



Coping With Distress

Managing intense and distressing emotions is a challenge. Didactical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is a specific counseling approach used to assist individuals in tolerating distress. Below are three DBT strategies to manage and increase distress tolerance:

STOP Skill

The **S** in this acronym means stop! Literally do not move a muscle. This “freeze” is intended to avoid acting without thinking.

The **T** stands for “think”. Give yourself space to think clearly and ask yourself 1) *What am I trying to accomplish?* 2) *What is my priority?* 3) *What do I need?* 4) *How and what am I feeling?* and 5) *What could be the consequences?*

Organize your thoughts. Now that you’ve given some thought, what are your priorities and actions for a smart decision?

Proceed wisely one step at a time now that you are more clear and focused.

TIPP Body Chemistry Skill

Tip your body temperature to cold. When in distress, our body responds with “fight or flight”. This stress response is part of the sympathetic nervous system, our internal alarm system to a perceived threat or risk.

The opposite of fight or flight is “rest and digest”, which is governed by our parasympathetic nervous system. When this system is engaged, we’re calm, collected and at ease. Cold temperatures kick-start our parasympathetic nervous system.

We can do this by taking a cold shower, splashing cold water on our face, or by holding an ice cube in hand or to our forehead.

Intense exercise is another way to dissipate distress. Going for a brisk walk, strength training or swimming are just some ways to release “feel good” hormones like endorphin.

Paced breathing also engages the parasympathetic nervous system to de-stress. Slow down the pace of your inhales and exhales (on average, five to six breaths per minute). It helps if you try to breathe out more slowly than you breathe in.

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing major muscle groups. You start in a comfortable seated position, feet flat on the floor. Then tense your feet for 10-12 seconds before then relaxing them. Notice how they feel when tensed versus relaxed. Then follow the same for your lower legs, upper legs, stomach, chest, shoulders, back, upper arms, lower arms, hands, neck and face. Repeat as needed always starting with your feet first.

Pros and Cons. When in distress, we often have a strong “knee jerk” impulse. Write out the pros and cons for acting on impulsive urges. Next, write out the pros and cons for resisting to act on those impulsive urges.

This activity allows you to think through the cost and benefit of actions and avoid unwanted/unintended consequences.

Employee Assistance Program



City of Milwaukee EAP

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Vicarious/Secondary Stress

Regardless of your specific role or job, we are employed to maintain or improve the quality of life for City residents. In the course of serving the community, you may be exposed to difficult resident encounters and their experiences. Some of these encounters may expose us to someone else's traumatic experience/story.

Vicarious or *Secondary Stress* may occur when we *empathically connect* with someone who was traumatized. The traumatizing event did not happen to you specifically. However, we may be impacted by listening, trying to help and empathically connect with someone who has been traumatized. (e.g. nightmares, avoidance/withdrawal, hypervigilance).

You may be experiencing lingering feelings of anger, rage and sadness about

the victimization. This can lead to becoming overly involved, feelings of shame or self-doubt. You may become preoccupied with thoughts of that traumatic event outside of the work situation.

ABC's to Recovery

Awareness of our own needs, emotions and limits. Take time to check-in with yourself after a difficult encounter with a resident, client or patron.

Balance between work, leisure time and rest. Have hobbies, interests and enjoyable activities to engage in.

Connection to ourselves, to others and to something greater. This may involve religion, spirituality, or meditation/mindfulness.

Crisis Survival

Below are **ACCEPTS** strategies to help weather a crisis.

Activities. Cope with the stress by engaging in an activity that requires thought, concentration or focus. Keep your mind busy by doing a puzzle or challenge. You may also do an activity that requires a steady hand and attention to detail, like an art project or craft.

Contributing. Altruism is the good feeling we experience when helping others. Take a moment to help someone and boost your own mood.

Comparisons. The grass isn't always greener on the other side. Avoid negatively comparing yourself to others. Maintain a realistic perspective without catastrophizing or magnifying.

Emotions. Seek positive emotions. When distressed seek out healthy activities, people and places that put you in a good mood.

Push away. Mentally detach, put down anxious thoughts or place them on the "back burner" by writing them out and setting aside until later.

Thoughts. When emotions take over, focus on reciting something from memory like song lyrics, old addresses, or a favorite poem or prayer.

Sensations. Self-soothe by engaging your senses. Ask—what are 5 things I can see, 4 things I can feel, 3 things I can hear, 2 things I can smell and 1 thing I can taste?

EAP Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist employees who develop behavioral/emotional problems that may directly affect their work performance, and to provide Key Personnel with policy and procedural guidelines for the management of these problems.

City of Milwaukee Wellness Resources

- For information about current Wellness programs and services, visit: www.milwaukee.gov/WYCM
- The City's Workplace Clinic provides free, convenient, onsite and virtual health care services for employees and spouses regardless of enrollment in the City's health insurance and dependents (18 mos and older) on the City's health insurance. Call 414-777-3413 to schedule an in-person or virtual visit.
- The City of Milwaukee Employee Assistance Program web page houses topical information and resources on a wide range of work-life issues. Visit: <https://city.milwaukee.gov/DER/EAP>
- The City of Milwaukee offers a free Care.com membership through Care@Work to employees. A Care.com membership provides unlimited access to a platform employees can use to find and manage care for children, seniors, pets and their home. Visit www.milwaukee.gov/careatwork to learn more.