

Chapter 8

Distress Tolerance Skills

Pain, both physical and emotional, is a part of life. There is nothing we can do to successfully avoid all depressing experiences or anxious situations, and there is good reason not to. Just as physical pain is an internal alarm system that something is going on that needs immediate attention, so too is emotional pain a form of feedback that there is something going on to which you need to attend. In fact, people who are born with physiological defects that prevent them from feeling physical pain frequently do not live very long. They bleed to death without even noticing. They experience burns so severe that their body cannot repair itself. The normal bumps and bruises of childhood that sensitize us to be careful of the environment are missing for such individuals. I have seen many mentally retarded individuals who are so insensitive to physical pain that they need others to keep a close eye on any possible signs or symptoms of disease or injury. These disabled people have never learned what the signs of pain mean, and therefore don't take corrective action. Furnaces and the sun burn them badly without them noticing it. The body has a lot to teach us about the beneficial effects of feedback. People in chronic physical pain will tell us emphatically that the alarm system of the body no longer serves a useful purpose, and they would disable it if they could because there is nothing they perceive they can do to make their lives less painful. Pain becomes not just an alerting system that something is wrong, but a constant reminder that life holds less joy than previously.

—Depression and anxiety (emotional pain) are no different. It is normal to feel sad when you lose something important to you, to feel despair when the loss is of a loved one, and to feel fury when someone has taken something from you that you assumed was rightfully yours. Temporary, acute emotional pain is thus tolerated by most of us. You tolerate it because you know it will end. You tolerate it because you accept it as natural and expectable. But mostly you tolerate it because you expect to feel different in the future. You can see the light at the end of the tunnel and expect to feel good again in the future.

But what happens when emotionally painful experiences keep the pain going over long periods of time? What happens when your pain feels so bad, for so long, that you feel you can no longer endure it?

When the Pain Doesn't End

DBT presumes that emotional pain is a form of information, like all the other senses (Linehan 1993b). However, any sense can become so overwhelming that you choose not to experience it any longer. We choose not to relive a painful event because once processed, there is no new information available. Once you fully see something and understand as many elements of it as possible, there is no longer any useful information to be had. This applies to all of our senses: hearing, taste, touch, sight, and smell. Once we have taken in the information, once we have been alerted to the environment, then to reexperience it brings no new adaptive capabilities.

Is the message here to avoid your emotions once you know they hurt? No. DBT invites you to accept (experience, pay attention to, and stop resisting) emotions. You're now aware of the distinction between avoidance, where you actively attempt not to feel at all, and denial, where you pretend and tell yourself that your feelings are not what they are, but are something totally different. Both of these processes bring more pain in the long run because they are false. You really do feel depressed, and if you use a defense mechanism built on an inaccurate foundation you are asking for trouble. If you feel petrified to feel your anxiety and design coping mechanisms to run away from it, in the end you are only increasing it. Running away from the bogeyman does not really decrease your fear of him—it increases it.

The dialectic with distress tolerance is between acceptance and avoidance. DBT helps you to pay attention to your emotions, even if they hurt. Don't resist them, try to always push them away, or even summarily disapprove of painful emotions. Relax while you experience even pain, and the agony surrounding the pain can disappear. While it may seem paradoxical, sitting with your pain for a time can decrease the intensity and duration of that pain.

Let's take a look at John, who has social anxiety disorder. He is petrified of having to talk to people he doesn't already know. Even going to the store and having to interact with clerks to obtain items he needs creates an intense dread from which he desires escape. His social anxiety is so intense that it has limited his career advancement. He just can't bring himself to deal with the public or work with others comfortably. He stays in his cubicle at work then goes home to his apartment. He feels imprisoned by his own feelings of dread, rumination, and constant anticipation that he is going to make a fool of himself in front of others. By the time John graduated from high school he was also feeling depressed. He stopped wanting to go places, and he looked forward to very little in the future. Now, as an adult, his sleep is fitful, he has lost weight, and he has even lost his sex drive. John has made compromises in his life, but not ones that serve his best interests. His solution is to reduce his anxiety by avoiding all situations that prompt it. He compromises interpersonal relationships (not having many, because new people make him feel vulnerable), compromises environments (having a rigid routine that does not bring him to unfamiliar places), and compromises desire (shutting down wants and needs that might cause him to challenge his defensive maneuvers).

Effective Coping

Distress tolerance offer a different approach. While emotion regulation skills (chapter 7) are strategies to create new and different feelings (so that there is greater balance between positive and negative experiences), distress tolerance skills are almost the opposite. You learn to pay attention to your pain in ways that do not increase it (mindfulness), you learn to self-soothe in order to increase your confidence in experiencing your emotions (decreasing avoidance and denial), you learn distraction skills that involve acknowledgment, you learn to improve the moment (a variant on emotion regulation skills, in that you are attempting to substitute a bad feeling for a better one, if just for a moment), and you learn critical thinking skills that can increase your emotional pain tolerance.

Distress Tolerance Skills

1. Mindfulness of pain in order to decrease it
2. Self-soothing skills
3. Distraction skills
4. Improving the moment (respite)
5. Increasing pain tolerance through critical thinking

Dr. Marsha Linehan thus describes distress tolerance skills as "crisis survival strategies" designed to "get through bad situations without making them worse" (1993b, p.97). I use her mnemonic for distress tolerance in its entirety because Dr. Linehan so successfully outlines behavioral and psychological techniques that work. And she creates a very easy way to remember the primary principles of distress tolerance: ACCEPTS, IMPROVE.

Mindfulness and Distress Tolerance

Mindfulness skills are an integral aspect of distress tolerance skills. If your goal is to reduce distress, you may ask, then why would paying even more careful attention to distress be useful or ever suggested? Didn't I just say that once an emotion no longer brings new or useful information, we shouldn't repeat it to ourselves? And earlier I even warned against practicing or rehearsing an emotion, as this makes us get "better" at it. If you're mindful of your emotional pain, won't you be practicing that emotion and thus increasing it?

Remember, DBT is a set of strategies that assumes that much of emotional pain and prolonged suffering involves inadequate compromises between competing and at times contradictory needs and urges. Here, the dialectic is between accepting the mixed anxiety and depression and ridding yourself of it. The more you engage in any extreme along the dialectic continuum, the greater the possibility that you are forming an inadequate compromise.

Dialectic Conflicts in Distress Tolerance

Accepting the anxiety just as it is	↔	Totally ridding yourself of the anxiety
Rehearsal of anxiety, making it grow	↔	Denial and avoidance of anxiety, prolonging it
Overlearning the depression response, increasing its probability in the future	↔	Increasing fear of depression, adding secondary emotional responses that increase distress
Noticing so much about your anxiety that you become oversensitized to it	↔	Noticing so little about your anxiety that you become undersensitized to it

Richness of Feeling

The goal is to form compromises that optimize your chances to reach your goals. Obviously you don't want to prolong pain. Unfortunately, this frequently means that you must be willing to expose yourself to this very pain precisely in order to not prolong it. Bereavement offers an excellent example. When you lose a lifelong companion, you should feel sadness and loss. Why? Because these feelings measure as well as define meaning in your life. Without attachment, love, need, anger, disappointment, anticipation, or any of the varied emotions you can have, how meaningful would life be? Without our emotions we would be more like plants or statues than human beings. Even our pets have these feelings. How many of you would bother to have a dog or cat that didn't care whether you ever came home? How many of you would tend to animals that seemed unmotivated to promote either their own well-being or that of others? Life would be rather dismal without the color, excitement, and meaning that your feelings bring.

But, at first glance, most of us would probably say we only want to feel good. If, in the dialectical continua above, you always choose strategies on the right side of the continuum (you try to rid yourself of all pain, you avoid and deny pain at every turn, and you minimize your experience of pain on any level), you will become undersensitized to all emotions. Why? Many experiences bring a variety of sensations. When you love someone, they inevitably disappoint you at times. When you hate someone, you are attached to him or her in the passion of your feeling. Even very event-oriented experiences, such as riding a roller coaster at an amusement park, involve a variety of emotions. You feel exhilaration at the anticipation of anxiety; you both look forward to and have a small amount of dread about the experience, which is exactly why some people seek it out. No one has yet discovered how to filter out all negative emotion without simultaneously filtering out joy and all its variants. So you must accept emotional pain, or you give up feeling good as well.

Nowhere is this better expressed than with panic attacks. Panic is when adrenalin flows excessively in the body. It activates your muscles, preparing you to run or attack. Your heart rate increases dramatically. You begin to breathe shallowly and quickly. You may perspire, as the body prepares to cool itself off from physical exertion. Blood rushes through your body

as the heart furiously pumps oxygen to cells throughout the body. People having panic attacks feel that they are about to die from a heart attack, or at least that they will pass out and be humiliated. Once someone has a panic attack, the probability of having another one increases. It is the fear of the panic that makes panic disorder such an anticipatory disease. The fear of the fear itself causes that which you fear to actually happen.

The behavioral treatment of panic disorder is thus to assist you to form better compromises on the continua we looked at earlier. The goal is to accept your bodily responses, to decrease the fear that you will die or be humiliated because of your body. By embracing the idea that you can tolerate your anxiety, the fear of the fear is reduced, and the probability of another attack decreases. As you become sensitive to your body you can see the signs of anxiety earlier, and it's easier to calm yourself with low to moderate anxiety than it is with high or extremely high anxiety. But you shouldn't become so highly sensitive to your body that you interpret every change as signal that another attack is coming. It's a balancing act, being both sensitive to your body and yet not overly vigilant. By moving from one side on the continuum to the other, you are more skillfully prepared to adjust your sensitivities to the situation at hand. You are more adaptable and less prone to error. Mindfulness of your distress is thus, paradoxically, actually a method of reducing pain.

Reduce or Accept Anxiety and Depression through Mindfulness

The basic mechanics of mindfulness skills are the same no matter what end you're seeking. With emotion regulation, you use mindfulness as a way to heighten your exposure to new and different experiences that can substitute better feelings for ones you are currently having. In strategic behavior skills (chapter 9), you use mindfulness to help you analyze the environment in order to better predict the course of action you should take in a particular situation. In distress tolerance, you use mindfulness in order to reduce secondary emotional responses and in order to validate the meaningfulness of situations that you confront. This is acceptance. The mechanics (how to be mindful) are the same, but the purpose differs.

We typically spend so much time trying to avoid feeling bad that it may feel foreign to pay specific attention to painful emotions. The procedures below break the mindfulness process down into small components, encouraging you to expose yourself to pain in order to better tolerate it. Certainly this may seem contrary to your natural tendency, but exposure to fear (experiencing it) reduces it.

1. Pay attention to your emotional pain. Where can you feel it? How is it expressed in your body? Do your muscles tighten up? Can you feel pressure in your head and neck? Do you feel hot or cold? Does your heart rate speed up?
2. Pay attention to your internal dialogue. What are you saying to yourself? What are you reacting to, and what does that mean to you? What are you saying to yourself about the future?
3. Pay attention to your language. What words are you using to describe your feelings?

4. Pay attention to your action urges, even if you are not acting on them. Do you feel like running away? Being violent with someone? Crawling in a hole to hide and burning your birth certificate?
5. Pay attention to your behavior that actually expresses the feeling. What are you doing? Crying? Screaming? Shaking? Sulking? Criticizing someone else? Withdrawing?
6. Pay attention to your tendency toward judgmentalism. How are you judging this process as bad, wrong, unfair, or undesired?

Now, be mindful, with the strategies we discussed in chapter 6 (ONE MIND) even more keenly in mind. Remember what the mnemonic stands for.

One thing

Now

Environment. What is happening out there?

Moment. Immediate

Increase senses. Touch, taste, vision, hearing

Nonjudgmental. Not good or bad, right or wrong

Describe. Words, descriptive not prescriptive or proscriptive

1. Focus on only One thing. Don't ruminate on the million things others have done to you to make you depressed. Focus only on one thing, the depression itself. Focus on the emotion itself, not everything that surrounds it.
2. Consider the Now. How are you experiencing this emotion in this moment? Not how you felt yesterday and the day before, but just now.
3. Focus on the Environment. Is anything happening outside of you that is prompting this emotion in this moment? Or are you responding to memories, wants, and past events? If so, refocus to the Moment, what is happening in this immediate second, both inside and outside of you.
4. Increase your senses. Experience your immediate senses in the now. What are you touching, tasting, seeing, hearing? Are you replaying what you saw and heard from the past? Are you really in this moment?
5. Take a Nonjudgmental stance toward what you are being mindful of. Describe your emotion to yourself without all the imperatives and action urges. Watch the emotion without dread or threat. Just for this moment, feel it up close and don't try to change it one iota.

The more skillful you become at being mindful of your emotional pain, the more you'll find that the intensity and frequency of the pain are reduced (Overholser 2000). Why do I say this? Emotions are frequently so variegated, containing so many secondary emotional responses, that by simply attending to the moment without struggling with the emotion makes it tolerable. By teasing out your experiences, taking them one bit at a time, they are

less overwhelming. By reducing resistance and judgmentalism, by not "tugging" at them or running from them, you are no longer growing them. They dissipate.

If you do not find, with a little practice, the intensity of the emotional pain reducing, go back to the desensitization procedures we outlined in emotion regulation (chapter 7), where you expose yourself to the pain and then expose yourself to something else more pleasant. Go back and forth between the pleasant and the unpleasant. This exposure to your emotions should help a great deal. If you continue to have difficulty, seek out a psychotherapist who has been trained in DBT. They should be able to coach you through this desensitization process. However, it is essential that you eventually learn the application of this process. Once you learn the strategy, you can then apply it on your own to future situations without professional coaching.

Self-Soothing

Self-soothing is the process of calming yourself down, speaking to yourself lovingly and reassuringly. While most of us learned how to be soothing to children, we rarely are able or willing to be soothing to ourselves. Think of how you soothe a child: you provide physical comfort (hugging them and placing them on your lap after a fall or mishap), you provide verbal comfort (most often by simply reassuring them that everything is going to be alright and that you understand that they hurt), and most importantly you validate them (by simply recognizing that they are frightened, in pain, or emotionally hurt, and letting them know it's okay to feel that way and that you want them to feel better).

Why is it acceptable to almost all adults to provide soothing experiences for children, oftentimes without a second thought about it, and frequently unacceptable for most adults to do the same things for themselves?

Most of us make critical assumptions about what it means to be an adult, to be grown-up and mature. Mature people somehow don't need simple soothing after an "ow-ee." In fact, many people assume that grown-ups shouldn't have "ow-ees." You should somehow be impervious to all the stresses and strains of daily living. This assumption of adult imperviousness is so firmly rooted in many people's minds that it is never specifically articulated. You believe it, even though you never actually say it to yourself. Sad, since children typically express what all humans need and want, just in more visible and less shrouded ways. While adults typically aren't as frightened when they trip and fall, other types of "falls" don't necessarily transform over time into inconsequential events. And why should they? When a friend puts you down a bit at a social gathering, it hurts in the same way that dropping your sucker on the floor did as a child. Why should you not be able to obtain the same comfort and soothing you received as a child when you're hurt as an adult? Especially when the hurts are powerful, soothing and comfort are powerfully effective in making a difference.

Another adult assumption that prevents people from soothing themselves involves the conception that only others should provide soothing. You might think to yourself, "Why should I have to soothe myself? Others should be giving me soothing! If I give it to myself, it's not as meaningful. Others should provide comforting words. I'd feel silly giving them to myself. What am I? Some friendless freak who has to do everything for myself?"

Obviously, if you take this approach to its extreme, you would be totally dependent on others for meeting your needs and at the mercy of their whims and desires—not a good

place to be. Ideally, you have internalized the adults who provided support and nurturance when you were a child. If so, you naturally and spontaneously say the same kinds of things to yourself that your important adults (typically parents, teachers, grandparents, and other extended family) said to you as a child. However, when you have a history of invalidation (when those from whom you sought support and nurturance provided conflicting or even negative messages), you may have internalized maladaptive values. "I'm only worthy of validation when someone else gives it to me. I don't deserve soothing because I want it. It's a gift from others."

More damaging still, another adult assumption is that you're unworthy of soothing at all. Not only do you reject self-soothing, you reject soothing provided by any source. You feel unworthy of such good feelings. Because you hurt so much and so often, you *must* be undeserving. You get what you deserve, right? Judging from your past experience, you may say something to yourself like, "I must not be worthy of good feelings because I've received so few." But think about it—this reasoning is circular. You didn't receive adequate soothing in the past, so now you believe you don't deserve it. Therefore, you don't accept it when it's offered, leaving you with no soothing—which turns around and confirms your belief that you're not worthy of soothing. Psychologists call this *emotional reasoning*. In logic they call it *tautological*.

Finally, another adult assumption is that the soothing is short-lived. You may say to yourself, "So what if I feel better for the moment? The pain will return, it always does." We've dealt with this before. Emotions are intended to be temporary, transitory, and fluctuating. No feeling, good or bad, should last forever. You should be influenced by your experience. Creating experiences that make you feel good, even temporarily, thus should be sought after rather than avoided. Engage in self-soothing, even if it feels weird in the beginning. Perhaps you are just out of practice (unfortunate, since this means that you have somehow suffered extended periods of invalidation rather than soothing). The more you practice it, the better you will get at it. Give yourself permission to feel good. Self-soothing is just that, you helping yourself feel better. You self-soothe by focusing on your senses and your thoughts.

Thoughts

Self-soothing thoughts come in three major classes:

1. *Validation*: It's okay that I hurt and that I want to feel better.
2. *Reassurance*: I can handle this pain, even though it hurts and I don't like it.
3. *Perspective taking*: I felt this way before, so I know I can handle it. The feeling did not last forever last time, and it won't this time either.

With validation you're reminding yourself that your feelings are right and justified, but that you don't want to have them any longer. You're separating out the way you feel from issues of "deserving." You're not telling yourself that you must be deserving of the depression as a form of punishment. Instead, you're telling yourself that your feeling is simply that, a feeling. Perhaps there is no purpose to your suffering. You may be reacting to a situation that you feel is horribly unfair and unjust. It does not matter. You don't buy in to the notion

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that your suffering says anything fundamental about your personality or your identity. You simply validate that the feeling you're having is there, and that you want to change it. You thus first accept the pain for what it is, an emotional sensation, before you go about changing it. You acknowledge, identify, and validate the pain, then move on.

Reassurance gets at the core of self-soothing. Like the child who needs comfort and to be told verbally or behaviorally that "it's alright, you're okay," you similarly reassure yourself. Tell yourself, unashfully and unapologetically: "This, too, will pass." "I'm okay, I just hurt." "Of course this is painful to me. I'll survive." "Of course I don't like this experience. Who would? But I can handle it." "This feels awful. I don't like it. But I can take it." "I'm okay, I'll survive, but I hurt." "I'm doing okay. I can take this pain for now. I can comfort myself through this."

Practice some self-soothing below. Identify situations where you experience mixed depression and anxiety and then write self-soothing statements that help you to cope with those situations.

Name the feeling you are having	Acknowledge and validate the pain	Write self-soothing statements you can use for the situation
Example: I'm depressed that I feel like I can't leave the house and anxious about the thought of having panic symptoms if I do leave the house.	I feel a sense of helplessness and being out of control. I feel urgency to escape this feeling. I feel as if I'm going to explode from the inside out. I hurt, so of course I'm afraid of leaving the house.	It's great that I'm feeling strong enough to consider leaving the house again. For so long I didn't even try. I have greater faith that I can handle my panic. I can get through this. I'm getting stronger every day.

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking involves looking at more than the moment at hand (Rusting and DeHart 2000). Unlike with mindfulness, where you attempt to focus only on the now, on

this moment in time, with perspective taking you look beyond what you feel immediately and compare it to the past and to the future. You may feel deeply depressed in this moment, rageful now, despondent in this instant, hopeless and urgently seeking escape from your emotion right now. But you can think of times, yesterday or a few weeks ago, when you felt very differently. Perspective taking thus involves comparison and a longer time frame. The intent is not to minimize how you feel now (telling yourself that you don't feel what you know you're feeling), but to compare it to your other previous feelings and anticipated future feelings so that you don't lose the perspective that all of your emotions shift and change over time. Tell yourself something like, "Yes, I feel frantic now, but yesterday I felt calmer. I can develop that calm today." "I feel hopeless now, but yesterday I had a good telephone conversation with a friend that made me feel connected. I'll feel less hopeless in a bit." "I feel worthless now, but when others compliment me I feel better. I always feel better when I work on recognizing my strengths." "My anxiety feels intolerable right now, but I know when I get in the hot tub my muscles let go, and I feel less like crawling out of my skin."

Practice perspective taking below by writing down situations that disagree with your general conclusion about yourself or your situation.

Identify the situation and your feeling	Write about situations that evoke a different perspective
<p>Example: I'm never good enough for my partner. I always seem to do something wrong. Sometimes I just feel like killing myself, the situation is so hopeless.</p>	<p>My new boyfriend told me last weekend that I was fun to be with. He told me many times that I'm attractive. He likes my cooking. He continues to seek out my company and calls several times a week. I guess I can't always be a bad partner to him. My hope for this relationship is high, so I can't give up hope in myself.</p>

Vision

While self-soothing with words or language can be powerful, your five senses can also be enormously helpful. What can you hold in your vision that provides respite from your immediate emotions? In distress tolerance workshops we use videotapes of dancers, ballet, art museum tours, nature videos, and beautiful art books to demonstrate the kind of visual material that you can easily use at home to relieve painful feelings. Focus your vision on beauty. It may be a beautiful bouquet of flowers, looking out at the stars at night, watching fish swim gracefully in an aquarium, lighting a candle and watching the flame flicker, observing the lapping of small waves in a swimming pool, or anything that brings a sense of awe and comfort. Be mindful when using vision to provide comfort and self-soothing. Are you watching something you find beautiful or simply standing in front of something while you turn thoughts constantly around in your head? Go back to the image of an adult soothing a frightened or hurt child. If the adult simply snatches them up and gives them no attention, the child will not be reassured. Why would you feel any differently? Give attention to visual images that provide comfort. Get out of yourself, and see something with care.

Below, write down objects, experiences, or views that can help you to feel soothed. Try to pick items that are accessible to you (either in your home, neighborhood, or library, or at a friend's house) that you can readily draw upon when you feel anxious or depressed. Do this exercise now, even though you may not feel especially tense or depressed in this moment. It's easier to generate such lists when your feelings are not so intense rather than when the anxiety is so high that it is hard to concentrate or the depression is so strong you feel little motivation or hope to initiate new behavior. So make your lists now; don't just skip over this section.

Visual Experiences That Soothe Me

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Hearing

Sound can provide incredible comfort. Listen to a CD or tape of nature: waterfalls, brooks, ocean waves, wind in forests, or birds. Get out your favorite record, CD, or tape that you remember as comforting, beautiful, and awe-inspiring. Listen to a vocalist, instrumental music, or a concert that you find captures your attention.

Below, write down sounds that are soothing to you. Again, try to pick things that are accessible to you so that you can readily use this strategy to soothe yourself.

Sounds That Soothe Me

Scent

Find a single flower that has a scent that you enjoy. Go to a cosmetic counter and enjoy the various perfumes, colognes, and toiletries that smell differently than ones you're used to. Walk near a restaurant and enjoy the aromas coming from the kitchen. Go to a health-food store and smell the various aromatherapy products.

Think of aromas that you find pleasant, that bring positive memories, and write them below.

Aromas That Soothe Me

Taste

Go to an ice-cream store and sample their various flavors. Go to a farmers' market and sample the various vegetables and breads. Go to a deli and sample some of the dishes. Prepare a dish you haven't made in a long time. Suck on a slice of lemon. Place a small ice cube in your

mouth. Flavor your coffee or tea. Use mouthwash, and feel it in every part of your mouth. Put a very small amount of spice on your fingertip and place it gently on your tongue.

Identify tastes that you find soothing and pleasant, and write them below.

Tastes That Soothe Me

Touch

Hold an ice cube in your fist briefly. Take a bubble bath. Let sand fall through your fingers. Let your hand gently comb a lawn. Rub lotion on your hands and arms. Splash cool water on your face. Rub marbles between your hands. Pet your pet. Hug someone. Write below as many things that you remember touching in the past that felt pleasant, made you feel comfort, or brought pleasant memories or sensations.

Touch That Soothes Me

Use all of your senses to soothe yourself. Pretend you have never seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched the thing before. Treat it as a totally new and different experience. Alternatively, try to remember the first time you ever experienced that thing before. Be mindful of the experience. Allow yourself permission to be comforted.

Practice soothing yourself. Write down things you can do in each section and make certain you do some of those things each week.

Soothing When Depression and Anxiety Are High

It's an excellent habit to expose yourself to self-soothing on a regular basis, since this will decrease the probability that you will slip into depression. It also redirects your attention away from your own body, which can decrease anxiety since you're not constantly watching your body in an anticipatory way for signs of stress (the self-fulfilling prophecy). It's especially important that you soothe yourself when your anxiety and depression increase. The next time you feel without energy, just want to sleep to make the world go away, or feel like your body couldn't possibly be any more anxious, choose some of the soothing items you listed above and engage in them. Do them especially when you are experiencing intense emotional pain.

Soothing yourself can involve all of your senses. Especially when you experience intense mixed anxiety and depression, it's important that you use all of your senses to soothe yourself. The following exercise will encourage you to do just that. Use the table below (and the similar one at the back of the book) when you feel desperate, hopeless, helpless, or paralyzed by the intensity of your emotions. You'll find that soothing yourself really does make your emotions less intense and more tolerable. When one sense doesn't work to decrease your agony (say, thinking reassuring thoughts), perhaps another sense will reduce your desperation (aromas that remind you of comforting situations). Engage in these soothing strategies each time you feel intolerable emotion, not just once as you work through this book.

Thoughts. What can I think about that will make me feel reassured?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Vision. What can I look at that will make me feel good things?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Hearing. What is pleasing to the ear? What can I listen to that soothes me?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Smell. What aromas make me feel good?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Taste. What can I put in my mouth that makes me feel great and prompts fond memories?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Touch. What can I touch that will invoke feelings that are so different from my pain?	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Distraction Skills

Distraction allows us to attend to something else besides our painful emotions and thus increases our emotional pain tolerance (Gross 2001). Just as with self-soothing, we can use a variety of different strategies to increase our psychological coping skills. Dr. Linehan's ACCEPTS mnemonic is an easy way to remember the different strategies you can deploy when necessary (1993b).

Activities

Contributing

Comparisons

Opposite Emotions

Pushing Away

Thoughts

Sensations

Activities

The first step of the mnemonic reminds you to get involved with a project. While typically the last thing you want to do when you feel depressed or anxious is take care of all those little tasks around the house you've put off, this is precisely the time to do them. Not only will you feel better by getting the laundry done, vacuuming the floor, doing the dishes, and so on, but you will also redirect your attention away from your emotions, away from yourself, and away from the memories that prompt the negative emotions. Write a thank-you note to a friend or acquaintance, put together an array of items to give to charity, or engage in a hobby. What you do is not nearly as important as that you do *something*. Get moving, engage in a task. Simply having your body moving and active is important.

Contributing

This is another way to decrease the self-absorption that intense emotions often bring. Self-absorption not only means that you are attending to little else besides your feelings and the events or processes that are prompting them, it also means that you tend to lose perspective. Contribute to others. Get involved in a community project (a park cleanup project, a beach beautification program, an elder visitation program, an inner-city assistance program, tutoring students or adults, or fund-raising for programs you deeply believe in). Join a board or committee of a program you support. Get involved in a political campaign or cause. Agree to distribute materials, stuff envelopes, or write letters of support to the local newspaper. Give of yourself in ways that make you feel good about your efforts and the causes you support. It will increase your confidence, your sense of competence, and the meaningfulness of your life. This, eventually, will increase good feelings and decrease bad feelings.

Comparisons

Making comparisons is another method of perspective taking. How is your life different from those of others born in third-world or developing countries? How would your situation be different or the same if you lived in a nation at combat? How might your relationships with others be different if you were born mentally retarded? Compare your situation and your feelings to those of others who perhaps have more physical disabilities, less income, or less education. Alternately, how might your situation be different if you were born rich? What if you were born into royalty? How would your feelings be different if you were in the immediate family of the president? If you were a butcher, rather than a plumber? What would the differences be? Comparison helps you to get out of the little cubbyholes you have placed yourself in, broadens your perspective, gets you more in a thinking mode rather than a pure feeling mode, and assists you to see that there will always be people better off and worse off than you.

Comparisons also invite you to examine your appraisals of the situation. "Is how I'm interpreting this situation really correct? I feel bad, but maybe that's because my thinking about a situation is inaccurate. Maybe others don't think I'm foolish, immoral, or stupid. Perhaps when all the emotions calm down, I have not lost the relationship I value so highly. Maybe my story won't be flashed on tomorrow's news headlines. While my feelings are accurate reflections of the anticipations I'm having, what if what I anticipate is wrong?" Project how your feelings would change if your appraisal of the situation were inaccurate. Keep perspective. Reserve judgment. Deal with what you know to be true, and question possible alternatives to what you anticipate. Maybe you're right about what you fear is going to happen. But compare your feeling to other possibilities. Not only can it provide comfort in the moment, but also it will decrease the chances that you engage in impulsive behaviors that promote your negative appraisals. "Are there things I can do to prevent my negative worry from coming true?" In chapter 9, you'll learn about what you can do to prevent your negative worrying from coming true.

Opposite Emotions

You may remember this strategy from chapter 7. Engage in an activity that will produce an emotion quite different from the one you currently have. If you feel tired and sluggish, go for a short jog or rapid stroll. If you're feeling bored or useless, read an adventure book, watch a comedy movie, or turn on a drama. If you are feeling depressed, watch a horror movie and change the depression to temporary, controllable anxiety. Any change in emotional state reminds you that all feelings are temporary. Prove to yourself that you can let the environment affect you. Invite in experiences that are influential and that prompt different emotions.

Pushing Away

Many of you are already quite familiar with this technique from childhood. For some, it is the main strategy they use when their feelings are intense. Refuse to think about what angers you. Visualize the person who has upset you, then make them shrink visually as if you had magical powers to do so. See them shrink so small that you can hardly see them in the distance, then watch them disappear. Take your feelings of being small and worthless, and visualize yourself growing visually. Take your anxiety and imagine being able to package it up in a box and put it on the top shelf of your most cluttered closet. Imagine that your anxiety is a ball and toss it far away in a distant field. Push away the emotions, as if you have a force field from *Star Trek* shimmering around you. The emotion cannot get in, no matter how it tries.

Thoughts

Thoughts can provide temporary respite from intense emotions. Do things that engage your mind. Do a crossword puzzle, balance your checkbook, put together your yearly budget, go through your junk mail, read the manual to a recent electronic product you bought, read magazines. Occupy your mind with something else.

Sensations

This item involves another strategy of creating new input. Take a hot bath. Take a cold shower. Smell something pungent. Put on your favorite perfume. Review the stimuli from the chapter on mindfulness for other ideas of sensations to which you can expose yourself.

ACCEPTS reminds you to accept other input and experiences the world has to offer. Don't expose yourself repeatedly to stimuli that keep the same old feelings going. Practice distraction skills. Practice ACCEPTS.

On the following worksheet, write your potential responses to each item.

Activities. What can I do now to distract myself?	
Contributing. What can I do for others?	
Comparisons. How am I better off than some? Worse off than some?	
Opposite Emotions. What can I do to feel the opposite of what I'm feeling right now?	
Pushing Away. Don't let the emotion in. Protect myself from it.	
Thoughts. Think about something else. Engage my mind.	
Sensations. Expose my senses to something else.	

Improve the Moment

Dr. Linehan's IMPROVE mnemonic (1993b) invites you to use emotion regulation strategies to feel something different. It's a reminder that each moment is an opportunity to feel a different feeling, to have variety and responsiveness in your life.

Imagery

Meaning

Prayer

Relaxation

One thing at a time

Vacation

Encouragement

Imagery

The first item of the mnemonic means using your memories of visual events. *Imagery* is when you project a mental picture, as if you were using a movie projector to project images onto your closed eyelids. Imagine yourself walking through the most beautiful forest on a warm summer morning. Imagine the tall trees, the various shades of green leaves sparkling with the rays beaming down from the sun. Imagine the smell of the earth, the trees, and the fresh forest air going into your lungs. Imagine that with each breath the visual image becomes more colorful and vivid, as if you are really there. Imagine what it would feel like to walk quietly among the trees, as if this is your private forest, grown for your exclusive enjoyment. See the bark on the trees, the leaves on the ground, and the beauty of nature surrounding you. Use this imagery, and remind yourself how your body would feel in such peaceful and magical surroundings, not having to think about, plan, or respond to anything other than the setting you visualize.

Use imagery that is comforting to you, imagery from tranquil and inspiring previous experiences that you've had. For you it might be the ocean, a lake, a mountain cabin, a favorite overstuffed chair in a previous home, the kitchen of your best friend, a childhood vacation spot, or an expensive resort where well-mannered servants cater to your every whim.

Play forward the visual images, staying with them for as long as it takes to reexperience the kind of peaceful and relaxed bodily and mental effects you remember when you were really there. Let irrelevant thoughts come and go. Don't use effort to push them away, just imagine that you look the other way. Don't let distractions upset the mood you want to set for yourself by using the imagery. The more you use this technique, the better you can get at it. Distractions will become less of an issue with your greater skill in using imagery.

Meaning

Meaning is always the foundation of good mental health. Go back to chapter 5 on meaning making and review what you wrote there about what is important to you. Remind yourself of all the important things, people, and places in your life. Don't allow your emotions to make you so self-absorbed that you forget the existing meaning in your life and the meaningfulness you are creating. Are there any ways that your current depression speaks to what is meaningful to you? Does your anxiety heighten the importance of what you find meaningful? For example, if your current pain is humiliation that you made a fool of yourself in front of others that you admire, then your humiliation is an example of how highly you

treasure your relationships with others. It is a reminder that you need to pursue your meaningful relationships. It is a painful reminder of your connection to others.

When your emotional pain is intense, reread chapter 5. Read your responses beginning on page 86 of the chapter. Remind yourself, in affirmative terms, what you want (not just what you don't want).

Prayer

Prayer can be a powerful method of reducing self-absorption, increasing meaning, and offering strength and courage in the face of fear. People with deep religious convictions already know this. If I may be so presumptuous, however, I would like to offer a few suggestions about *how* to pray, even for those who consider themselves believers in a Higher Power. Pray in order to be closer to your Higher Power, in order to communicate with God. Don't treat God like a vending machine, asking for deliverance from this or that. Don't ask for things. Don't make requests. Instead, commune. Repetition of well-known prayers (Our Fathers, the Rosary, the Serenity Prayer) can make us feel closer to our Higher Power.

Prayer has been shown through scientific study of brain wave patterns to have the same effect as meditation and deep relaxation exercises of very skillful practitioners of such techniques (Kabat-Zinn 2003). Thus, for those who have ideological difficulty with the notion of prayer, practice meditation.

Prayer serves the goal of acceptance. You accept your pain, you stop struggling with it, and it dissipates.

Relaxation

Relaxation can help with distress tolerance because it provides bodily relief of tension. Remember our brief tour of emotion theory in chapter 7? Recall that you can change emotions by intervening at any of a number of points: behavior, body, environment, or feelings. Since each of these major systems interact with each other, by relaxing the body, the brain accepts that threat is lower. Our emotions will eventually follow.

There are a number of quite effective bodily relaxation techniques. One is called *progressive muscle relaxation* (Jacobson 1938) and relies on the "pendulum theory." Sometimes we're able to relax simply by paying attention to our muscular tension and inviting it to let go. However, when many muscles are very tight this can be a challenge. As with a pendulum, when you pull it very far in one direction and then let go, it will swing fully to the opposite direction. Your muscles work the same way. With progressive muscle relaxation, you tightly flex each muscle group as hard as you can for fifteen to twenty seconds and then abruptly let go of the tension. You do this one muscle group at a time, starting at the head (forehead, eyes, jaw, neck) and moving toward the toes (right shoulder, left shoulder, upper back, chest, lower back, right arm, left arm, right hand, left hand, stomach, right leg, and so on). First, you tighten the muscle group for fifteen to twenty seconds, then abruptly let go and pay attention to the increased blood flow and immediate release of tension you feel, and then go on to the next muscle group. If you do this successfully, you should feel a tingling or warm sensation in the area of the body you just worked on, since you are tightening muscles sharply. This paradoxical procedure of tightening in order to loosen really works. With practice, your skill in using this technique should increase and you should get better results over time.

Deep breathing is an additional way of encouraging bodily relaxation. Under stress, our breathing tends to become more rapid and shallow. Deep breathing is consciously reversing this process. Take slow, deep breaths. Pause a second to two seconds between each inhale and exhale. Pay attention to the air as it enters and exits your nose. Feel your lungs inflate and deflate. Feel your chest and lower belly rise and fall with each breath. Say something soothing to yourself, such as "relax," "calm," "tranquil," "peaceful," or "quiet" with each breath.

Do stretching exercises, get in a hot tub or Jacuzzi, massage yourself, soak in the bathtub, sunbathe, or sit in your favorite chair with soft music and soft lighting. Do whatever allows your muscles to relax, your skin to feel good, your breathing to be gentle, and your spirit to be soothed.

One Thing in the Moment

This idea is familiar to you from mindfulness practice. Focus just on now. Watch your physical sensations. Stay out of your head. Don't think—notice.

Vacation

Take a small vacation from the routine. Most people think of a major one- or two-week get-away when they think of vacationing. However, stress researchers have found that a typical vacation has stress-reducing effects that last no longer than the vacation itself, and certainly no longer than two weeks. Even a monthlong vacation in France will reduce your stress no longer than two weeks once you return to your normal day-to-day existence. So, for our purposes, think of vacation as very short-term and easy things you can do to get away from it all. Visit a friend across town for a few hours, and don't talk about your problems. Go to the mall, just window-shop, and have lunch someplace different from your normal routine. Spend the afternoon in your backyard with a good book. Light a candle, put on music you typically don't listen to, and make yourself an exotic beverage to sip on. Go to a nearby hotel, order one drink, and spend the afternoon or evening in an elegantly furnished lobby. Go to a nearby park and be mindful of the children playing and how it feels to be outdoors. Find something local, inexpensive, unobtrusive, and that does not require lots of planning or stress to participate in. If you have not been to the movies in a long time, go. If you always go the movies, this time go to the park. If you rarely entertain guests, have a small dinner party. Have a picnic, barbecue, or just serve dinner on the floor in front of a good home movie. Do something slightly out of the ordinary.

Encouragement

Encouragement is critical. Be optimistic, predict success. No technique, no matter how powerful or potentially effective, will work if you use it with doubt and misgivings. I'm not asking you to lie to yourself. If you know that spending your day in the backyard with a book wasn't appealing even when you weren't feeling depressed and it still doesn't sound good to you now, then engaging in that activity just to prove that this DBT stuff doesn't work is not helpful. On the other hand, depression and anxiety are often anticipatory in nature. Your expectations are of doom and gloom. However, when you actually engage in the behavior

you feel differently than you expected. If all you want to do is moan, pull the covers over your head, and hope that somehow you will magically feel differently in the future, then you're likely to be disappointed. Approach each of these techniques with hope, encouragement, and an expectation of success. Look for small changes in your feelings rather than "light-bulb" epiphanies that immediately transform you. Instead, say to yourself, "I'm going to do this because doing more of the same is unlikely to make me feel differently. I'll feel better just for trying something different and breaking my routine."

Practice IMPROVE and write your ideas here.

Imagery. What can I "see" in my mind that will be reassuring, pleasant, and invoke great memories?	
Meaning. Review what I wrote on pages 86-87. Which of these things can I do, remember, or remind myself of when I'm depressed or anxious?	
Prayer. How can I develop my spiritual or meditative power in this moment of depression and anxiety?	
Relaxation. What relaxation technique can I more faithfully practice?	
One thing at a time. What gets in the way of me really focusing? How can I stay on track better?	
Vacation. What small vacation from the ordinary can I take today, or at least in the next couple of days?	
Encouragement. What can I say to myself that will inspire hope and make me more positive?	

ACCEPT and IMPROVE your day, each day. Practice the principles. They don't work with halfhearted periodic efforts. They must be applied daily, always. Think of behaviors that you can do in your mind, things that you can do at home and even at work, in the car on the way to errands, and when interacting with your least-admired coworker. Practice.

Use the forms at the end of the book to prompt you to practice the variety of techniques in your daily life in a consistent basis over time.

Acceptance and Critical Thinking

The ACCEPT mnemonic above has an entirely different meaning when you attempt to actually increase your pain tolerance. Sometimes you are unable to successfully distract yourself and you tire of being mindful of the pain (because you have teased apart all the secondary from primary emotions, and even the remaining primary emotions are intolerably painful). At these times, what becomes of utmost importance is to increase your depression and anxiety tolerance itself. You need to increase your threshold of what you find acceptable. In fact, you need to accept the pain for what it is. You engage in acceptance as a method of reducing stress and depression (Hayes and Wilson 1994; Kabat-Zinn 1993). You say to yourself, I hurt, I feel like shit, and in this moment there is nothing I can do about it. I need to tolerate this pain. I need to accept that in this moment my pain and I are intertwined in ways I wish on no one.

Admitting Your Pain

What Dr. Linehan refers to as "radical acceptance" is validation that your pain hurts horribly, hurts continuously, and struggle is no longer an option (1993b). You can't move this emotional hurt, you can't distract it away, and just for this instant you choose not to improve the moment. You need to accept your pain for what it is, no more and no less. You hurt.

Radical acceptance does not mean that you run with your negative thoughts. It doesn't mean that you give up like your feelings tell you to do. It does not mean being pessimistic and giving in to the urge to destroy your life and thus end your depression. (Besides, you don't actually know this will work, maybe the end of the physical life doesn't mean an end to spiritual and emotional pain. You may just be limiting your options in the future.)

One of my favorite Greek stories is the myth of Sisyphus. He angers the Greek gods with his sin of avarice (insatiable greed) and is condemned to roll a heavy stone up a steep hill, which, at the top, rolls down again. And this condemnation is intensified with immortality. He can never die, so for all of eternity all he can do is roll the stone up the steep hill and watch it roll down. Sisyphus is condemned to the senseless repetition of inanity. However, Sisyphus handles it by cleaving to his task. He decides, if he is condemned to roll this stone up this steep hill forever, he might as well believe that the most important and meaningful thing in the universe is rolling that stone up the hill. The action itself, not its accomplishment, is what is important.

In essence, Sisyphus teaches us radical acceptance. We need to accept that which we cannot change. There is no need fighting it, since the struggle simply increases our suffering. To fight that which is inevitable increases suffering and brings agony; it does not inspire

hope or meaning. Radical acceptance is about tolerating your pain without making it worse (without adding suffering and agony to an already bad situation).

You choose to accept your pain as it is, without struggle, because you know the struggle itself creates even more pain. Your choice is based on a commitment to accept. You have turned over your pain to a Higher Power, a spiritual force who helps you suffer less through acceptance. You know that fighting your pain gets you nowhere. You know you cannot will your pain away, so you roll with it. You don't give in to it, you don't base your decisions for future actions on it—you simply experience it acceptingly because you know on a deep level that this acceptance makes the pain bearable. You allow rather than encourage, you accept rather than intensify, you experience rather than agonize over.

Thinking Critically

This act of choice is critical thinking. You have inventoried all the ways you could avoid your pain and all the ways you could tolerate your pain, and made the decision to accept it in this moment. You appreciate that all feelings change over time, that this pain also will pass, and you endure it willingly and without struggling with it. Acceptance isn't a behavior engaged in to intensify or practice the feeling. It's not a decision to engage in intentional actions of self-harm or to make matters worse by contributing to the pain. It is a choice of acceptance of that which already exists—nothing more and nothing else.

This is critical thinking in at least three ways. First, it is decisional. It is a choice among alternatives. It is not emotionally based, but a thought process that occurs about an emotion. Second, it's critical because it is made in the depths of agony. You engage your mind, your rational self, when it seems as if only your heart and soul speak. You raise your rational voice above the screams of emotionalism. Third, it is critical thinking because it precisely defines the true meaning of crisis management. You choose an alternative that results in the least harm both for this moment and for the future.

Acceptance is based in critical thinking, but fundamentally it is an emotional decision. You accept that which cannot be changed. But you accept your feelings of anxiety and depression with the deep belief, backed up with scientific evidence, that acceptance can decrease emotional pain over the long haul (Hayes 2002; Teasdale et al. 2000).

Distress tolerance is probably the least-favored strategy you will ever use to manage your emotions, but it does work to decrease the intensity and duration of your pain (Baer 2003; Davidson 2000). Fortunately, there are skills that you can use to decrease your need for distress tolerance in the future. In the next chapter we turn to strategic behavior that can decrease the probability of future depression and anxiety.