

THE EXPANDED  
DIALECTICAL  
BEHAVIOR  
THERAPY  
SKILLS TRAINING  
—MANUAL—

PRACTICAL DBT FOR SELF-HELP, AND  
INDIVIDUAL & GROUP TREATMENT SETTINGS

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# Distract with ACCEPTS

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**Core concept:** Accept distress to effectively work on distraction skills.

When we experience distress or crisis or feel unsafe, we have a few choices. We can work on problem-solving (see SOLVED), be mindful of our painful emotions (see Mindfulness), or work on distraction skills.

Use the acronym *ACCEPTS* to remember the building blocks (Activities, Contributing, Comparisons, Emotions, Push Away, Thoughts, Sensations) of this skill. These building blocks are described in further detail in the paragraphs that follow.

**Activities:** Activities help you to decrease depression, anxiety, and other symptoms and can create positive emotions. See the Activities List along with the ROUTINE skill. You need to plan activities as part of your daily routine and follow through with the plans.

Activities work best when they engage you physically and/or mentally. Remember Mindfulness skills (and the other Distress Tolerance skills, too) need to be used in connection to activities.

You may have difficulty with activities because you lack interest or energy. When writers have writer's block, they continue to write anyway, because inspiration finds us when we are at work. If we wait to be interested, we might wait a long time.

You can control the choice to engage in activities, and in time, interest and enjoyment will follow if you do not obsess on it. In other words, mindfully engage in activities without concern for or being caught up in interest or enjoyment. Start with activities that have been interesting and enjoyable in the past.

Use Opposite to Emotion when energy is low and/or DEAR MAN to get others to help you get kick-started. The first law of physics applies: A body at rest tends to stay at rest, and a body in motion tends to stay in motion.

Describe how you can use **Activities**:

**Contributing:** Contributing helps you get out of yourself and your distress and into participating with others and in the world. We all need a break from ourselves sometimes. Contributing also helps you feel connected and less alone, and it creates positive feelings.

Contribute in small but impactful ways: Smile at others, give compliments, hold a door, or do a favor. Thoughtful and unexpected acts of kindness, random or not, fit the bill. Let someone else have a parking spot or move ahead of you in line. Help out others, be part of a team effort, and participate. Simply listening to others can be a great contribution, too. Also consider longer-term ways of contributing, such as volunteering.

Describe how you can use **Contributing**:

**Comparisons:** Comparisons bring perspective to your current situation. You can compare yourself to other times when you have dealt with more difficult problems or been less effective with skills. You can also compare yourself to others who struggle with even greater problems than you. We want to remember to validate ourselves as we use comparisons—we can experience tough times *and* have perspective through this skill.

Describe how you can use **Comparisons**:

**Emotions:** Seek out activities, events, and thoughts that create feelings that are different than the painful ones you are experiencing. (See Opposite to Emotion and Build Positive Experience) Remember that emotions can be influenced by what you choose to do and what you choose to think about.

Listen to music that creates different emotions: loud and fast music when fatigued, calming music when anxious or upset, or uplifting music when sad. Watch favorite shows or movies, fondly remember fun times (without comparing them to your current situation), or work on a project. (See Build Mastery)

Alternatively, sometimes we can use emotions to validate our feelings. For example, we can listen to melancholy music when sad. However, be careful not to get stuck! The concept is self-validation, not wallowing.

Describe how you can use **Emotions**:

**Push Away:** Put away distress by mentally locking it in a box and putting it on a shelf in a locked room. Make the imagery as vivid as possible, practicing it over and over. Say “This is a tomorrow problem” and then focus on something else. Or, write something about the problem down and put it away in a drawer or someplace where you will remember to find it when you are ready.

Remember to take out your distress or problem at a safe time in the future to attend to it. Putting and pushing away is a short-term strategy.

Describe how you can use **Push Away**:

**Thoughts:** Mindfully focus on distracting thoughts. (See One-mindfulness) You can only think about one thing at a time, and your distress may diminish when you think about something else. The classic example is counting to 100 when angry; thinking about something else (counting) helps us to cool down and be more rational.

Read a magazine or book, do Sudoku or other puzzles, or think about inspirational sayings and quotes. Bring your thoughts mindfully to other Distress Tolerance skills or activities.

Describe how you can use **Thoughts**:

**Sensations:** Sensations include anything that is physically vigorous or actively awakens your senses. The skill is different from the Self-Sooth skills in that it seeks to stimulate rather than relax.

Take a brisk walk or engage in exercise, such as running or weight-lifting. Get into a hot or cold bath or shower or splash cold water on your face. Engage your senses with loud music, bold colors, or strong tastes or smells.

Some people hold ice cubes or a frozen orange when in distress as a substitute for self-injury because the physical pain distracts from the emotional pain. These practices can work in a “harm-reduction” approach, meaning they can be used as safer step-down techniques when you are trying to stop self-injury but are not completely ready yet. Remember that ultimately we want to learn that you do not need physical pain to cope with emotional pain.

Describe how you can use Sensations: