

DISTRESS TOLERANCE DBT SKILLS

WHEN TO USE CRISIS SKILLS

When crisis skills can help:

Crisis skills are designed for moments when things feel really intense and overwhelming. They're not about fixing everything — they're about helping you get through the moment safely until the intensity settles.

A moment might feel like a crisis when:

- The situation feels highly stressful or emotionally intense
- There's a strong urge to react or do something right now
- Your emotions or nervous system feel overwhelming or hard to manage
- The problem can't be solved immediately, but you still need to get through the moment

When these skills might help:

You might find crisis skills useful when:

- The emotional pain feels very strong and needs support right now
- An urge shows up that might make things harder if you act on it
- Your emotions feel like they might take over completely
- You're feeling overwhelmed but still need to get through something
- Your body feels very activated, and things need time to settle

What crisis skills are (and aren't) for:

Crisis skills are short-term supports. They help you get through intense moments, but they're not meant to solve every problem or fix everything in your life.

They're simply tools you can use to ride out the wave until things feel a little steadier.

THE STOP SKILL

When emotions surge or something feels overwhelming, it's easy for our system to react quickly. The STOP skill helps create a small pause so you can check in with yourself and respond in a way that feels more supportive rather than impulsive.

S — Stop: Pause for a moment. You don't need to respond or act right away. Give yourself permission to slow things down and take a breath.

T — Take a step back: Create a little space from the situation if you can. This might mean taking a breath, stepping away briefly, or giving yourself a moment before responding. Slowing down can help your nervous system settle.

O — Observe: Gently notice what's happening inside and around you. What thoughts, feelings, or body sensations are showing up? Are different parts of you reacting in different ways? What is happening in the situation around you?

P — Proceed mindfully: When you feel ready, choose how to respond in a way that feels supportive for you.

You might consider:

- What you're feeling or needing right now
- What might help the situation
- What choice aligns with your values or goals

You don't have to get it perfect — the pause itself is already a powerful step :)

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TIP SKILLS

Sometimes strong emotions activate the body very quickly. These skills can help shift your nervous system and bring the intensity down a little. You don't have to try all of them — you might experiment and see what feels supportive for you or your system.

T — Temperature: Cool your face (cold pack, cool water, or cloth on eyes/cheeks).

I — Intense movement: Short bursts of movement to release energy (run, jump, brisk walk, shake out your body).

P — Paced breathing: Slow your breathing. Let your exhale be slightly longer than your inhale.

P — Paired muscle relaxation: Gently tense muscles as you breathe in, then release them as you breathe out.

Notes

- Different parts of you may prefer different skills — it's okay to experiment.
- Even trying one small step can sometimes shift the intensity a little.
- If a skill doesn't feel helpful or safe for your system, it's okay to skip it and try something else.
- Although there are two P skills, the mnemonic remains the word TIP

SELF-SOOTHING: FIVE SENSES

Self-soothing means being gentle, nurturing, and kind to yourself — comforting your body and mind in a mindful way. Use self-soothing when emotions feel overwhelming, when you feel vulnerable, or when you want to tolerate distress without acting impulsively.

Vision – look at things that feel calming or beautiful

- Watch the sunrise or sunset
- Look at nature, art, or photos you love
- Set up a small peaceful space in your room

Hearing – listen to sounds that feel comforting

- Soothing or energizing music
- Nature sounds like rain or birds
- Hum, sing, or play an instrument

Smell – bring in scents that calm you

- Light a candle or incense
- Smell coffee, herbs, or flowers
- Use scented lotion or essential oils

Taste – enjoy flavors that feel comforting

- Sip herbal tea, hot chocolate, or a smoothie
- Eat a favorite snack mindfully
- Taste something sweet, sour, or nostalgic

Touch – notice comforting sensations

- Wrap in a soft blanket or wear a cozy shirt
- Hug a pet or a loved one
- Take a warm bath or shower
- Hold something smooth, soft, or cold

Resources: Handouts with additional self-soothing ideas will be available on the Support Tools section for easy reference.

Tip: Self-soothing isn't about fixing your emotions — it's about showing care and support to yourself in the moment. Try different senses and activities, and listen to what your parts need.

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DISTRACTING WITH WISE MIND ACCEPTS

Sometimes when emotions feel overwhelming, it can help to briefly shift your attention somewhere else. These skills are about giving your mind and body a short break, not avoiding your feelings forever.

- A — **Activities:** Do something that occupies your mind or body for a while — a task, hobby, movement, or small project.
- C — **Contributing:** Doing something kind or helpful for someone else can gently shift focus & sometimes bring a sense of connection or purpose.
- C — **Connection**:** Remember that struggling is a shared human experience. Many people go through difficult moments too, and you're not alone in feeling overwhelmed.
- E — **Emotions:** Invite a different emotion for a little while through music, books, shows, humour, or comforting activities.
- P — **Pushing away** (temporarily): If a problem can't be solved right now, you might choose to set it aside briefly and come back to it later. You may want to physically leave a place, build an imaginary room or escape into a book or show.
- T — **Thoughts:** Give your mind something else to focus on — puzzles, counting, learning something new, or noticing details around you.
- S — **Sensations:** Use strong or grounding sensations to shift attention — holding ice, wrapping in a blanket, smelling something calming, or listening to loud music.

Note: See resources under [support tools](#) for lists of coping skills & distractions

** We've reframed the original "Comparison" step in DBT as Connection to focus on shared experience without self-judgement — a safer, kinder approach for DID, trauma, and perfectionistic parts.

PROS & CONS

Evaluating pros and cons is a decision-making strategy. The focus here is on thinking through the positive and negative consequences of acting on impulsive urges in crisis situations and of not acting on them (i.e., tolerating distress).

Before a strong urge shows up:

Take some time to write out the pros and cons of acting on the urge and of getting through the moment without acting on it.

Keep the list somewhere accessible so you can return to it when things feel intense.

When a strong urge shows up

Come back to your list and read through it slowly.

	PROS	CONS
Acting on crisis urges	<i>Pros of acting on impulsive urges, giving in, giving up, or avoiding what needs to be done.</i>	<i>Cons of acting on impulsive urges, giving in, giving up, or avoiding what needs to be done.</i>
Resisting crisis urges	<i>Pros of resisting impulsive urges, doing what needs to be done, and not giving up.</i>	<i>Cons of resisting impulsive urges, doing what needs to be done, and not giving up.</i>

The goal isn't perfection — it's simply giving yourself a moment to pause and remember the bigger picture.

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DBT SKILLS

I M P R O V E T H E M O M E N T

Improving the Moment means finding ways to make a stressful or overwhelming moment more manageable and tolerable. You can do this by shifting your focus, calming your body, or offering yourself gentle encouragement. It's about supporting yourself and your parts right now, not fixing everything.

I – Imagery: Imagine a safe place, a calm scene, or a comforting memory.

- Imagine a calm, safe place where you feel completely at ease.
- Picture a cozy, secret room inside yourself, decorated just how you like it.
- Visualise past moments when you felt happy or peaceful, and “step back” into them in your mind.

M – Meaning: Find some meaning or perspective in the situation, or reframe it gently.

- Notice any small lessons, growth, or purpose in the situation.
- Focus on values you care about and how they guide you, even in hard moments.
- Recognise tiny positive aspects of a difficult experience and hold them in mind.

P – Prayer / Mindfulness: Connect to your values, faith, or simply focus on the present moment.

- Connect to your inner Wise Mind, a higher power, or spiritual support.
- Ask for strength to carry what's hard right now.
- Simply open your heart and let yourself feel supported, even for a moment.

R – Relaxing actions: Stretch, breathe, or do something that calms your body.

- Take slow, deep breaths into your belly.
- Stretch or move gently to release tension.
- Change your facial expression to soften your features or smile slightly.

O – One thing in the moment: Focus fully on a single activity, sensation, or object.

- Focus completely on the activity you're doing right now.
- Notice every physical sensation — taste, touch, sound — fully in the present.
- Use a sensory recording or mindfulness exercise to anchor yourself.

V – Vacation: Give yourself a short mental or physical break from the stressor.

- Pull the covers over your head and rest quietly for a short while.
- Step outside into nature — a park, beach, or just your backyard.
- Take an intentional break from responsibility — read, listen to music, or enjoy a snack.

E – Encouragement: Speak kindly to yourself, remind yourself that it's okay to feel how you feel.

- Repeat comforting phrases like: “I'm doing my best” or “This too shall pass.”
- Cheer yourself on gently: “I can handle this, one moment at a time.”
- Remind yourself: “It won't last forever, I will get through it.”

Note: These are just some ideas to get you started. More options are available in the handouts. Feel free to adapt them however feels right — take what works for you and leave what doesn't.