

DISTRESS TOLERANCE DBT SKILLS

WHEN TO USE REALITY ACCEPTANCE SKILLS

What are reality acceptance skills?

Radical acceptance is gently acknowledging what's real, right now, with your mind, body, and heart. It's about easing the fight with reality so you're not carrying extra pain on top of what's already there — without giving up or saying it's okay.

- You don't have to like it or agree with it
- You can't change what you don't acknowledge
- Letting go of the fight can make things more bearable
- Avoiding or denying reality often keeps the pain going
- You can accept this moment without accepting it forever
- It's okay if some parts aren't ready — this can be slow and gentle

When these skills might help:

You might find these skills useful when:

- Life has dealt you major trauma, pain, or difficulty
- You are in distress but not in a crisis
- Problem solving isn't working

Radical acceptance does not mean:

- Approval: You don't have to like or agree with what you accept.
- Compassion or love: Acceptance doesn't require loving feelings toward people, situations, or things.
- Passivity, giving up, or giving in: Accepting reality doesn't stop you from taking action or making changes.
- Opposition to change: Acceptance makes change possible; it doesn't prevent it.

TURNING THE MIND

Turning the mind means gently choosing to accept, again and again. Acceptance doesn't have to happen all at once—it can take repeated effort, especially with pain or loss. Each time you notice resistance or suffering, turning the mind is the choice to return to reality without judgment.

1. **Notice when you're resisting reality:** Pay attention to anger, frustration, or thoughts like "Why me?"—these signal you're not fully accepting what's happening.
2. **Make an inner commitment to accept:** Decide to turn your mind toward acceptance. You don't have to feel it yet, just plant the intention.
3. **Repeat as needed:** Acceptance often takes many gentle returns, sometimes within minutes or throughout the day. Each time strengthens your ability to stay present.
4. **Plan to catch yourself drifting:** Notice cues when you resist, and check in with yourself regularly to gently return to acceptance.

Turning the mind is a gentle, ongoing practice. Each time you notice yourself resisting and return to acceptance, you strengthen your ability to meet reality with clarity and calm—without giving up on change or hope.

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WILLINGNESS

Practicing willingness means noticing when parts are trying to push, pull, or hide, and gently turning your mind toward what works in the present moment. It's showing up for life without letting any one part dominate, choosing to act with curiosity, care, and skill, again and again.

Willingness is choosing to respond to life with your wise, compassionate self, even when your parts are upset, scared, or resisting. It's not about ignoring feelings or forcing change—it's about letting all parts be present while acting skillfully in the moment.

Willfulness happens when a part takes over, insisting things be different, controlling life, or resisting reality. It often comes from a protective part trying to keep you safe but can create more struggle and pain.

1. **Notice Willfulness** – Begin by simply observing when a part of you is resisting, controlling, or refusing. Label it gently: “Willfulness is here.” Awareness is the first step toward choice.
2. **Radically Accept Willfulness** – Allow the willful part to exist without judgment. You don't have to act on it, but acknowledging it reduces its grip.
3. **Turn Your Mind** – Intentionally shift your focus toward acceptance and willing action, even if only a little at a time.
4. **Use Opposite Action** – If your body is tense or your face is tight, soften it. Half-smile, relax your posture, and open your hands. Let your body signal willingness even before your mind fully cooperates.
5. **Identify the Threat** – Ask, “What am I afraid of?” Willfulness often arises from perceived danger or expected catastrophe. Naming the fear lets you act from wise mind rather than panic or resistance.

HALF SMILE & WILLING HANDS

Half smile and willing hands are gentle, body-based ways of shifting out of resistance and into openness. By softening your face and relaxing your hands, you're sending a message of safety to your system—helping your parts settle and supporting a move toward acceptance and willingness.

Half Smile

What it is: A gentle softening of the face—a slight upward curve of the lips with relaxed muscles. It's a way of accepting reality with your body, not pretending everything is okay.

How to practice & what it does: Relax your face, jaw, and shoulders, then allow a small half smile. Let it be subtle and mostly for you. This sends a signal of safety to your system, helping parts of you soften, reducing inner tension, and supporting a shift toward acceptance.

Willing Hands

What it is: An open, relaxed hand posture—palms up, fingers unclenched. It reflects a stance of openness instead of resistance.

How to practice & what it does: Unclench your hands and rest them gently, palms open. Notice any urge to tighten, and softly return to openness. This can ease anger or control-driven parts, helping your body and mind move toward acceptance and willingness.

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MINDFULNESS OF CURRENT THOUGHTS

Practicing willingness means noticing when parts are trying to push, pull, or hide, and gently turning your mind toward what works in the present moment. It's showing up for life without letting any one part dominate, choosing to act with curiosity, care, and skill, again and again.

Noticing & Accepting Thoughts – Gently notice thoughts as they arise and allow them to be there, without reacting or holding on. Thoughts are simply mental events that come and go, even when they feel intense or sticky.

Changing Your Relationship to Thoughts – The focus isn't on changing or fixing thoughts, but on relating to them differently. By creating space, thoughts have less power to overwhelm or control your responses.

The Goal Isn't an Empty Mind – Minds naturally produce thoughts. The practice is not to stop them, but to notice them without attaching to them or pushing them away. Letting thoughts come and go—without fighting them—is what reduces suffering over time.

Why observe thoughts?

Thoughts Can Pull Us In – It's easy to get caught in thoughts and treat them like facts, which can increase distress. Noticing them helps create a little breathing room.

Thoughts Come and Go – Even the most persistent thoughts shift over time. They're not permanent, even when they feel that way.

Softens Reactivity – When you don't immediately believe or fight thoughts, they often feel less intense and overwhelming.

Creates Gentle Distance – Observing thoughts allows you to step back and see them for what they are, instead of getting swept up in them.

Keeps You Grounded – Thoughts can pull you into “what ifs” or “whys.” Observing helps you stay connected to what's actually happening right now.

You Are More Than Your Thoughts – Thoughts can feel loud or convincing, but they don't define you. There's a steadier part of you that can notice them.

Creates More Freedom – Over time, letting thoughts come and go can feel lighter—like you're no longer being pushed around by everything your mind says.

How to be mindful of current thoughts:

Notice Your Thoughts – Gently observe thoughts as they arise. Acknowledge them and create a little space, like stepping back and watching rather than being in the middle of them.

Be Curious, Not Judgmental – Watch thoughts come and go with curiosity. You might wonder where they came from or where they go, without needing to judge or analyse them.

You Are Not Your Thoughts – Remind yourself that thoughts are something you have, not who you are. You don't have to act on every thought that shows up.

Let Thoughts Flow – Instead of pushing thoughts away or trying to control them, allow them to move through naturally. Making space for them often helps them settle on their own.