



LEARNING TO TOLERATE DISTRESS

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Explore how stress affects emotions
- Choose and practice positive thoughts
- Discover and develop ways to regulate stress

When circumstances feel overwhelming, a person may be flooded with wide-ranging emotions. Frustration, confusion, anxiety, despair, and anger all pile up to create an overpowering experience. Distressing experiences can create a desire to flee the pain, escape the feelings, and avoid the problems of life. In times like these, the temptation to drink or use drugs again can feel crushing, but it is possible to stay strong and emotionally balanced. A variety of skills can help reduce the pain of stressful situations. Stress cannot always be prevented, but it can be managed.

THE STRESS OF LIFE

Stress varies from minor annoyances and pet peeves to severe problems that are overwhelming and chronic. Read through the list and identify items you find stressful. Consider the last two months and rate the stress level of those items from 1-5 on the scale shown below. Review your scores with a sponsor, friend, counselor, or support group.

Low	Moderate	High
1-----2-----3-----4-----5		
<input type="checkbox"/> Traffic		<input type="checkbox"/> Working under dangerous conditions
<input type="checkbox"/> Weather		<input type="checkbox"/> Being held responsible for too much
<input type="checkbox"/> Parenting		<input type="checkbox"/> Education
<input type="checkbox"/> Defiant children		<input type="checkbox"/> Exams
<input type="checkbox"/> Increase of financial responsibilities		<input type="checkbox"/> Addiction
<input type="checkbox"/> Job stress		<input type="checkbox"/> Peer pressure
<input type="checkbox"/> Working long hours		<input type="checkbox"/> Past traumatic experiences

We all have **GOOD THINGS** in our past that can **HELP US COPE** with stressful times.

NOTES

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Treatment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> Debt |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family conflict | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health issues |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Health problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Incarceration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Health problems of others | <input type="checkbox"/> A family member's addiction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legal problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicide attempt of a loved one |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unsafe environments | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being discriminated against | <input type="checkbox"/> Legal separation or divorce |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness | <input type="checkbox"/> Change in job situation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving | <input type="checkbox"/> Grief and loss |

LEARNING TO COPE

We all have good things in our past that can help us cope with the stressful times we face today. Rather than continually replaying previous relapses, past drug and alcohol activities, or the negative consequences of use, it is more helpful to write a new, optimistic life-script. The positive elements of the past can help us do that well. Because we move in the direction of what we think and believe, if a negative past is the foundation of our belief, the past is where we will stay. But if we can confidently recall good things about the past and use them, along with new coping skills, a strong foundation for the future can be built. To get the most out of new skills, they must be learned well, practiced, and demonstrated.

CHOOSING POSITIVE THOUGHTS

Self-encouraging coping thoughts can be helpful tools to reduce the emotional impact of stress and prevent relapse. These thoughts can help you tolerate distressing situations by giving you strength and motivation to endure a difficult situation. Identify some you already use, and then add a few more to your arsenal. Writing them down and committing them to memory may help you tolerate future stressful events and frustrations as they arise.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> This situation won't last forever. | <input type="checkbox"/> This is an opportunity to learn to cope with my fears. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I've already been through many other painful experiences and I've survived. | <input type="checkbox"/> I can ride this out and not let it get to me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not in this alone. | <input type="checkbox"/> I can take the time I need to relax and let go. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can accept help. | <input type="checkbox"/> This is a blip on the screen, not the story of my life. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My ability to manage stress is getting stronger. | <input type="checkbox"/> Eventually these bad feelings will go away. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am uncomfortable with my feelings right now, but I can accept them. | <input type="checkbox"/> I am able to make progress. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can be anxious and still deal with the situation. | <input type="checkbox"/> Distress can be tolerated, and tolerating stress makes me stronger. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm strong enough to handle what's happening to me right now. | |

- It's okay to feel sad, anxious, or afraid sometimes.
- Even though I don't like this, I can tolerate it.
- My negative thoughts don't control my life. I do.
- I can think different thoughts if I want to.
- This is distressing, but not dangerous.
- This situation is annoying, but I can endure.
- I can beat this.
- This situation will pass.
- This situation is an opportunity for me to learn.
- My anxiety, fear, or sadness won't kill me; it feels bad right now, but it will get better.
- I'm strong and I can deal with this.
- I've survived other situations like this before and I'll survive this one too.

(Based in part on Mckay, Wood, Brantley, p. 47)

NOTES

Choose five of your favorite coping thoughts from the previous list. Write them here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Review each of these positive thoughts several times a day.

REGULATING YOUR STRESS LEVEL

Lifestyle choices are an important factor in controlling stress. Adjustments can be made to help lower tension levels, and using coping skills will help you manage stressful situations as they arise.

1 Find support.

The amount and type of support received from friends and family can make an enormous difference in your ability to cope with unexpected problems and stress in life. Encouragement, support, and validation from others will help bring a sense of calm and courage to face difficulties.

2 Believe you can change.

We are more able to endure difficulties if we believe and have the ability to change things. Feeling out of control or being overrun with random troubles increases your stress levels. Control what you can and willingly accept what you cannot.

3 Be optimistic.

Having a good sense of humor and being upbeat will help you endure and overcome. A positive attitude in life helps people better manage stress. Emphasize what recently went right in your life. Review what you have and be grateful whenever you can. Look for opportunities to see the silver lining in every dark cloud.

LIFESTYLE CHOICES are an important factor in controlling stress.

*Pain is inevitable,
but **SUFFERING**
IS OPTIONAL.*

NOTES

4 Keep calm.

The ability to balance or regulate emotions is a terrific way to get through difficult times. Knowing that most challenging situations will soon pass can help keep you calm, even in the middle of the storm. Use this knowledge as a way to soothe and quiet yourself.

5 Be accepting.

Work to understand and accept a situation rather than complain about it long and loud. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. Accepting that life can be difficult will decrease your level of bitterness and reduce complaints about perceived injustices.

6 Stay active.

It is important to exercise and stay active. Increasing activity can help you feel confident and strong. As you exercise your physical body, your mental and emotional resolve to push through pain, conquer difficulties, and overcome every setback, is strengthened.

7 Get adequate sleep.

Getting enough, good quality sleep goes a long way to helping you feel alert, confident, and capable. Tolerating ordinary levels of stress is easier if you are healthy and feeling good physically. When well-rested, you can concentrate and focus better, think more clearly, and be more productive.

Choose two of the seven items above and write a brief plan to carry out and practice them regularly.

GETTING STRONGER

Not all stress can be eliminated, and if you tried, you would probably stress yourself terribly. Instead, continue to develop skills to get rid of what you can and manage what you must. As your recovery gains strength and momentum, you will be more capable of handling anything that comes your way.

SOURCE

Mckay, M., Wood, J., Brantley, J. (2007). *The dialectical behavior therapy workbook: Practical DBT exercises for learning mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation, and distress tolerance*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.