat.
- \_\_\_ Visit your favorite Web sites.
- \_\_\_ Visit crazy Web sites and start keeping a list of them.
- \_\_\_ Create your own Web site.
- \_\_\_ Create your own online blog.
- \_\_\_ Join an Internet dating service.
- \_\_\_ Sell something you don't want on the Internet.
- \_\_\_ Buy something on the Internet.
- \_\_\_ Do a puzzle with a lot of pieces.
- \_\_\_ Call a crisis or suicide hotline and talk to someone.
- \_\_\_ Go shopping.
- \_\_\_ Go get a haircut.

- \_\_\_\_ Go to a spa.
  - \_\_\_\_ Go to a library.
  - \_\_\_\_ Go to a bookstore and read.
  - \_\_\_\_ Go to your favorite café for coffee or tea.
  - \_\_\_\_ Visit a museum or local art gallery.
  - \_\_\_\_ Go to the mall or the park and watch other people; try to imagine what they're thinking.
  - \_\_\_\_ Pray or meditate.
  - \_\_\_\_ Go to your church, synagogue, temple, or other place of worship.
  - \_\_\_\_ Join a group at your place of worship.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a letter to God.
  - \_\_\_\_ Call a family member you haven't spoken to in a long time.
  - \_\_\_\_ Learn a new language.
  - \_\_\_\_ Sing or learn how to sing.
  - \_\_\_\_ Play a musical instrument or learn how to play one.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a song.
  - \_\_\_\_ Listen to some upbeat, happy music (start collecting happy songs for times when you're feeling overwhelmed).
  - \_\_\_\_ Turn on some loud music and dance in your room.
  - \_\_\_\_ Memorize lines from your favorite movie, play, or song.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a movie or video with your camcorder.
  - \_\_\_\_ Take photographs.
  - \_\_\_\_ Join a public-speaking group and write a speech.
  - \_\_\_\_ Participate in a local theater group.
  - \_\_\_\_ Sing in a local choir.
  - \_\_\_\_ Join a club.
  - \_\_\_\_ Plant a garden.
  - \_\_\_\_ Work outside.
  - \_\_\_\_ Knit, crochet, or sew—or learn how to.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a scrapbook with pictures.
  - \_\_\_\_ Paint your nails.
  - \_\_\_\_ Change your hair color.
  - \_\_\_\_ Take a bubble bath or shower.
  - \_\_\_\_ Work on your car, truck, motorcycle, or bicycle.
- 
- \_\_\_\_ Sign up for a class that excites you at a local college, adult school, or online.
  - \_\_\_\_ Read your favorite book, magazine, paper, or poem.
  - \_\_\_\_ Read a trashy celebrity magazine.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a letter to a friend or family member.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write things you like about yourself on a picture of your body or draw them on a photograph of yourself.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a poem, story, movie, or play about your life or someone else's life.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write in your journal or diary about what happened to you today.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a loving letter to yourself when you're feeling good and keep it with you to read when you're feeling upset.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a list of ten things you're good at or that you like about yourself when you're feeling good, and keep it with you to read when you're feeling upset.
  - \_\_\_\_ Draw a picture.
  - \_\_\_\_ Paint a picture with a brush or your fingers.
  - \_\_\_\_ Masturbate.
  - \_\_\_\_ Have sex with someone you care about.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a list of the people you admire and want to be like—it can be anyone real or fictional throughout history. Describe what you admire about these people.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a story about the craziest, funniest, or sexiest thing that has ever happened to you.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a list of ten things you would like to do before you die.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a list of ten celebrities you would like to be friends with and describe why.
  - \_\_\_\_ Make a list of ten celebrities you would like to have sex with and describe why.
  - \_\_\_\_ Write a letter to someone who has made your life better and tell them why. (You don't have to send the letter if you don't want to.)
  - \_\_\_\_ Create your own list of pleasurable activities.
  - \_\_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- Notice how your body feels and observe any tension or pain you might be feeling. Recognize how your thoughts might be contributing to how you're feeling. Use cue-controlled relaxation to release any tension.
- Notice any painful emotions you might be feeling as a result of time traveling, and use one of the distress tolerance skills to help you relieve any immediate pain.

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## **Exercise: Listening to Now**

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Another exercise to help you refocus on the present moment is the Listening to Now exercise. Dedicate at least five minutes to help yourself refocus.

### **Instructions**

*Sit in a comfortable chair. Turn off any distractions, like your phone, radio, and television. Take slow, long breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Feel your stomach expand like a balloon each time you breathe in and feel it deflate each time you exhale. Now, as you continue to breathe, simply listen. Listen to any sounds you hear outside your home, inside your home, and inside your own body. Count each sound that you hear. When you get distracted, return your focus to listening. Maybe you hear cars, people, or airplanes outside. Perhaps you hear a clock ticking or a fan blowing inside. Or maybe you hear the sound of your own heart beating inside your body. Actively and carefully listen to your environment and count as many sounds as you can. Try this exercise for five minutes and notice how you feel afterwards.*

A variation of this listening exercise will help you stay focused on the present moment while you're in a conversation with another person. If you notice that your attention is beginning to wander and you start thinking about your past or future, focus your attention on something that the person is wearing, like a button on their shirt, a hat they're wearing, or their collar. Note to yourself what color the item is and what it looks like. Sometimes this can snap you out of your time traveling. Now continue to listen, and if your mind begins to wander again, do the same thing and try to keep listening.

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## **Exercise: Mindful Breathing**

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Another exercise that will help you stay focused in the present moment is breathing. It sounds simple, but we often don't breathe as well as we should. Think about it: who ever taught you how to breathe? If you're like the rest of us, probably no one. And yet, you do it about fifteen times a minute or almost 22,000 times a day! Everyone knows that we breathe air to take in oxygen. But how much of the air you breathe is actually oxygen—100 percent, 75 percent? The correct answer is that the air you breathe is only about 21 percent oxygen, and when your body doesn't

you right now as you read this. Are you thinking of something else? Are you thinking of something that happened in the past or something that's coming up in the future? What does your body feel like right now? Pay attention to it. Do you notice any spots of tension or physical pain? How are you breathing? Are you taking full, deep breaths, or are you breathing very shallowly?

Often, we don't pay attention to what's happening to us. We don't pay attention to what people are saying to us or to the things that we read. We don't even pay attention to who's around us while we're walking. And to make it even more problematic, we often try to do more than one thing at the same time, like driving, eating, and talking on the phone simultaneously. As a result, we miss a lot of what life has to offer and we often make easy situations more difficult.

But even worse, not living in the present moment can also make life more painful. For example, maybe you anticipate that the person with whom you're talking is going to say something insulting, which makes you feel angry—even though the person hasn't even said anything yet! Or maybe just thinking about past events makes you feel physically or emotionally upset, which then interferes with whatever you're trying to do at the moment. Obviously, both types of time traveling can make any event unnecessarily painful.

In chapters 3 through 5 on mindfulness skills, you'll learn advanced skills to help you stay in the moment. But for now, try the following exercises to help you live in the moment and tolerate distressing events more skillfully.

### **Exercise: “Where Are You Now?”**

The next time you're in a distressing situation, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where am I right now?
- Am I time traveling in the future, worrying about something that might happen, or planning something that might happen?
- Am I time traveling in the past, reviewing mistakes, reliving bad experiences, or thinking about how my life could have been under different circumstances?
- Or am I in the present, really paying attention to what I'm doing, thinking, and feeling?

If you're not in the present moment, refocus your attention on what's happening to you now by using the following steps:

- Notice what you're thinking about and recognize if you're time traveling. Bring your focus back to the present moment.
- Notice how you're breathing. Take slow, long breaths to help you refocus on the present.

Here's an example of using pleasurable activities to distract yourself. Karen was feeling lonely and had nothing to do. As she sat alone at home, she began to think about how lonely she'd been her whole life and how she was hurt by her father when she was growing up. Very quickly, Karen was overwhelmed with very painful emotions. In fact, the memories also triggered physical pain in her shoulder. Karen began to cry and didn't know what to do. Luckily, she remembered the distraction plan she had created. Exercise had always been a powerful tool for Karen, so she went for a long walk in the park while she listened to some of her favorite music. The activity didn't erase her memories or remove her pain completely, but the long walk did soothe her and prevent her from being overwhelmed with sadness.

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## **DISTRACT YOURSELF BY PAYING ATTENTION TO SOMEONE ELSE**

Another great way to distract yourself from pain is to put your attention on someone else. Here are some examples. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- *Do something for someone else.* Call your friends and ask if they need help doing something, such as a chore, grocery shopping, or housecleaning. Ask your parents, grandparents, or siblings if you can help them with something. Tell them you're feeling bored and you're looking for something to do. Call up someone you know and offer to take them out to lunch. Go outside and give money to the first needy person you see. If you can plan ahead for moments like these when you're overwhelmed with pain, call your local soup kitchen, homeless shelter, or volunteer organization. Plan to participate in activities that help other people. Join a local political activities group, environmental group, or other organization, and get involved helping other people.
- *Take your attention off yourself.* Go to a local store, shopping center, bookstore, or park. Just sit and watch other people or walk around among them. Watch what they do. Observe how they dress. Listen to their conversations. Count the number of buttons they're wearing on their shirts. Observe as many details about these other people as you can. Count the number of people with blue eyes versus the number of people with brown eyes. When your thinking returns to your own pain, refocus on the details of the people you're watching.
- *Think of someone you care about.* Keep a picture of them in your wallet or in your purse. This could be your husband, wife, parent, boyfriend, girlfriend, children, or friend, or it could be someone else you admire, such as Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Jesus, the Dalai Lama, Ganesha, and so on. It could even be a movie star, an athlete, or someone you've never met. Then, when you're feeling distressed, take out the picture and imagine a healing, peaceful conversation you would have with that person if you

could talk to them at that moment when you're feeling hurt. What would they say to you that would help make you feel better? Imagine them saying those words to you.

Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Here's an example of distracting yourself by paying attention to someone else. Louis got upset by a fight he had with his boyfriend, Roger. Very quickly, Louis became overwhelmed by sadness as he started to remember all the other fights he and Roger had had in the past. Louis went to his desk, where he kept a picture of his mother. He sat down and started to talk to his mother as if she were there with him. He asked for strength and guidance to handle the situation with Roger. Then he imagined what she would say to him, and he started to feel better. Later, when he was able to think more clearly, he returned to what he needed to do that day.

## DISTRACT YOUR THOUGHTS

The human brain is a wonderful thought-producing machine. It turns out millions of thoughts every day. Most of the time, this makes our lives much easier. But unfortunately, we can't fully control what our brain thinks about. Here's an example. Imagine a picture of your favorite cartoon character, such as Bugs Bunny, Snoopy, Superman, or whomever. Close your eyes and see the character in vivid detail in your mind's eye. Remember exactly what it looks like. Think about the character for about fifteen seconds. Got it? Now, for the next thirty seconds do your best not to think about the character. Try to block the character from your thoughts. But be honest with yourself and notice how often the character pops into your thoughts. It's impossible not to think about the character. In fact, the harder you try not to think about it, the more power you give to the image and the more your brain keeps bringing it into your thoughts. It's almost as if the harder you try to forget something, the harder your brain tries to remember it. This is why forcing yourself to forget about something that happened to you is impossible. It's also why you can't simply force yourself to get rid of emotions that you don't want.

So, instead of trying to force yourself to forget a memory or thought, try to distract your thoughts with other memories or creative images. Here are some examples. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

Remember events from your past that were pleasant, fun, or exciting. Try to remember as many details as possible about these happy memories. What did you do? Who were you with? What happened?

they feel guilty or selfish about doing anything for themselves. But how long can you continue to take care of someone else without taking care of yourself? Imagine a woman who stands on a street corner on a hot, summer day holding a jug of cold water. She pours drinks for every pedestrian who walks by and, of course, everyone is grateful. But what happens when she's thirsty and goes to get a drink? After a long day of helping everyone else and neglecting herself, the jug is now empty. How often do you feel like this woman? How often do you run out of time for yourself because you've spent all of it taking care of other people? Helping others is a good thing to do as long as it doesn't come at the expense of sacrificing your own health. You need to take care of yourself, and that doesn't mean you're selfish.

## Exercise: Time-Out

Here are some simple ideas you can use to take time out for yourself. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do.

\_\_\_\_\_ Treat yourself as kindly as you treat other people. Do one nice thing for yourself that you've been putting off.

\_\_\_\_\_ Take time to devote to yourself, even if it's just a few hours during the week, by doing things like taking a walk or preparing your favorite meal.

\_\_\_\_\_ Or if you're feeling really brave, take a half day off from work. Go someplace beautiful, like a park, the ocean, a lake, the mountains, a museum, or even someplace like a shopping center.

\_\_\_\_\_ Take time to do things for your own life, like shopping, errands, doctor's appointments, and so on.

Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## LIVE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

Time travel is possible. We all do it occasionally, but some people do it more often than others. People who time travel spend a large portion of each day thinking about all the things they should've done yesterday, all the things that went wrong in the past, and all the things they're supposed to do tomorrow. As a result, that's where they live, in the past or in the future. They rarely pay attention to what's happening to them right now, so they miss living in the present moment—the only true moment in which anyone can really live. For example, notice what's happening to

— Think about our planet Earth. Water is the most important substance for sustaining life on our planet. Yet if we were much closer to the sun, all the water on our planet would evaporate because the temperature would be too hot, and if we were much farther away, all the water would freeze because the temperature would be too cold. Somehow, we've been lucky enough to be in just the right place for life to form. Even if you don't believe in a religious purpose, ask yourself what it means that you live on a planet with just the right climate and elements for life to exist. How did this happen, and what does it mean about your life?

— Go to the beach. Try to count the grains in a handful of sand. Now try to imagine how many handfuls of sand there are in the world, on all the beaches and in all the deserts. Try to imagine how many billions of years must have passed to create so many grains of sand. And again, recognize that the chemical elements that make up the sand also exist in you. Stand with your feet in the sand and imagine feeling connected to the planet.

— Go to a park or to a field and observe the trees, the grass, and the animals. Again, recognize that whatever created all of that also created you. Remember that all living things are made of the same chemical elements. On a subatomic scale, there isn't much difference between you and many other life forms. Yet you are still different and special. What is it that makes you unique from other life?

— Think about the human body, especially your own. Each human being is more wonderful than a piece of artwork and more complex than any computer ever invented. Everything about you is largely determined by your DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the instructions that are found in every cell of your body. Yet amazingly, each set of instructions that creates every part of your body is composed of just four chemical elements that are repeated in different combinations. These different combinations are called genes, and these are the instructions you inherit from your parents that determine everything from your eye color to the structure of your heart. Incredibly, it only takes an estimated thirty to forty thousand genes to design a human being. Imagine trying to write so few instructions in order to create a body that thinks, breathes, eats, moves, and does everything else you do. Plus, remember that this same number of instructions is also responsible for creating approximately 100 billion neurons in your brain, 60,000 miles (!) of blood vessels throughout your body, 600 skeletal muscles, 206 bones, 32 teeth, and 11 pints of blood.

— Imagine sexual thoughts that make you excited. Create sexual fantasies involving you and someone you know or someone you would like to know. Try to think of as many details as possible. What happens that's so exciting?

— Look outside at the natural world around you. Observe the flowers, trees, sky, and landscape as closely as you can. Observe any animals that are around. Listen to the sounds that they make. Or if you live in a city without much nature around you, either do your best to observe what you can or close your eyes and imagine a scene you've observed in the past.

— Imagine yourself as a hero or heroine correcting some past or future event in your life. How would you do it? What would people say to you?

— Imagine yourself getting praise from someone whose opinion matters to you. What did you do? What does this person say to you? Why does this person's opinion matter to you?

— Imagine your wildest fantasy coming true. What would it be? Who else would be involved? What would you do afterwards?

— Keep a copy of your favorite prayer or favorite saying with you. Then, when you feel distressed, pull it out and read it to yourself. Imagine the words calming and soothing you. Use imagery (such as a white light coming down from heaven or the universe) that soothes you as you read the words.

— Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Here's an example of using distracting thoughts. Joel was in a bad relationship that often reminded him of the way he was treated by his mother. She was always criticizing him and telling him he was wrong. When these memories overwhelmed him, Joel never knew what to do. Sometimes he would just scream at his friends or whoever else was around. But after creating a distraction plan, Joel thought of other ideas. The next time he had memories of his mother berating him, he went to his bedroom to lie down. Then he started to imagine himself as a child confronting his mother about her abusive language. He told her all the things he wished he could have said to her years ago. He told her she was wrong and that she should stop criticizing him. Joel controlled the details of the fantasy in the way he wished it could have happened years ago. Afterwards, he slowly felt better. He had escaped the cycle of letting his painful emotions overwhelm him.

## TAKE A TIME-OUT

Time-outs aren't just for kids. We all need to relax in order to refresh our bodies, minds, and spirits. Yet many people don't take time out for themselves because they feel like they'd be disappointing someone else, like their boss, spouse, family, or friends. Many people struggle with the constant need to please others, and as a result, they neglect to take care of themselves. But people who don't take care of themselves lead very unbalanced lives. Many people ignore their own needs because

## DISTRACT YOURSELF BY LEAVING

Sometimes the best thing that you can do is leave. If you're in a very painful situation with someone and you recognize that your emotions are going to overwhelm you and possibly make the situation worse than it is already, then often it's best to just leave. Remember, if you're already overwhelmed by your emotions, it will be harder for you to think of a healthy resolution to your problem. Maybe it's best to put some distance between you and the situation in order to give yourself time to calm your emotions and think of what to do next. Just walk away if that's the best you can do. It will be better than adding fuel to the emotional fire.

Here's an example of leaving to distract yourself. Anna was in a large department store shopping for a blouse. She wanted one of the clerks to help her find her size, but the store clerk was busy with other customers. Anna waited as long as she could and kept trying to get the clerk's attention, but nothing worked. Anna recognized that she was getting angry very quickly. She was ready to tear the blouse in half. She didn't know what else to do. In the past, she would have stayed in the store and gotten angrier, but this time she remembered to leave. She walked out of the store, did some shopping elsewhere, and returned to get the blouse later, when the store was less crowded and when she was feeling more in control of her behaviors.

## DISTRACT YOURSELF WITH TASKS AND CHORES

Strangely, many people don't schedule enough time to take care of themselves or their living environments. As a result, tasks and chores go uncompleted. Here, then, is the perfect opportunity to do something to take care of yourself and your environment. The next time you're in a situation in which your emotions become too painful, temporarily distract yourself by engaging in one of the following activities. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- \_\_\_\_ Wash the dishes.
- \_\_\_\_ Make phone calls to people you haven't spoken to recently but not someone you're angry with.
- \_\_\_\_ Clean your room or house, or go help a friend with their cleaning or gardening project.
- \_\_\_\_ Clean out your closet and donate your old clothes.
- \_\_\_\_ Redecorate a room or at least the walls.
- \_\_\_\_ Organize your books, CDs, computer desktop, and so forth.
- \_\_\_\_ Make a plan for getting a job if you don't already have one, or make a plan for finding a better job.

## Exercise: Higher-Power Activities

Here are some additional activities to help you feel more connected to your higher power, the universe, and the big picture. Check (✓) the ones that you're willing to do:

- \_\_\_\_ *If you do believe in the teachings of a particular religion or faith, find related activities that make you feel more empowered and calm.* Go to your church, synagogue, or temple for services. Talk to the man or woman who runs your services. Talk to other members of your faith about how they've handled difficult experiences. Join discussion groups formed at your place of worship. Read the books that are important to your faith. Find passages that give you strength, and mark them or copy them to keep with you in your wallet or purse so you can read them no matter where you are.
- \_\_\_\_ *Remember that your higher power can also be something other than God.* Your higher power can be a person who makes you feel stronger and more confident to deal with the challenges that you face. Think of someone you admire who can be your higher power. Describe that person. What makes that person special? Then, the next time you're in a difficult or distressing situation, act as if you are that person, and notice how you handle the situation differently.
- \_\_\_\_ *Look up at the stars.* The light you're seeing is millions of years old, and it has traveled from stars that are billions of miles away. In fact, each time you look up at the stars, you're looking through a time machine and seeing the universe as it looked billions of years ago. Strangely, many of the stars you're looking at have already died, but their light is just reaching your eyes on the Earth. Look up at the stars and recognize that whatever created them also created you, whether it was God or a cosmic accident. You are connected to the stars. Imagine yourself connecting with the universe. Sit in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, and imagine a white beam of light shining down from the universe. Like a laser beam, the white light shines on the top of your head and fills you with a feeling of peace. Now imagine the white light spreading all over your body, relaxing every muscle. Now imagine your legs stretching down through the floor like giant tree trunks, going all the way down into the center of the Earth. Imagine these roots tapping into the energy that drives the planet. Feel your body fill with confidence as your legs absorb the golden energy flowing up from the Earth.

- How do these beliefs make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How do these beliefs make you think about others? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How do these beliefs make you think about life in general? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How do you acknowledge your beliefs throughout your daily life? For example, do you go to church, synagogue, or temple? Do you pray? Do you talk to other people about your beliefs? Do you read books about your beliefs? Do you help other people?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What else would you be willing to do in order to strengthen your beliefs? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What can you do to remind yourself of your beliefs on a regular basis? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What can you say or do to remind yourself of your beliefs the next time you're feeling distressed? \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_ Go get a haircut.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Go get a manicure or pedicure, or both.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Go get a massage.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Wash your or someone else's car.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Mow the lawn.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Clean your garage.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Wash the laundry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Do your homework.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Do work that you've brought home from your job.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Polish your shoes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Polish your jewelry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Clean the bathtub and then take a bath.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Water your plants or work in the garden.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Cook dinner for yourself and some friends.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pay the bills.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Go to a support meeting, like Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, or Overeaters Anonymous.
- Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Here's an example of using tasks and chores to distract yourself. Mike called his girlfriend Michelle to go to a movie. Michelle had already made plans with her friends to do something else. Mike felt incredibly rejected and abandoned. He started yelling at Michelle, who hung up on him. This made Mike feel worse. He didn't know what to do. Quickly, he began to feel light-headed and confused, and his emotions became very angry. But this time, instead of calling Michelle back and arguing, he opened his wallet and pulled out the distraction plan he had made (which you'll also create at the end of this chapter). He had written down "get a haircut," so he walked a half mile to his barber. Getting out of his house helped soothe his anger, and when he returned home, he had cooled down enough to call Michelle back to see if she was busy the next day.

## DISTRACT YOURSELF BY COUNTING

Counting is a simple skill that can really keep your mind busy and help you focus on something other than your pain. Here are some examples. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- *Count your breaths.* Sit in a comfortable chair, put one hand on your belly, and take slow, long breaths. Imagine breathing into your stomach instead of your lungs. Feel your belly expand like a balloon with each inhalation. Start counting your breaths. When you inevitably start thinking about whatever it is that's causing you pain, return your focus to counting.
- *Count anything else.* If you're too distracted by your emotions, simply count the sounds that you're hearing. This will take your attention outside of yourself. Or try counting the number of cars that are passing by, the number of sensations that you're feeling, or anything else you can put a number on, such as the branches of a tree you're looking at.
- *Count or subtract by increments of seven.* For example, start with one hundred and subtract seven. Now take that answer and subtract seven more. Keep going. This activity will really distract you from your emotions because it requires extra attention and concentration.
- Other counting ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Here's an example of using counting to distract yourself. Dawn became upset when her mother told her to help set the table for dinner. "She's always telling me what to do," Dawn thought. She could feel her anger getting worse, so she went to her room and remembered that the last time this happened, counting her breaths had helped soothe her emotions. She sat down and did it again. After ten minutes, she felt calmer, so she went back to the dining room.

## CREATE YOUR DISTRACTION PLAN

Now identify those distraction skills that you're willing to use the next time you're in a situation that's causing you pain and discomfort. These chosen skills will make up your distraction plan. Remember, these are the first steps you will use in your plan to distract, relax, and cope. Write your chosen distraction techniques below. When you're done, write them down again on a 3 x 5 inch note card or a sticky note to carry around with you in your wallet or purse. Then the next time you're in a distressing situation, you can pull out the card to remind yourself of your distraction plan.

## IDENTIFY YOUR HIGHER POWER ... AND MAKE YOURSELF FEEL MORE POWERFUL

Whether you believe in one God, many gods, a divine universe, or the goodness that exists within each human being, having faith in something bigger and more powerful than yourself can often make you feel empowered, safe, and calm. This is what people mean when they talk about believing in a "higher power" or seeing "the big picture" in life. Believing in something divine, holy, or special can help you endure stressful situations as well as help you soothe yourself.

At some point in life, we all feel hopeless or powerless. We've all experienced unfortunate situations during which we felt alone and needed strength. Sometimes unexpected circumstances hurt us or the people we care about. These situations often include being the victim of a crime, getting into an accident, having someone close to us die, or being diagnosed with a serious illness. Having faith in something special during times like these can often help you feel connected to a bigger purpose in life. And remember, your faith doesn't have to involve God if that's not what you believe in. Some people only put their faith in the goodness of the people they love. Yet basic beliefs like these are often powerful enough to help people find the strength and comfort to lead happy, healthy lives.

While you're exploring your spirituality, remember that your spiritual beliefs can change over time. Sometimes a person is raised in a spiritual tradition that no longer makes sense or feels helpful. Yet, despite these feelings, a person will sometimes continue to attend the services of that tradition because he or she thinks "it's the right thing to do." The truth is, if your spiritual tradition is no longer giving you peace and strength, it's okay to reexamine that faith and to change traditions if necessary.

### Connect to Your Higher Power

Use the following questions to help you identify your beliefs and to identify some ways in which you can strengthen and use your beliefs on a regular basis:

- What are some of your beliefs about a higher power or a big picture that give you strength and comfort? \_\_\_\_\_

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- Why are these beliefs important to you? \_\_\_\_\_

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## COMMITTED ACTION WORKSHEET

(Adapted from Olerud & Wilson, 2002)

1. A component of my life that I value is \_\_\_\_\_

My intention for this component is \_\_\_\_\_

The committed actions that I'm willing to take include the following (be sure to note when you'll begin these actions):

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

2. A component of my life that I value is \_\_\_\_\_

My intention for this component is \_\_\_\_\_

The committed actions that I'm willing to take include the following (be sure to note when you'll begin these actions):

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

3. A component of my life that I value is \_\_\_\_\_

My intention for this component is \_\_\_\_\_

The committed actions that I'm willing to take include the following (be sure to note when you'll begin these actions):

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## MY DISTRACTION PLAN

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

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## RELAX AND SOOTHE YOURSELF

Now that you've learned some healthy and effective ways to distract yourself when you become overwhelmed by painful emotions, you'll need to learn new ways to help soothe yourself (Johnson, 1985; Linehan, 1993b). Remember, these next skills will give you the second step in your plan to distract, relax, and cope. The activities in this section will help you relax. Then, later in this book, you'll learn specific skills to cope with problematic situations. These will include emotion regulation skills, mindfulness skills, and interpersonal effectiveness skills.

Learning to relax and soothe yourself is very important for many reasons. When you're relaxed, your body feels better. It also functions in a healthier way. In a state of relaxation, your heart beats more slowly and your blood pressure is reduced. Your body is no longer in a state of constant emergency, preparing to either confront a stressful situation or run away from it. As a result, it's easier for your brain to think of healthier ways to cope with your problems.

Included here are some simple relaxation and soothing activities that utilize your five senses of smell, sight, hearing, taste, and touch. These activities are meant to bring you a small amount of peace in your life. So if one of these activities doesn't help you feel relaxed, or makes you feel worse, don't do it. Try something else. And remember, each one of us is different. For example, some people will become more relaxed by listening to music and others will find that taking a hot bubble bath works for them. As you explore this list, think about what works best for you and be willing to try something new if it sounds exciting.

## **Self-Soothing Using Your Sense of Smell**

Smell is a very powerful sense that can often trigger memories and make you feel a certain way. Therefore, it's very important that you identify smells that make you feel good, not bad. Here are some ideas. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- \_\_\_\_ Burn scented candles or incense in your room or house. Find a scent that's pleasing to you.
- \_\_\_\_ Wear scented oils, perfume, or cologne that makes you feel happy, confident, or sexy.
- \_\_\_\_ Cut out perfumed cards from magazines and carry them with you in your handbag or wallet.
- \_\_\_\_ Go someplace where the scent is pleasing to you, like a bakery or restaurant.
- \_\_\_\_ Bake your own food that has a pleasing smell, like chocolate chip cookies.
- \_\_\_\_ Lie down in your local park and smell the grass and outdoor smells.
- \_\_\_\_ Buy fresh-cut flowers or seek out flowers in your neighborhood.
- \_\_\_\_ Hug someone whose smell makes you feel calm.
- \_\_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Self-Soothing Using Your Sense of Vision**

Vision is very important to humans. In fact, a large portion of our brain is devoted solely to our sense of sight. The things you look at can often have very powerful effects on you, for better or for worse. That's why it's important to find images that have a very soothing effect on you. And again, for each person, it comes down to individual taste and preference. Here are some ideas. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- \_\_\_\_ Go through magazines and books to cut out pictures that you like. Make a collage of them to hang on your wall or keep some of them with you in your handbag or wallet to look at when you're away from home.
- \_\_\_\_ Find a place that's soothing for you to look at, like a park or a museum. Or find a picture of a place that's soothing for you to look at, like the Grand Canyon.

## **Exercise: Committed Action**

This next exercise will help you create a more fulfilling life for yourself by formulating intentions and committed actions based on your values (Olerud & Wilson, 2002). Maybe you already dedicate a lot of time to the components of your life that you value, or maybe you don't. Either way, this exercise will help you think about ways to make your life feel more fulfilling based on what you think is important.

First, using the Valued Living Questionnaire, identify the components of your life that you rated between 5 and 10, from moderately important to extremely important. Then fill in the names of those areas on the Committed Action Worksheet that follows the questionnaire. (Make additional photocopies of this worksheet if you need more space.)

Next, identify one intention for each of those valued components, which will help make your life feel more fulfilling. For example, if you rated education highly, maybe your intention would be "to go back to school." Or if you rated romantic relationships highly, maybe your intention would be "to spend more time with my spouse or partner."

Then, finally, identify several actions you are willing to commit to doing that will move you toward your intention. Also, note when you're willing to begin that commitment. For example, if your intention is to go back to school, the actions you list might include "getting a catalog of classes next week" and "signing up for a class within the next three weeks." If your intention is to spend more time with your spouse, your committed actions might include "not working overtime for the next month" and "spending less time with friends for the next two weeks."

Again, the purpose of these exercises is to fill your life with activities that are important to you. Creating a life that you value can often help you deal with other situations that are distressing and less desirable. Having a fulfilling life can give you something to look forward to when you're doing something you don't like, and it can make you feel stronger during times of distress.

## VALUED LIVING QUESTIONNAIRE (Wilson, 2002)

Life Component	Not Important at All					Moderately Important					Extremely Important
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Family (other than romantic relationships or parenting)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Romantic relationships (marriage, life partners, dating, and so on)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Parenting	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Friends and social life	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Work	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Education and training	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Recreation and fun	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Spirituality and religion	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Citizenship and community life	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Self-care (exercise, diet, relaxation, and so on)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

— Go to the bookstore and find a collection of photographs or paintings that you find relaxing, such as the nature photographs of Ansel Adams.

— Draw or paint your own picture that's pleasing to you.

— Carry a picture or photograph of someone you love, someone you find attractive, or someone you admire.

— Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### *Self-Soothing Using Your Sense of Hearing*

Certain sounds can soothe us. Listening to gentle music, for example, may be relaxing. In fact, this entire chapter was written while listening to classical music. However, each one of us has our own tastes. You have to find what works best for you. Use these examples to identify the sounds that help you relax. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

— Listen to soothing music. This can be classical, opera, oldies, new age, Motown, jazz, Celtic, African, or anything else that works for you. It might be music with singing or without. Go to a music store that lets you listen to music before you buy it, and listen to a wide variety of genres to determine what helps you relax. If you have a portable radio or an MP3 player, carry it with you to listen to music when you're away from home.

— Listen to books on tape or compact discs. Many public libraries will let you borrow books on tape. Take some out to see if it helps you relax. You don't even have to pay attention to the story line. Sometimes just listening to the sound of someone talking can be very relaxing. Again, keep some of these recordings with you in your car or loaded in your portable stereo.

— Turn on the television and just listen. Find a show that's boring or sedate, not something like Jerry Springer that's just going to get you angry. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down, and then close your eyes and just listen. Make sure you turn the volume down to a level that's not too loud. Years ago there was a show on public television featuring a painter named Bob Ross. His voice was so soothing and relaxing that many people reported falling asleep while watching him. Find a show like this that will help you relax.

— Listen to a gentle talk show on the radio. Remember—a gentle talk show, not something that's going to make you upset or angry. Stay away from political talk shows

and the news. Find something neutral in discussion, like *Car Talk* on National Public Radio or a gardening show. Again, sometimes just listening to someone else talk can be relaxing. Carry a portable radio with you to listen to when you're feeling upset or angry.

Open your window and listen to the peaceful sounds outside. Or, if you live in a place without relaxing sounds outside, go visit a place with relaxing sounds, such as a park.

Listen to a recording of nature sounds, such as birds and other wildlife. You can often buy these in a music store and then take them with you to listen to on your portable compact disc player, cassette player, or MP3 device.

Listen to a white-noise machine. *White noise* is a sound that blocks out other distracting sounds. You can buy a machine that makes white noise with circulating air, or you can turn on a fan to block out distracting sounds. Other white-noise machines have recorded sounds on them, such as the sounds of birds, waterfalls, and rain forests. Many people find these machines very relaxing.

Listen to the sound of a personal water fountain. These small electronic fountains can be bought in most department stores, and many people find the sound of the trickling water in their homes to be very soothing.

Listen to a recording of a relaxation exercise. Exercises such as these will help you imagine yourself relaxing in many different ways. Other recorded exercises can even teach you self-hypnosis techniques to help you relax. Recordings like these can be bought at some bookstores and online at self-help publishers, such as New Harbinger Publications. Go to [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com) and look under "Audio Programs." Then you can take the programs with you to listen to when you're feeling overwhelmed.

Listen to the sound of rushing or trickling water. Maybe your local park has a waterfall, or the nearby mall has a fountain. Or maybe just sit in your bathroom with the water running.

Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Self-Soothing Using Your Sense of Taste**

Taste is also a very powerful sense. Our tongue has distinct regions of taste buds on it to differentiate flavors and tastes of food. These sensations can also trigger memories and feelings, so again, it's important that you find the tastes that are pleasing to you. However, if eating is a

Practice the cue-controlled relaxation technique twice a day, and record how long it takes you to feel relaxed. With daily practice, this technique should help you relax more quickly each time. Again, remember that the ultimate goal of this technique is to train your entire body to relax simply when you think of your cue word, such as "relax." This will only come with regular practice. Initially, you might also have to think of the white-light imagery and engage in slow, deep breathing to help yourself relax. But with practice this technique can help you relax in many distressing situations. You can also combine this exercise with the previous safe-place visualization. Engaging in cue-controlled relaxation first will help you feel even more safe and calm in that visualization process.

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### **REDISCOVER YOUR VALUES**

The word "values" can be defined as your ethics, principles, ideals, standards, or morals. These are literally the ideas, concepts, and actions that fill your life with worth and importance. Remembering what you value in life can be a very powerful way to help you tolerate a stressful situation. It can also be particularly helpful when you find yourself upset over and over again in the same situation or with the same person. Sometimes we forget why we're doing something that's hard, and this makes it difficult for us to continue. Maybe you have a job that you don't like and you wonder why you keep going to work. Perhaps you're going to school, and you don't remember what your goals are. Or maybe you're in a relationship that isn't fulfilling, and you wonder why you keep maintaining that relationship. In cases like these, remembering what you value can help you tolerate stressful situations and also help you create a more fulfilling life for yourself. Use the following exercises to explore what you value in life.

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#### **Exercise: Valued Living Questionnaire**

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This first exercise will ask you to identify how you value ten different components of your life using the Valued Living Questionnaire (Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Murrell, 2004). As you read each component, ask yourself how important each of these areas is to your life—regardless of how much time or effort you now put into fulfilling the needs of that area. For example, maybe you highly value "self-care" regardless of the fact that you devote little time to it. Rate the importance of each component on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being not important at all and 10 being extremely important. Do your best to rate them honestly, according to your own true feelings, not to what you think you *should* rate them. You'll then use your responses to the Valued Living Questionnaire in the following exercise, which will help you move toward engaging in what you value.

## Instructions

To begin, sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands resting comfortably, either on the arms of the chair or in your lap. Close your eyes. Take a slow, long breath in through your nose. Feel your belly expand like a balloon as you breathe in. Hold it for five seconds: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then release it slowly through your mouth. Feel your belly collapse like a balloon losing its air. Again, take a slow, long breath in through your nose and feel your stomach expand. Hold it for five seconds: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then exhale slowly through your mouth. One more time: take a slow, long breath in through your nose and feel your stomach expand. Hold it for five seconds: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then exhale slowly through your mouth. Now begin to take slow, long breaths without holding them, and continue to breathe smoothly for the rest of this exercise.

Now, with your eyes still closed, imagine that a white beam of light shines down from the sky like a bright laser and lands on the very top of your head. Notice how warm and soothing the light makes you feel. This could be a light from God, the universe, or whatever power makes you feel comfortable. As you continue to breathe smoothly, taking slow, long breaths, notice how the light makes you feel more and more relaxed as it continues to shine on the top of your head. Now, slowly, the warm, white light begins to spread over the top of your head like soothing water. And as it does, the light begins to loosen any muscle tension that you're feeling on the top of your head. Slowly the light begins to slide down your body, and as it moves across your forehead, all the muscle tension there is released. Then the white light continues down past your ears, the back of your head, your eyes, nose, mouth, and chin, and it continues to release any tension you're holding there. Notice how pleasantly warm your forehead feels. Now, slowly, imagine that the light begins to move down your neck and over your shoulders, releasing any muscle tension. Then the light slowly proceeds down both of your arms and the front and back of your torso. Feel the muscles in your upper and lower back release. Notice the soothing sensation of the white light as it moves across your chest and stomach. Feel the muscles in your arms release as the light moves down to your forearm and then across both sides of your hands to your fingertips. Now notice the light moving down through your pelvis and buttocks and feel the tension being released. Again, feel the light move like soothing water across your upper and lower legs until it spreads across both the upper and lower surfaces of your feet. Feel all of the tension leaving the muscles of your body as the white light makes your body feel warm and relaxed.

Continue to notice how peaceful and calm you feel as you continue to take slow, long, smooth breaths. Observe how your stomach continues to expand as you inhale, and feel it deflate as you exhale. Now, as you continue breathing, silently think to yourself "breathe in" as you inhale, and then silently think your cue word as you exhale. (If your cue word is something other than "relax," use that word in the following instructions.) Slowly inhale and think: "breathe in." Slowly exhale and think: "relax." As you do, notice your entire body feeling relaxed at the same time. Feel all the muscle tension in your body being released as you focus on your cue word. Again, inhale and think: "breathe in." Exhale and think: "relax." Notice your entire body releasing any muscle tension. Again, inhale ... "breathe in." Exhale ... "relax." Feel all the tension in your body releasing.

Continue breathing and thinking these words at your own pace for several minutes. With each breath, notice how relaxed your entire body feels. When your mind begins to wander, return your focus to the words "breathe in" and "relax."

problem for you, such as eating too much, bingeing, purging, or restricting what you eat, talk to a professional counselor about getting help for yourself. If the process of eating can make you upset or nervous, use your other senses to calm yourself. But if food soothes you, use some of these suggestions. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities you can think of:

- \_\_\_ Enjoy your favorite meal, whatever it is. Eat it slowly so you can enjoy the way it tastes.
- \_\_\_ Carry lollipops, gum, or other candy with you to eat when you're feeling upset.
- \_\_\_ Eat a soothing food, like ice cream, chocolate, pudding, or something else that makes you feel good.
- \_\_\_ Drink something soothing, such as tea, coffee, or hot chocolate. Practice drinking it slowly so you can enjoy the way it tastes.
- \_\_\_ Suck on an ice cube or an ice pop, especially if you're feeling warm, and enjoy the taste as it melts in your mouth.
- \_\_\_ Buy a piece of ripe and juicy fresh fruit and then eat it slowly.
- \_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Self-Soothing Using Your Sense of Touch

We often forget about our sense of touch, and yet we're always touching something, such as the clothes we're wearing or the chair we're sitting in. Our skin is our largest organ, and it's completely covered with nerves that carry feelings to our brain. Certain tactile sensations can be pleasing, like petting a soft dog, while other sensations are shocking or painful in order to communicate danger, like touching a hot stove. Again, each of us prefers different sensations. You have to find the ones that are most pleasing for you. Here are some suggestions. Check (✓) the ones you're willing to do, and then add any activities that you can think of:

- \_\_\_ Carry something soft or velvety in your pocket to touch when you need to, like a piece of cloth.
- \_\_\_ Take a hot or cold shower and enjoy the feelings of the water falling on your skin.
- \_\_\_ Take a warm bubble bath or a bath with scented oils and enjoy the soothing sensations on your skin.

Get a massage. Many people who have survived physical and sexual abuse do not want to be touched by anyone. This is understandable. But not all types of massage require you to take off your clothes. Some techniques, such as traditional Japanese shiatsu massage, simply require you to wear loose-fitting clothes. A shoulder and neck massage, received while seated in a massage chair, can also be done without removing any clothes. If this is a concern for you, just ask the massage therapist what kind of massage would be best to have while wearing your clothes.

Massage yourself. Sometimes just rubbing your own sore muscles is very pleasing.

Play with your pet. Owning a pet can have many health benefits. Pet owners often have lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, and reduced risk for heart disease (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992), and they experience other general health improvements (Serpell, 1991). In addition, playing with your pet and stroking the animal's fur or skin can provide you with a soothing tactile experience. If you don't have a pet, consider getting one. Or if you can't afford one, visit a friend who has a pet or volunteer at your local animal shelter where you can play with the rescued animals.

Wear your most comfortable clothes, like your favorite worn-in T-shirt, baggy sweat suit, or old jeans.

Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## CREATE A RELAXATION PLAN

Now that you've read the suggestions to help you relax and soothe yourself using your five senses, construct a list of techniques you're willing to use. For ideas, review the activities that you checked. Be specific about what you're going to do. Make a list of ideas to try at home and a list of ideas you can take with you when you're away from home.

### RELAXATION AND SOOTHING SKILLS TO USE AT HOME

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Next, notice if you can feel anything with your imaginary sense of touch. What are you sitting or standing on in your scene? Can you feel the wind? Can you feel something you're touching in the scene? Choose to touch something soothing in your scene. Then take a few seconds to use your imaginary sense of touch.

Last, use your imaginary sense of taste. Are you eating or drinking anything in this scene? Choose something soothing to taste. Then take a few seconds to use your imaginary sense of taste.

Now take a few more seconds to explore your safe place using all of your imaginary senses. Recognize how safe and relaxed you feel here. Remember that you can come back to this place in your imagination whenever you need to feel safe and relaxed. You can also come back whenever you're feeling sad, angry, restless, or in pain. Look around one last time to remember what it looks like.

Now keep your eyes closed and return your focus to your breathing. Again, take some slow, long breaths in through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Then, when you feel ready, open your eyes and return your focus to the room.

## CUE-CONTROLLED RELAXATION

Cue-controlled relaxation is a quick and easy technique that will help you reduce your stress level and muscle tension. A cue is a trigger or command that helps you relax. In this case, your cue will be a word, like "relax" or "peace." The goal of this technique is to train your body to release muscle tension when you think about your cue word. Initially, you'll need the help of the guided instructions to help you release muscle tension in different sections of your body. But after you've been practicing this technique for a few weeks, you'll be able to relax your whole body at one time simply by taking a few slow breaths and thinking about your cue word. With practice, this can become a very quick and easy technique to help you relax. Before you begin, choose a cue word that will help you relax.

- My cue word is \_\_\_\_\_

To begin this exercise, you'll need to find a comfortable chair to sit in. Later, after you've practiced this exercise for a few weeks, you'll be able to do it wherever you are, even if you're standing. You'll also be able to do it more quickly. But to begin, choose a comfortable place to sit in a room where you won't be disturbed. Make sure you'll be free from distractions. Turn off your phone, television, and radio. Tell the people in your home, if there are any, that you can't be disturbed for the next twenty minutes. Allow yourself the time and the freedom to relax. You deserve it. Read the following directions before you begin. If you feel comfortable remembering them, close your eyes and begin the relaxation exercise. Or, if you would prefer, use an audio-recording device to record the directions for yourself. Then close your eyes and listen to the guided relaxation technique that you created.

use an audio-recording device to record the directions for yourself. Read them aloud using a slow, soothing voice. Then close your eyes and listen to the guided visualization you created.

Before you begin the exercise, think of a real or imaginary place that makes you feel safe and relaxed. It can be a real place that you've visited in the past, such as the beach, a park, a field, a church/temple, your room, and so on. Or it can be a place that you've completely made up, such as a white cloud floating in the sky, a medieval castle, or the surface of the moon. It can be anywhere. If you have trouble thinking of a place, think of a color that makes you feel relaxed, such as pink or baby blue. Just do your best. In the exercise, you'll be guided through exploring this place in more detail. But before you begin, make sure you already have a place in mind, and remember—thinking of it should make you feel safe and relaxed.

Complete the following sentences about your safe place before beginning the visualization:

- My safe place is \_\_\_\_\_
- My safe place makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_

### Instructions

To begin, sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands resting comfortably, either on the arms of the chair or in your lap. Close your eyes. Take a slow, long breath in through your nose. Feel your belly expand like a balloon as you breathe in. Hold it for five seconds: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then release it slowly through your mouth. Feel your belly collapse like a balloon losing its air. Again, take a slow, long breath in through your nose and feel your stomach expand. Hold it for five seconds: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then exhale slowly through your mouth. One more time: take a slow, long breath in through your nose and feel your stomach expand. Hold it for five seconds: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then exhale slowly through your mouth. Now begin to take slow, long breaths without holding them, and continue to breathe smoothly for the rest of this exercise.

Now, with your eyes closed, imagine that you enter your safe place using all of your senses to ground yourself in the scene.

First, look around using your imaginary sense of sight. What does this place look like? Is it daytime or nighttime? Is it sunny or cloudy? Notice the details. Are you alone or are there other people or animals? What are they doing? If you're outside, look up and notice the sky. Look out at the horizon. If you're inside, notice what the walls and the furniture look like. Is the room light or dark? Choose something soothing to look at. Then continue looking for a few seconds using your imaginary sense of sight.

Next, use your imaginary sense of hearing. What do you hear? Do you hear other people or animals? Do you hear music? Do you hear the wind or the ocean? Choose something soothing to hear. Then listen for a few seconds using your imaginary sense of hearing.

Then use your imaginary sense of smell. If you're inside, what does it smell like? Does it smell fresh? Do you have a fire burning that you can smell? Or, if you're outside, can you smell the air, the grass, the ocean, or the flowers? Choose to smell something soothing in your scene. Then take a few seconds to use your imaginary sense of smell.

5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Keep this list in a convenient place that's easy to remember. You might even want to copy this list and put it in places where you see it all the time, such as on your refrigerator, above your desk, on the mirror in your bathroom, or next to your bed. This way you'll remind yourself to relax and soothe yourself as often as possible. It will also make it easier to soothe yourself when your painful emotions overwhelm you and prevent you from thinking clearly.

Now create a similar list to use when you're away from home. Again, review the soothing skills you checked in the last few pages to give you ideas. But make sure that it's possible to use these skills when you're away from home. For example, don't list "take a hot bath" because, most likely, there won't be a hot bath available to you when you're not at home.

### RELAXATION AND SOOTHING SKILLS TO USE AWAY FROM HOME

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Now copy these last ten ideas on an index card to remind you what to do when you're away from home. Keep this list with you, in your car, in your wallet, or in your handbag. Then make

sure you have whatever's needed with you, such as candy, a portable radio, pictures, and so forth. This way you can practice relaxing when you're not at home, especially when your painful emotions overwhelm you and prevent you from thinking clearly.

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## CONCLUSION

You've now learned some basic distraction and relaxation skills. You should begin using these skills immediately when you become overwhelmed with painful emotions. The next chapter will build on these skills and teach you more advanced distraction and relaxation skills.

# CHAPTER 2

## Advanced Distress Tolerance Skills: Improve the Moment

In the last chapter, you learned many important skills that you can use in a crisis. These skills will distract you from painful situations and then help you soothe yourself and relax so that you can deal with the situation in a more effective way. Remember, your plan for handling a crisis is to distract, relax, and cope.

Now that you've been practicing the distress tolerance skills from the last chapter, you'll be ready for the advanced distress tolerance skills found in this chapter. These techniques will help you feel more empowered when you encounter painful situations in the future, and they'll help you build a more relaxing and fulfilling life for yourself.

After trying each technique, mark the ones that are helpful so you can identify them later.

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### SAFE-PLACE VISUALIZATION

Safe-place visualization is a powerful stress-reduction technique. Using it, you can soothe yourself by imagining a peaceful, safe place where you can relax. The truth is, your brain and body often can't tell the difference between what's really happening to you and what you're just imagining. So if you can successfully create a peaceful, relaxing scene in your thoughts, your body will often respond to those soothing ideas.

Make sure you conduct this exercise in a quiet room where you'll be free from distractions. Turn off your phone, television, and radio. Tell the people in your home, if there are any, that you can't be disturbed for the next twenty minutes. Allow yourself the time and the freedom to relax. You deserve it. Read the following directions before you begin. If you feel comfortable remembering them, close your eyes and begin the visualization exercise. Or, if you would prefer,