

Facing Your Feelings

Module 3

Improving Distress

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Introduction

The previous module focused on developing ways of accepting emotional distress. This module takes a very different focus of learning how to improve your distress when you experience it. To improve distress we focus more on your behaviours, looking at what to do and what not to do when you experience emotional distress. Depending on the type of escape methods you typically use (i.e., avoidance, numbing & withdrawing, or harmful releases), the strategies we will suggest for improving your distress will vary slightly. This module will focus on helping you discover a variety of things you can try to improve your distress, so you can experiment and find out what works for you.

Balancing Acceptance & Improvement

Accepting and improving distress are quite different approaches, and maintaining a balance between acceptance and improvement is the key to building distress tolerance. It is unhelpful to be at either extreme (i.e., only accepting how you feel or only trying to improve how you feel). To tolerate distress you really need to learn how to do both. Our aim is to help you learn how to accept your negative emotions, and with that in mind, then work on improving your emotional experience. Imagine if you only tried to improve your distress without being able to accept it first, if this were the case then your efforts to find something to improve your negative feelings would be pretty frantic and desperate. If instead you could accept your distress, then your efforts to improve the distress would more likely be calm, considered and calculated.

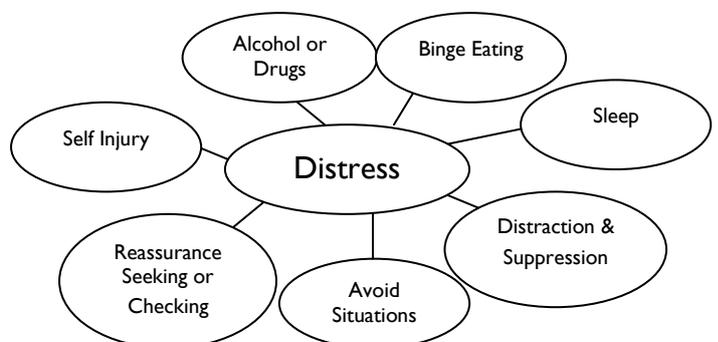


We have purposely put *Accepting Distress* before *Improving Distress* in this series of Modules, as we don't want "improving" to become just another strategy for avoiding your emotions. In summary, you need to feel the emotion first, accept it, ride through it, and then take action to improve it.

However having said that, if as you work through these modules the distress you experience is extremely intense and unbearable emotional pain, then you may not be able to apply the acceptance strategies outlined in the previous module just yet. If this is the case, then it is ok to move straight to this module and focus on improving your distress (particularly the *Distress Improvement Activities* on page 5). This is particularly relevant for people who engage in self-harm or drug and alcohol use to manage their distress. In these situations, temporary distractions may be necessary to help you get through the intense distress you might be experiencing, and avoid engaging in behaviours that are damaging to you.

Improving Distress

As we have seen, being distress intolerant can manifest in very different sorts of behaviours or escape methods. Some people avoid certain situations that make them distressed, engage in reassurance seeking or checking to alleviate their distress, or use distraction and suppression to stop their distress. Other people numb and withdraw via engaging in alcohol or drug use, binge eating or using sleep to escape their emotions. And other people may engage in harmful releases, hurting themselves in some physical way as a means of dealing with their distress. Although these behaviours are very different, and hence the strategies for improving distress can vary too, the common guiding principle for improving distress is to do the opposite of your escape urge, and find specific activities that improve your emotional state.



Please Note: As mentioned in Module 1, whilst these modules may be helpful to people who use drugs, alcohol or self-harm as a means of tolerating emotional distress, it is important to recognise that these are very serious problems in their own right that can cause a person significant harm. We strongly advise seeking help from a GP or mental health professional to address these concerns, rather than relying solely on these Modules to overcome the problem.

Opposite Action

In Module 1, you identified your particular escape methods. Below is a table summarising the opposite actions for each distress escape method we have covered. Look through the table and circle the opposite action box corresponding to your particular escape method(s). There is also a box at the bottom for if you engage in a particular escape method that we have not covered in these Modules. If this applies to you, maybe you could try to think of what the opposite action would be.

| Drop Escape Method | Do Opposite Action |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Situational Avoidance* | Don't avoid situations that distress you. Instead gradually face these situations and stay in them, until you have ridden through the distress. Remember to reward your efforts when you are done, by doing things that are active or soothing . |
| Reassurance Seeking or Checking | Minimise or eliminate reassurance seeking or checking behaviours. Try to cope independently with the distress you feel, riding through these feelings without resorting to checking things or seeking the reassurance of others. Remember to reward your efforts when you are done, by doing things that are active or soothing . |
| Distraction & Suppression | Don't push away distressing feelings. Instead allow and experience these feelings. Remember to reward your efforts when you are done, by doing things that are active or soothing . |
| Alcohol or Drugs | Don't numb the distress by using alcohol or drugs. Instead allow and experience these feelings. Also do things that are active or soothing , rather than withdrawing from life. |
| Binge eating | Don't numb the distress by binge eating. Instead allow and experience these feelings. Also do things that are active or soothing , rather than withdrawing from life. |
| Excessive sleep | Don't numb the distress by using sleep. Instead allow and experience these feelings. Also do things that are active or soothing , rather than withdrawing from life. |
| Harmful Releases | Self- soothe and be active in the moment, rather than harming yourself. |
| | |

* **Note:** This module deals with general avoidance driven by not wanting to feel emotional distress. If you identify very strongly with your avoidance being specifically related to social situations, or fear of having a panic attack or fear of having a serious health problem, then you may want to look at the 'Shy No Longer', 'Panic Stations' and 'Helping Health Anxiety' Information packages respectively to target these specific problems.

You will notice that most of the opposite actions initially require that you stay with, ride through, allow and experience the distress, rather than escaping it. As such, the acceptance strategies of Module 2 will be relevant in helping you do this. You will also notice that most of the opposite actions require engaging in some activity that is either about being active in the moment, or about soothing yourself in some way. The Distress Improvement Activities that follow this section will help you with ideas for activities that may help you achieve these aims.

Also notice that for the first 3 escape methods (i.e., situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction & suppression), distress improvement activities should be used as a reward after having faced and stayed with the distress until it naturally subsides of its own accord. For the remaining escape methods, engaging in distress improvement activities may be done sooner than this, as you do not necessarily have to wait until you feel the distress subside.

It is also worth mentioning that doing these opposite actions can be challenging, and so words of encouragement and compassion to ourselves may be important when we are finding it tough. It can be useful to think “*what encouragement would I give to someone else feeling this way?*”, “*what would I say to them and what tone would I use?*” Some other examples of helpful self-talk might be things like... “*I can stay with this feeling*”; “*it is good practice for me to get comfortable being uncomfortable*”; “*I can get through this*”; “*I can tolerate this*”; “*It will pass*”; “*this is good for me in the longrun*”; “*I can focus on just getting through this moment*”; “*I can breathe with this feeling*”; “*this is helping me build my tolerance*”...



Distress Improvement Activities

Finding small ways to participate and be active in the moment when distressed, or to self-soothe and self-nurture when you are feeling distressed, are important for improving your emotional experience. Activities that centre on the concepts of *activating* and *soothing* we will call ‘distress improvement activities’, and a list of these is featured on the next page. The activities in the left-hand column are more about participating actively in the moment (i.e., being involved, active and absorbed in something that may improve your distress), whilst the activities on the right-hand side are more about soothing yourself (i.e., activities that make us feel a sense of warmth and being cared for and that help us get through things). You will notice there is a lot of overlap between activities that are about activation and activities that are about soothing, so don’t get too caught up in which column you pick activities from. Also, some of the listed activating and soothing activities you may also find rewarding, and you can use them in this way if needed.



The idea is not that you have to use each activity on the list, but that some may appeal to you to try and others won’t. Also, by having such a large list, it may help you to brainstorm other distress improvement activities that may work for you. Look at the list and underline any activities you may like to experiment with when you are feeling distressed, and feel free to add other activities that come to mind in the space provided. **Remember, the aim of these activities is not to take your distress away, but to make your distress more tolerable.**



The only way to get a sense of what distress improvement activities work well for you, is to start experimenting with those that sound promising, and then evaluate what impact they have on your distress. Below is a table to keep track of the findings from your experiments. The next time you feel distressed you might try one of the distress improvement activities you highlighted, recording the date you tried it, what the activity was and the outcome. By outcome we mean what actually happened when you tried it. Did it work well at improving your distress? Did it make no difference? Or did it make your distress worse? Based on the outcome

you can then evaluate what you learnt from it, whether it is a worthwhile strategy to do again, or whether you need to redo it because you are still unsure if it is useful.

| Date | Distress Improvement Activity | Outcome What happened? | Evaluation What did I learn? Should I use this activity again? |
|------------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| 10/05/2012 | Warm Shower | <i>Felt groggy after. Didn't feel great, but probably less angry than I was.</i> | <i>Not sure if this is the best activity to use. I could use it again, but I might try music next time.</i> |

Improving Distress Practice

Now that you have some general ideas of things not to do when you feel distressed (i.e., my usual distress escape methods), and things you can do to improve your distress (i.e., opposite actions and distress improvement activities), it is good to personalise and clarify these ideas for your own situation. Below gives two examples of what a personalised list might look like. The first example is of someone who numbs & withdraws by binge eating and sleeping, and also engages in harmful releases by scratching themselves. The second example is of someone who situationally avoids by not leaving the house, distracts themselves when they do venture out, and seeks reassurance from their family to deal with their distress. Following these examples is the opportunity to draft your personalised list of ideas. Use the examples below, the “opposite action” section(s) you circled on page 3, and what you learnt from your distress improvement experiments on page 6, to assist you with drafting your own ideas.



| Example Improving Distress Ideas | |
|--|---|
| What Not To Do | What To Do |
| <p>Scratching myself when I feel distressed. Binge eating when I feel distressed. Sleeping when I feel distressed.</p> | <p>Allow the distress rather than trying to get rid of it. Try active and soothing activities like... listening to my favourite CD, rubbing nice moisturiser on my arms where I would normally scratch, walking around the block, taking a shower, calling my friend Emma, enjoying a good coffee, sitting in the sunshine, reading an inspirational book, patting my cat. Encourage myself: “I can get through this”, “It will pass”, “I can tolerate this feeling”.</p> |
| Example Improving Distress Ideas | |
| What Not To Do | What To Do |
| <p>Avoiding leaving the house, because it makes me distressed. Distracting myself when I do have to leave the house, by always listening to music on my headphones. Constantly seeking reassurance from my family about anything distressing me.</p> | <p>Face the distress by leaving the house, without headphones, and not relying on family to reassure me. Stick with it until I feel my distress come down. Encourage myself: “I can cope through this distress”, “this is good for me in the longrun”, “breathe with this feeling”, “focus on the task I am doing”. Reward my efforts with active or soothing activities, once I have felt the distress subside (e.g., quality time with my family, making a nice meal for myself, buying myself a new book).</p> |

| Personalised Improving Distress Ideas | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| What Not To Do | What To Do |
| | |

Problem Solving

Once you have been able to tolerate rather than escape your negative emotions, and your distress has somewhat subsided, it may be worth asking yourself whether the distress you are experiencing is regarding a situation you can actually do something about? That is, is your distress regarding something you have some control over, and could take action with to improve how you are feeling?

If the answer is 'no', then keep going with all that we have covered so far in Module 2 and 3 to keep building your tolerance to the distress.

However, if the answer is 'yes', then once the distress has subsided, you might be in a better position to problem solve regarding the situation that is distressing you. Problem solving involves working your way through the problem in a systematic, step-by-step, structured manner. This means identifying the problem that is distressing you, thinking through all the options for solving the problem, looking at the advantages and disadvantages of the options most preferable to you, picking one or more options to put into place, listing the steps required to put those options into action, and specifying a plan for when you will take each step. Finally, it requires taking action to put your plan in place, then evaluating the outcome, and reassessing if the problem has been solved or requires further action. As you can imagine, problem solving is difficult to do when you are in the thick of distress, but is a good thing to try once the distress is more manageable.

Below is an example of problem solving in action. If problem solving seems relevant to improving your distress, space is then provided for you to follow the same problem solving steps.

Step 1: Identify/Define Problem

Try to state the problem as clearly as possible. Be objective and specific about the behaviour, situation, timing, and circumstances that make it a problem. Describe the problem in terms of what you can observe rather than subjective feelings.

Problem Definition

The gas and phone bills are due at the same time. I don't have enough money to cover both this month.

Step 2: Generate Possible Solutions/Options

List all the possible solutions. Be creative and forget about the quality of the solutions. If you allow yourself to be creative, you may come up with some options that you would not otherwise have thought of.

List All Possible Solutions

- *Ring both companies - see if I can negotiate to pay it off gradually*
- *Prioritise - I can live without the phone for a while, but not the gas, so I will pay the gas bill first*
- *Borrow money from family or friends to pay both bills*
- *Pay bills on my credit card - then pay that off later*
- *See a financial counsellor - they may be able to help me sort it out*
- *Get a second job*
- *Sell some of my possessions to pay the bills*



- *Don't pay the bills and move in with a friend instead*

Now eliminate the less desirable or unreasonable alternatives only after as many possible solutions have been listed. Then, list the remaining options in order of preference.

Preferred Solutions/Options

1. *Ring both companies - see if I can negotiate to pay it off gradually.*

2. *See a financial counsellor - they may be able to help me sort it out.*

3. *Prioritise - I can live without the phone for a while, but not the gas, so I will pay the gas bill first.*

4. *Get a second job.*

Step 3: Evaluate Alternatives

Evaluate the top 3 or 4 plans in terms of their advantages and disadvantages

| | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Potential Solution #1 | <i>I may be able to keep both the phone and gas on. I will feel I have done something.</i> | <i>I will feel embarrassed having to ring the companies. I may not get what I want. I will still have to pay eventually.</i> |
| Potential Solution #2 | <i>They are experienced and will know what to do. I'll have support. Someone to help me. Companies may listen to them.</i> | <i>I will need to do some research to find a free service - this will take some effort.</i> |
| Potential Solution #3 | <i>The gas will stay on. I can still use the pay phone. I will survive. Problem will be reduced.</i> | <i>I won't have a phone on hand if I need it. I may have difficulties getting the phone reconnected in future.</i> |
| Potential Solution #4 | <i>More money.</i> | <i>I will be too busy - no time for myself. This won't solve the immediate problem.</i> |

Step 4: Decide On A Plan

Decide on one, two or more of the plans. Specify who will take action, when the plan will be implemented and how the plan will be implemented.

| Action Steps | Who | When |
|---|------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Contact gas and phone companies to negotiate options for paying the bills (pay off gradually or extend payment).</i> | <i>Me</i> | <i>Monday morning</i> |
| <i>If that doesn't resolve the problem, contact Centrelink to ask about free financial counsellors.</i> | <i>Me</i> | <i>Monday afternoon</i> |
| <i>Visit financial counsellor for advice.</i> | <i>Me</i> | <i>Tuesday</i> |
| <i>If that doesn't resolve the problem, pay gas bill and use pay phone temporarily.</i> | <i>Me</i> | <i>Wednesday</i> |

Step 5: Implement Plan

Implement your plan as specified above.

Step 6: Evaluate the Outcome

Evaluate how effective the plan was. Decide whether the existing plan needs to be revised, or whether a new plan is needed to better address the problem. If you are not pleased with the outcome, return to Step 2 to select a new option or revise the existing plan, and repeat the remaining steps.

Module Summary

- Maintaining a balance between acceptance and improvement is the key to building distress tolerance. You need to feel the emotion first, accept it, ride through it, and then take action to improve it.
- The common guiding principle for improving distress is to do the opposite of your distress escape methods, and find specific activities that improve your emotional state.
- Acting opposite to your escape urge involves dropping your escape methods (i.e., situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction and suppression, alcohol or drugs, binge eating, excessive sleep, harmful releases, etc), allowing and experiencing the distress, and participating in activities that are activating or soothing.
- Activities that are *activating* or *soothing* we call 'distress improvement activities', and you will need to experiment with these activities when you are distressed to find out what works for improving your distress.
- Once your distress is more manageable, it may be worth questioning if there is something you can change about your situation to further improve the distress. If it is a situation you have some degree of control over, then you can use the 6 problem solving steps as a way of working through the problem systematically.



Coming up next ...

In Module 4, you will put together and practice your Distress Tolerance Action Plan...

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behavioural and Mindfulness-Based Therapies. These modules are based on the approach that distress intolerance is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Skills Training Manual For Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York: Guilford Press.

“FACING YOUR FEELINGS”

We would like to thank Bruce Campbell for the title of this module that forms part of the InfoPax series.

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