

Using Distraction To Tolerate Emotional Distress: The ACCEPTS Technique

Objective

To use distraction to distance yourself emotionally from overwhelming and distressing situations.

You Should Know

When fear, anxiety, anger, and other distressing emotions are overwhelming, you may act on harmful urges like overeating, abusing alcohol, or inflicting self-harm. Or, you may redirect your pain to your relationships by provoking arguments or withdrawing from communication.

Distraction is a tool that can be used to create emotional distance from a distressing situation, enabling you to avoid immediately responding in ways that are not healthy, productive, or desirable. Distraction does not suggest that you push away or avoid strong feelings and experiences. Instead, it provides the space to soothe yourself so that you can deal with the issue at another time, when you are feeling less overwhelmed.

What are the typical ways you currently respond to emotional distress?

What undesirable or unhealthy behaviors do you engage in when you are upset?

What to Do

Name: _____ Date: _____

If you are engaging in undesirable behaviors to cope with distressing situations, here are some suggestions of pleasurable activities you can try instead.

- Call or text a friend or a family member.
- Play with your pet.
- Take a hot bath.
- Go for a walk or take an exercise class.
- Listen to music.
- Read a book or write in a journal.
- Spend time outside in nature or do some gardening.
- Give yourself a manicure.

What other pleasurable activities do you enjoy?

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) uses the acronym ACCEPTS to categorize distracting behavior. It stands for:

Activities - Engage in activities that bring you pleasure. Exercise, watch a funny video, play video games, go to a movie; schedule pleasurable events.

Contributing - Do something kind for yourself or someone else. Volunteer at a food bank or animal shelter, or visit a sick friend.

Choices or Comparisons - Compare yourself to those less fortunate than you. Or, think of a time when you felt differently than you do now.

Emotions - Choose events that create different emotions than the ones you are currently feeling. If you are angry, listen to soothing music. If you are sad, watch a comedy.

Pushing Away - Put some distance between you and the situation. Physically leave (walk away) from the situation, or block the thoughts from your mind for a few minutes.

Thoughts - Keep your mind busy by engaging in activities that require your concentration, such as counting, doing household chores, or completing a crossword puzzle.

Sensations - Engage in activities that make you feel present in your body, such as taking a hot or cold shower, getting a massage, listening to a recording of nature sounds, or watching a video on relaxation techniques.

For the next week, record any distressing situations that you encounter and what you did to distract yourself at the time, using one of the ACCEPTS behaviors.

Situation	Emotions / Thoughts	Behavior I would normally choose	Distraction	Emotions / Thoughts Following Distraction

Reflections on This Exercise

What ways of distracting yourself were the most successful? Explain.

What was difficult about distracting yourself when you were in distress?

Describe a recent challenging situation where using distraction would have been helpful for you.

Who can support you in identifying and using distracting behaviors?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
