

MODULE 9

Tolerating Distress

Session IX

Tolerating Distress

Meeting A

Materials

Linehan, Chapter 10
Distress tolerance handout #1

Goal – Each group member will begin to distinguish the negative aspects of being unable to tolerate distress.

Goal – Each group member will be able to recognize and verbalize the benefits of learning to tolerate distress.

Leader

Linehan p. 97-98
List responses on flip chart/chalkboard
Give handout and discuss distracting, self-soothing, improving the moment and focusing on pros and cons.

Meeting B

Materials

Brainstorm “Distress Tolerance Handout”
Art Experience #1 Drawing a Breath”

Goal – Members will change their subjective experience of distress by using art.

10

Distress Tolerance Skills

Goals of the Module

Most approaches to mental health treatment focus on changing distressing events and circumstances. They have paid little attention to accepting, finding meaning for, and tolerating distress. Although the distinction is not as clear-cut as I am making it seem, this task has generally been tackled by religious and spiritual communities and leaders. DBT emphasizes learning to bear pain skillfully. The ability to tolerate and accept distress is an essential mental health goal for at least two reasons. First, pain and distress are part of life; they cannot be entirely avoided or removed. The inability to accept this immutable fact itself leads to increased pain and suffering. Second, distress tolerance, at least over the short run, is part and parcel of any attempt to change oneself; otherwise, impulsive actions will interfere with efforts to establish desired changes.

Distress tolerance skills constitute a natural progression from mindfulness skills. They have to do with the ability to accept, in a nonevaluative and nonjudgmental fashion, both oneself and the current situation. Essentially, distress tolerance is the ability to perceive one's environment without putting demands on it to be different, to experience your current emotional state without attempting to change it, and to observe your own thoughts and action patterns without attempting to stop or control them. Although the stance advocated here is a nonjudgmental one, this should not be understood to mean that it is one of approval. It is especially important that this distinction be made clear to clients: Acceptance of reality is not equivalent to approval of reality.

The distress tolerance behaviors targeted in DBT skills training are concerned with tolerating and surviving crises and with accepting life as it is in the moment. Four sets of crisis survival strategies are taught: distract-

ing, self-soothing, improving the moment, and thinking of pros and cons. Acceptance skills include radical acceptance (i.e., *complete* acceptance from deep within), turning the mind toward acceptance (i.e., *choosing* to accept reality as it is), and willingness versus willfulness. Gerald May (1982) describes willingness as follows:

Willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process. In contrast, willfulness is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence. More simply, willingness is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. Willfulness is saying no, or perhaps more commonly, "yes, but . . ." (p. 6)

Although borderline clients and their therapists alike readily accept crisis survival skills as important, the DBT focus on acceptance and willingness is often viewed as inherently flawed. This viewpoint is based on the notion that acceptance and willingness imply approval. This is not what May means; indeed, he points out that willingness demands opposition to destructive forces, but goes on to note that it seems almost inevitable that this opposition often turns into willfulness:

But willingness and willfulness do not apply to specific things or situations. They reflect instead the underlying attitude one has toward the wonder of life itself. Willingness notices this wonder and bows in some kind of reverence to it. Willfulness forgets it, ignores it, or at its worst, actively tries to destroy it. Thus willingness can sometimes seem very active and assertive, even aggressive. And willfulness can appear in the guise of passivity. Political revolution is a good example. (p. 6)

Content Outline

- I. Orient clients to skills to be learned in this module and the rationale for their importance.
 - A. Skills for tolerating and surviving crises.
 - B. Skills for accepting life as it is in the moment.

Lecture Point: The skills in the module are ones that help people get through life when they can't make changes for the better in their situation and when, for any number of reasons, they can't sort out their feelings well enough to make changes in how they feel. Basically, the skills are ways of surviving and doing well in terrible situations without resorting to behaviors that will make the situations worse.

Discussion Point: Everyone has to tolerate some amount of pain and distress in life. Life simply is not pain-free. Always trying to avoid pain leads to more problems than it solves. Get examples from participants of this point.

Lecture Point: Present the research literature on avoidance. Posttraumatic stress disorder is primarily a result of trying to avoid all contact with cues that cause discomfort. Pathological grieving—that is, grieving that never ends—is a result of the same avoidance. Avoiding all cues that are associated with pain insures that the pain will continue. The more people attempt to avoid and shut emotional (as well as physical) pain off, the more it comes back to haunt them. Trying to suppress emotional pain or avoid contact with pain-related cues leads to ruminating about the painful events; paradoxically, trying to get rid of painful thoughts creates painful thoughts. For example, one of the most successful and effective programs for helping people with chronic physical pain is based almost entirely on the practice of mindfulness and is described in the book *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990). (See also the section on exposure-based treatments in Chapter 11 of the text.) Experiencing, tolerating, and accepting emotional pain are the ways to reducing pain.

Lecture Point: But there are times for people to distract themselves from pain also. Painful situations cannot always be immediately processed. It is often not an appropriate time for working on painful emotions or situations. At work, at school, or at meetings, people may feel emotional pain, be upset, or feel alienated. However, they may simply have to tolerate the feelings. This module is not about working things out or changing things; it is about accepting and tolerating things.

Discussion Point: Elicit examples of times when pain is intense but it is not an appropriate time to work on changing the source of the pain or figuring out and

changing the painful emotions. Discuss the relationship of this module to the fact that not much time in skills training is spent processing feelings.

II. Review Distress Tolerance Handout 1: Crisis Survival Strategies.

Note to Leaders: Homework practice sheet for these skills is Distress Tolerance Homework Sheet 1: Crisis Survival Strategies.

A. Give overview of skills.

1. The skills to be learned here are concrete skills in how to tolerate and survive a crisis situation when the crisis cannot be changed right away.
2. The basic idea is to learn how to get through bad situations without making them worse.

Discussion Point: Elicit from participants crisis situations they need to tolerate.

Discussion Point: Surviving crisis situations is part and parcel of being effective, "doing what works" (a core mindfulness skill). However, at times people are more interested in proving to others how bad a situation is than in surviving the situation. The problem with proving how bad things are is that it hardly ever works. That is, although it may result in short-term gains (e.g., being put in the hospital or getting a lover to return), it usually fails in the long run. Elicit situations where this has been the case with clients. Leaders: If you can give personal examples here, so much the better.

3. There are four categories of crisis survival strategies: distracting, self-soothing, improving the moment, and focusing on pros and cons. Each is a series of methods for short-circuiting or coping with overwhelming negative emotions and intolerable situations.
4. These strategies are intended for getting through crisis situations and overwhelming emotions. They are not presented as a cure-all for one's problems or life. Beneficial effects may only be temporary (but achieving them is not a small feat, nonetheless). Remind participants that these are not presented as emotion regulation strategies (i.e., ways to reduce or end painful emotions) although they may help to regulate emotions. They are, instead, ways to survive painful emotions.

Discussion Point: Get participants to discuss where and why such strategies might be a good idea. That is, why is surviving a crisis a good idea? Pull for insight that temporary solutions are at times OK.

B. Review specific skills.

1. **Distracting methods** have to do with reducing contact with emotional stimuli (events that set off emotions). Or, in some cases, they work to change parts of an emotional response. There are seven distracting skills. A useful way to remember these skills is the phrase "**Wise Mind ACCEPTS**":

Activities
Contributing
Comparisons
Emotions
Pushing away
Thoughts
Sensations

- a. **Activities** can work to modulate negative emotions in a number of ways. They distract attention and fill short-term memory with thoughts, images, and sensations counteractive to the thoughts, images, and sensations that activate and reactivate the negative emotion. They affect physiological responses and emotional expressive behavior directly.
- b. **Contributing** refocuses attention from oneself to what one can do for others. For some, contributing also increases a sense of meaning in life, thereby improving the moment (see below). For others, it also enhances self-respect.
- c. Making **Comparisons** also refocuses attention from oneself to others, but in a different way. In this case, the situations of others—those coping in the same way or less well, or the less fortunate in general—are used to recast one's own situation in a more positive light.
- d. Generating opposite **Emotions** replaces the current negative emotion with other, less negative emotions. This strategy interferes with the current mood state. This technique requires the person to first figure out the current emotion so that activities to generate an opposite one can be sought.
- e. **Pushing away** from a situation can be done by leaving it physically or by blocking it in one's mind. Leaving the situation decreases contact with the emotion-

al cues associated with the situation. Blocking is a somewhat conscious effort to inhibit internal stimuli associated with negative emotions. Blocking is a bit like riding a bicycle; one only understands it when one does it. (Most borderline clients seem able to do this and will usually know what you mean as soon as you mention the technique.) It is perhaps related to the ability to dissociate or depersonalize. It should not be the first technique tried, but can be useful in an emergency. The secret is not to overuse it.

- f. Distracting with other **Thoughts** fills short-term memory with other thoughts so that thoughts activated by the negative emotion do not continue to reactivate the emotion.
- g. Intense other **Sensations** can interfere with the physiological component of the current negative emotion. Also, the sensations may work to focus attention on something other than the stimuli arousing the emotion. Holding ice cubes,² in particular, can be very helpful. In a skills group of a colleague of mine, a client brought everyone small refreezable ice packs. Several clients would then take them (frozen) to therapy sessions to hold onto when discussing very painful topics (e.g., sexual abuse that one client had not previously been able to discuss at all). This latter technique, while at times useful, would also need to be closely monitored so that it does not interfere with exposure to important and relevant cues.

Discussion Point: Elicit any objections participants have to using distraction, and discuss. Cheerleading may be needed.

2. **Self-soothing** has to do with comforting, nurturing, and being gentle and kind to oneself. A way to remember these skills is to think of soothing each of the **Five senses**:

Vision
Hearing
Smell
Taste
Touch

Note to Leaders: The meaning and intent of these

are reasonably self-evident, so you need to review only a few in session. You should devote more time to the following discussion point.

Discussion Point: Borderline individuals often have difficulties with self-soothing. Some believe that they do not deserve soothing, kindness, and gentleness; they may feel guilty or ashamed when they self-soothe. Others believe that they should get soothing from others; they don't self-soothe as a matter of principle, or feel angry at others when they attempt to self-soothe. Elicit examples from each participant.

Note to Leaders: It is important that each participant learn to self-soothe. Even if at first it elicits anger or guilt, self-soothing should be repeatedly attempted. In time, it will become easier. Some clients may be quite resistant to practicing self-soothing. Keep a watchful eye on homework practice to be sure that each participant is at least trying these skills. Assess and problem-solve difficulties.

3. **Improving the moment** is replacing immediate negative events with more positive ones. Some strategies for improving the moment are cognitive techniques having to do with changing appraisals of oneself (encouragement) or the situation (positive thinking, meaning, imagining). Some involve changing body responses to events (relaxing). Prayer and focusing on one thing in the moment have to do with acceptance and letting go. A way to remember these skills is the word "**IMPROVE:**"

Imagery

Meaning

Prayer

Relaxation

One thing in the moment

Vacation

Encouragement

- a. **Imagery** can be used to distract, soothe, bolster courage and confidence, and make future rewards more salient. Explain: "Using imagery, you can create a situation different from the actual one; in this sense, it is like leaving the situation. With imagery, however, you can be sure that the place you go to is a safe and secure one. Going to an imaginary safe place or room within can be very helpful during flashbacks. For it to be useful, however, you have to practice it when you are not in a crisis enough times to get it firmly down as a skill."

Imagery can also be used to cope more effectively with crises. Practicing effective coping in imagination can actually increase one's chances of coping with it effectively in real life.

- b. Finding or creating **Meaning** helps many people in crises. Victor Frankl (1984) wrote an important book about surviving Nazi concentration camps, *Man's Search for Meaning*, based on the premise that people need to find or create meaning in their lives to survive terrible suffering. Finding or creating meaning is similar to the dialectical strategy of making lemonade out of lemons. (See Chapter 7 of the text.)

Discussion Point: It is important to note that life is at times unfair for reasons that no one can understand. People do not have to assume that there is a purpose to their suffering, although those who are religious or spiritual may see it this way. Those who do not believe in a higher purpose can still create meaning or purpose however. Get feedback about participants' views on the meaning or purpose of suffering.

- c. The essence of **Prayer** is the complete opening of oneself to the moment. The practice is very similar to the notion of radical acceptance, discussed later in this module. Note that the suggested prayer is not one of begging to have the suffering or crisis taken away. Nor is it a "Why me?" prayer.

Practice Exercise: During the skills training session, have all participants close their eyes, imagine "get in touch with" a current pain or suffering, and then silently try each type of prayer (an acceptance prayer, a "Deliver me" prayer, a "Why me?" prayer). Have participants refocus on current suffering (for only a moment) before each attempt at prayer. Discuss afterward. Or suggest that people who are comfortable with praying try each type of prayer during the next crisis and keep track of which type actually helps.

- d. **Relaxing** is changing how the body responds to stress and crises. Often people tense their bodies as if by keeping them tense, they can actually make the situation change. They try to control the situation by controlling their bodies. The goal here is to accept reality with the body. The idea is that the body communicates with the mind, and acting with the body can help in acting with the mind.

Note to Leaders: Most clients who have been on an inpatient psychiatric unit will have gotten muscle relaxation training. Check on how they liked it and whether it was useful. You may also want to do some structured relaxation training here; any of the numerous audio-tapes available for this can be used. It is important to point out that relaxing is a skill that takes lots of practice. The breath and half-smiling exercises described below are relaxation exercises that promote acceptance and tolerance. They are specific and concrete, and both can be done in crisis situations. Practiced on a daily basis, they can prepare clients for crises.

- c. **One thing in the moment** is the second mindfulness "how" skill discussed in Chapter 7 of this manual. Although it can be very difficult to do, focusing on one thing in the moment can be very helpful in the middle of a crisis; it can provide time to settle down. The secret of this skill is to remember that the only pain one has to survive is "just this moment." We all often suffer much more than is required by calling to mind past suffering and ruminating about future suffering we may have to endure. But, in reality, there is only "just this moment." Because of the importance of this skill in reality acceptance, a number of specific exercises for improving focus and increasing awareness are taught in the next section of this module.

Practice Exercise: During the session, have all participants close their eyes and imagine or "get in touch with" some current discomfort, irritation, or anxiety right now, this moment in the session. Instruct participants to raise a hand slightly when they have the focus. Instruct them to notice their level of current discomfort. Now instruct them to start ruminating about all the past times they have had to endure such feelings in sessions. Have them also bring to mind and ruminate about how much more of these feelings have to be endured in this skills training session and all future sessions. Instruct them to notice now their level of discomfort. Then have them refocus the mind on "just this moment." Explain: "Say in your mind 'just this moment.' Let go of thoughts of the future and the past." Have them notice now their level of discomfort. Discuss the exercise.

- f. Taking a "Vacation from adulthood" is ceasing to cope actively and either retreating into oneself or allowing oneself to be taken care of for the moment. Explain: "Everyone needs a vacation

from adulthood once in a while. The trick is to take it in a way that does not harm you, and also to make sure the vacation is brief. It should only last from a few moments to no longer than a day. When you have responsibilities, taking a vacation depends on getting someone else to take over your duties for a while." The idea here is similar to Alan Marlatt's (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985) use of planned relapses in the treatment of addictions. The focus is on the *planned* nature of the relapse (or, here, the *planned* vacation). It is similar to the notion of taking a timeout to regroup.

Discussion Point: Borderline individuals are usually experts at taking vacations. The problem is that they are not in control of their vacations; that is, they take them at inappropriate times and stay on them too long. Making vacation taking a skill to be practiced, gives them the potential for getting in control. Elicit from participants times they have taken vacations in an out-of-control fashion. Discuss ways to get in control of vacations and use them effectively.

- g. **Encouragement** is cheerleading oneself. Explain: "The idea is to talk to yourself as you would talk to someone you care about who is in a crisis. Or talk to yourself as you would like someone else to talk to you." Leaders: You may at first need to do quite a bit of modeling here, as well as cheerleading.
4. **Thinking of pros and cons** consists of thinking about the positive and negative aspects of tolerating distress and the positive and negative aspects of not tolerating it. The eventual goal here is for the person to face the fact that accepting reality and tolerating distress lead to better outcomes than do rejecting reality and refusing to tolerate distress.

Practice Exercise: Many borderline individuals react to crises and stress by harming themselves (parasuicidal behavior, substance abuse, "throwing tantrums," etc.). Make a "pros" column and a "cons" column on the blackboard. Get participants to generate pros and cons of tolerating a crisis without doing something harmful and/or impulsive. Then generate a list of pros and cons for not tolerating the crisis (for self-harm, substance abuse, or one or more other nontolerating responses the participants want to analyze). Be sure to focus on both short-term and long-term pros and cons. Compare the two sets of lists.

5. **Notes/Other Ideas** is a space at the end of Handout 1 to write down ideas that participants generate for tolerating distress. Almost always, clients will have a number of creative strategies not on the list. Write these ideas down and ask other participants to do so.

Discussion Point: Discuss with participants how these strategies can be overused in invalidating environments. Point out that the fact that they can be overused does not mean they have no value at all. Elicit and problem-solve "resistance" to using these skills.

III. Go over **breath, half-smiling, and awareness exercises.**

Note to Leaders: If you are running short of time, give the general idea of each of these exercises, but let participants read and practice each specific one on their own. For those who find these exercises helpful, suggest that they read the book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh (1976). These exercises are drawn from that book.³ It is very important that leaders also practice these skills.

A. Review Distress Tolerance Handout 2: Guidelines for Accepting Reality: Observing-Your-Breath Exercises.

Lecture Point: All major religions and spiritual disciplines have as an important part of their contemplative and/or meditative practice a focus on breathing. The focus is intended to help the individuals accept and tolerate themselves, the world, and reality as it is. A focus on breathing is also an important part of relaxation training and the treatment of panic attacks.

1. Go over one or several breath exercises (using guidelines):
 - a. Deep breathing.
 - b. Measuring your breath by your footsteps.
 - c. Counting your breath.
 - d. Following your breath while listening to music.
 - e. Following your breath while carrying on a conversation.
 - f. Following the breath.
 - g. Breathing to quiet the mind and body.
2. Have each participant select one breath exercise she would like to try during the coming week.

B. Review Distress Tolerance Handout 3: Guidelines for Accepting Reality: Half-Smiling Exercises.

1. Explain: "Half smiling is accepting and tolerating with your body. To do it, you relax your face, neck, and shoulder muscles, and then half-smile with your lips. Try to adopt a serene facial expression. Remember to *relax* the facial muscles." (See Chapter 11 of text and Chapter 9, this manual, for further discussion.)

Lecture Point: Emotions are partially controlled by facial expressions. By adopting a half-smile—a serene, accepting face—people can control their emotions somewhat. They can feel more accepting if their faces express acceptance.

2. Go over one or more half-smiling exercises (using guidelines):
 - a. Half-smile when you first awake in the morning.
 - b. Half-smile during your free moments.
 - c. Half-smile while listening to music.
 - d. Half-smile when irritated.
 - e. Half-smile in a lying down position.
 - f. Half-smile in a sitting position.
 - g. Half-smile while contemplating the person you hate or despise the most.

Practice Exercise: Have participants sit very still. First, have them try to make a very impassive face—one with no expression—and experience how that feels. Then have them try actually relaxing the muscles of the face—from the forehead, to the eyes, to the cheeks, and to the mouth and jaw—and experience how that feels. Finally, have them half-smile and experience how that feels. Discuss the differences.

3. Have each participant select one half smiling exercise she would like to try during the coming week.

C. Review Distress Tolerance Handout 4: Guidelines for Accepting Reality: Awareness Exercises.

Lecture Point: These exercises can be very helpful in the middle of a crisis. When practiced every day they can help develop a more accepting state of mind.

1. Go over one of several awareness exercises (using guidelines):
 - a. Awareness of the positions of the body.
 - b. Awareness of connection to the universe.
 - c. Awareness while making tea or coffee.
 - d. Awareness while washing the dishes.
 - e. Awareness while hand-washing clothes.
 - f. Awareness while cleaning house.

- g. Awareness while taking a slow-motion bath.
 - h. Practicing awareness with meditation.
2. Have each participant select an awareness exercise she would like to try during the coming week.

Note to Leaders: Do not underestimate the value of these awareness exercises for getting through very difficult times. In truly desperate times, these can be exceptionally valuable. In my experience, almost all borderline individuals like and use these—at least if you first push them to give them a try. Notice that one could make up any number of variations.

IV. Review Distress Tolerance Handout 5: Basic Principles of Accepting Reality.

Note to Leaders: Homework practice sheet for these skills and the remaining skills in this module is Distress Tolerance Homework Sheet 2: Acceptance and Willingness.

A. **Radical acceptance** is letting go of fighting reality. The term “radical” means to imply that the acceptance has to come from deep within and has to be complete. Acceptance is the only way out of hell. It is the way to turn suffering that cannot be tolerated into pain that can be tolerated. Pain is part of living; it can be emotional and it can be physical. Pain is nature’s way of signaling that something is wrong, or that something needs to be done.

1. The pain of a hand on a hot stove causes a person to move her hand quickly. People without the sensation of pain are in deep trouble.
2. The pain of grief causes people to reach out for others who are lost. Without it there would probably be no societies or cultures. No one would look after those who are sick, would search for loved ones who are lost, or would stay with people who are difficult at times.
3. Pain of fear makes people avoid what is dangerous.
4. Pain of anger makes people overcome obstacles.

Discussion Point: What are the pros and cons of never having painful emotions? Would participants like people who never have painful emotions?

Lecture Point: Suffering is pain plus nonacceptance of the pain. Suffering comes when people are un-

able or refuse to accept pain. Suffering comes when people cling to getting what they want, refusing to accept what they have. Suffering comes when people resist reality as it is at the moment. Pain can be difficult or almost impossible to bear, but suffering is even more difficult. Refusal to accept reality and the suffering that goes along with it can interfere with reducing pain. It is like a cloud that surrounds pain, interfering with the ability to see it clearly. Radical acceptance transforms suffering to pain.

Discussion Point: When acceptance is used as a technique to create change—as a sort of “bargain with God” (“I’ll accept it, and in return you promise to make it better”)—is not really acceptance. Elicit examples of bargaining from participants.

Note to Leaders: The point of radical acceptance is extremely difficult for borderline individuals (and some leaders) to see. They have great difficulty seeing that they can accept something without approving of it. They believe that if they accept what is, they cannot change it. Trying to get them to accept the notion of acceptance, can become a power struggle. As a shaping strategy, you might suggest the terms “acknowledge,” “recognize,” or “endure.” Discuss these points. You will probably have to discuss them over and over again. Great patience is needed, but don’t give up on radical acceptance.

Discussion Point: A great myth is that if people don’t accept something, if they simply refuse to put up with it, it will magically change. It is as if resistance and/or willpower alone, will change it. Get examples of this. Discuss why participants might believe this. Elicit examples of when tantrums and verbal refusals to accept things have been reinforced.

Discussion Point: Some people are afraid that if they ever actually accept their painful situation or emotions, they will become passive and just give up (or give in). Elicit and discuss fears of participants. Explain: “Imagine that you hate the color purple. Then imagine that your room is painted purple. If you refuse to accept that the room is purple, you will never paint it a color you want.” Elicit examples of when accepting things as they are has helped to reduce suffering and resulted in a greater ability to reduce the source of pain. (This point is taken up again below under willingness versus willfulness.)

Discussion Point: The notion of acceptance is central to every major religion, East and West. Elicit participants’ reactions to this and any experiences they have. The idea is also similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous notion of surrendering to a higher power and accepting things one cannot change.

- B. **Turning the mind** is choosing to accept. Acceptance seems to require some sort of choice. People have to turn their minds in that direction, so to speak. Acceptance sometimes only lasts a moment or two, so people have to keep turning the mind over and over and over. The choice has to be made every day—sometimes many, many times a day, or even an hour or a minute.

Discussion Point: Discuss all the reasons why *not* to accept, to turn the mind. Elicit reasons from participants. What makes it so difficult to take that first step?

- C. The notion of **willingness versus willfulness** is taken from Gerald May's (1982) book on the topic.
1. **Willingness** is accepting what is, together with responding to what is, in an effective or appropriate way. It is doing what works. It is doing just what is needed in the current situation or moment.
 2. **Willfulness** is imposing one's will on reality—trying to fix everything, or refusing to do what is needed. It is the opposite of doing what works.

Lecture Point: Use metaphors to explain willingness versus willfulness. One is that life is like hitting baseballs from a pitching machine. A person's job is just to do her best to hit each ball as it comes. Refusing to accept that a ball is coming does not make it stop coming. Willpower, defiance, crying, or whimpering does not make the machine stop pitching the balls; they keep coming over and over and over. A person can stand in the way of a ball and get hit, stand there doing nothing and let the ball go by as a strike, or swing at the ball. Another metaphor is that life is like a game of cards. It makes no difference to a good card player what cards she gets. The object is to play whatever hand she gets as well as possible. As soon as one hand is played, another hand is dealt. The last game is over and the cur-

rent game is on. The idea is to be mindful of the current hand, play it as skillfully as possible, and then let go and focus on the next hand of cards. Many other metaphors (e.g., life as a computer game) can be used also.

Discussion Point: Elicit examples of willingness and willfulness. Leaders: If you can point to recent examples of yourselves' and/or participants' being willful or willing, so much the better. A light touch is needed. Discuss May's definitions. Elicit agreements and disagreements.

Practice Exercise: The best way to get the idea of willingness and willfulness off the written page and into active use is to start highlighting during skills training sessions when you (the leaders) and/or the clients are behaving willfully and when willingly. Phrase it as a question: "Do you all think I am being willful here? Hmm, let's examine this," or "You're not by chance being willful about this, are you?" (Clients will usually rather enjoy catching the leaders in willfulness.) Or when a difficult situation or conflict emerges in a session, you can say, "OK. Let's all try to be completely willing for the next 5 minutes."

- V. **Summarize** rationale for distress tolerance, crisis survival strategies, radical acceptance, willingness and willfulness.

Notes

1. R. Matthew Kamins, Cornell Medical Center/NY Hospital at White Plains, made very helpful comments about how to reorganize these skills.
2. Steve Hollon of Vanderbilt University gave me the idea.
3. Distress Tolerance Handouts 2, 3, and 4 are adapted from *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (pp. 79–87, 93) by Thich Nhat Hanh, 1976, Boston: Beacon Press. Copyright 1976 by Thich Nhat Hanh. Adapted by permission.

DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT I

Crisis Survival Strategies

Skills for tolerating painful events and emotions when you cannot make things better right away.

DISTRACT with "Wise Mind ACCEPTS."

Activities
Contributing
Comparisons
Emotions
Pushing away
Thoughts
Sensations

SELF-SOOTHE the FIVE SENSES.

Vision
Hearing
Smell
Taste
Touch

IMPROVE THE MOMENT.

Imagery
Meaning
Prayer
Relaxation
One thing at a time
Vacation
Encouragement

PROS AND CONS

DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT 1: Crises Survival Strategies (cont.)

DISTRACTING

A useful way to remember these skills is the phrase
"Wise Mind **ACCEPTS**."

With Activities:

Engage in exercise or hobbies; do cleaning; go to events; call or visit a friend; play computer games; go walking; work; play sports; go out to a meal, have decaf coffee or tea; go fishing; chop wood, do gardening; play pinball.

With Contributing:

Contribute to someone; do volunteer work; give something to someone else; make something nice for someone else; do a surprising, thoughtful thing.

With Comparisons:

Compare yourself to people coping the same as you or less well than you. Compare yourself to those less fortunate than you. Watch soap operas; read about disasters, others' suffering.

With opposite Emotions:

Read emotional books or stories, old letters; go to emotional movies; listen to emotional music. *Be sure the event creates different emotions.* Ideas: scary movies, joke books, comedies, funny records, religious music, marching songs, "I Am Woman" (Helen Reddy); going to a store and reading funny greeting cards.

With Pushing away:

Push the situation away by leaving it for a while. Leave the situation mentally. Build an imaginary wall between yourself and the situation.

Or push the situation away by blocking it in your mind. Censor ruminating. Refuse to think about the painful aspects of the situation. Put the pain on a shelf. Box it up and put it away for a while.

With other Thoughts:

Count to 10; count colors in a painting or tree, windows, anything; work puzzles; watch TV; read.

With intense other Sensations:

Hold ice in hand; squeeze a rubber ball very hard; stand under a very hard and hot shower; listen to very loud music; sex; put rubber band on wrist, pull out, and let go.

From *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder* by Marsha Linehan. ©1993 The Guilford Press.

DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT 1: Crisis Survival Strategies (cont.)

SELF-SOOTHE

A way to remember these skills is to think of soothing each of your
FIVE SENSES:

With Vision:

Buy one beautiful flower; make one space in a room pretty; light a candle and watch the flame. Set a pretty place at the table, using your best things, for a meal. Go to a museum with beautiful art. Go sit in the lobby of a beautiful old hotel. Look at nature around you. Go out in the middle of the night and watch the stars. Walk in a pretty part of town. Fix your nails so they look pretty. Look at beautiful pictures in a book. Go to a ballet or other dance performance, or watch one on TV. Be mindful of each sight that passes in front of you, not lingering on any.

With Hearing:

Listen to beautiful or soothing music, or to invigorating and exciting music. Pay attention to sounds of nature (waves, birds, rainfall, leaves rustling). Sing to your favorite songs. Hum a soothing tune. Learn to play an instrument. Call 800 or other information numbers to hear a human voice. Be mindful of any sounds that come your way, letting them go in one ear and out the other.

With Smell:

Use your favorite perfume or lotions, or try them on in the store; spray fragrance in the air; light a scented candle. Put lemon oil on your furniture. Put potpourri in a bowl in your room. Boil cinnamon; bake cookies, cake, or bread. Smell the roses. Walk in a wooded area and mindfully breathe in the fresh smells of nature.

With Taste:

Have a good meal; have a favorite soothing drink such as herbal tea or hot chocolate (no alcohol); treat yourself to a dessert. Put whipped cream on your coffee. Sample flavors in an ice cream store. Suck on a piece of peppermint candy. Chew your favorite gum. Get a little bit of a special food you don't usually spend the money on, such as fresh-squeezed orange juice. Really taste the food you eat; eat one thing mindfully.

With Touch:

Take a bubble bath; put clean sheets on the bed. Pet your dog or cat. Have a massage; soak your feet. Put creamy lotion on your whole body. Put a cold compress on your forehead. Sink into a really comfortable chair in your home, or find one in a luxurious hotel lobby. Put on a silky blouse, dress, or scarf. Try on fur-lined gloves or fur coats in a department store. Brush your hair for a long time. Hug someone. Experience whatever you are touching; notice touch that is soothing.

DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT I: Crisis Survival Strategies (cont.)

IMPROVE THE MOMENT

A way to remember these skills is the word
IMPROVE.

With Imagery:

Imagine very relaxing scenes. Imagine a secret room within yourself, seeing how it is decorated. Go into the room whenever you feel very threatened. Close the door on anything that can hurt you. Imagine everything going well. Imagine coping well. Make up a fantasy world that is calming and beautiful and let your mind go with it. Imagine hurtful emotions draining out of you like water out of a pipe.

With Meaning:

Find or create some purpose, meaning, or value in the pain. Remember, listen to, or read about spiritual values. Focus on whatever positive aspects of a painful situation you can find. Repeat them over and over in your mind. Make lemonade out of lemons.

With Prayer:

Open your heart to a supreme being, greater wisdom, God, your own wise mind. Ask for strength to bear the pain in this moment. Turn things over to God or a higher being.

With Relaxation:

Try muscle relaxing by tensing and relaxing each large muscle group, starting with your hands and arms, going to the top of your head, and then working down; listen to a relaxation tape; exercise hard; take a hot bath or sit in a hot tub; drink hot milk; massage your neck and scalp, your calves and feet. Get in a tub filled with very cold or hot water and stay in it until the water is tepid. Breathe deeply; half-smile; change facial expression.

With One thing in the moment:

Focus your entire attention on just what you are doing right now. Keep yourself in the very moment you are in; put your mind in the present. Focus your entire attention on physical sensations that accompany nonmental tasks (e.g. walking, washing, doing dishes, cleaning, fixing). Be aware of how your body moves during each task. Do awareness exercises.

DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT 1: Crisis Survival Strategies (cont.)

With a brief Vacation:

Give yourself a brief vacation. Get in bed and pull the covers up over your head for 20 minutes. Rent a motel room at the beach or in the woods for a day or two; drop your towels on the floor after you use them. Ask your roommate to bring you coffee in bed or make you dinner (offer to reciprocate). Get a schlocky magazine or newspaper at the grocery store, get in bed with chocolates, and read it. Make yourself milk toast, bundle up in a chair, and eat it slowly. Take a blanket to the park and sit on it for a whole afternoon. Unplug your phone for a day, or let your answering machine screen your calls. Take a 1-hour breather from hard work that must be done.

With Encouragement:

Cheerlead yourself. Repeat over and over: "I can stand it," "It won't last forever," "I will make it out of this," "I'm doing the best I can do."

Thinking of PROS AND CONS

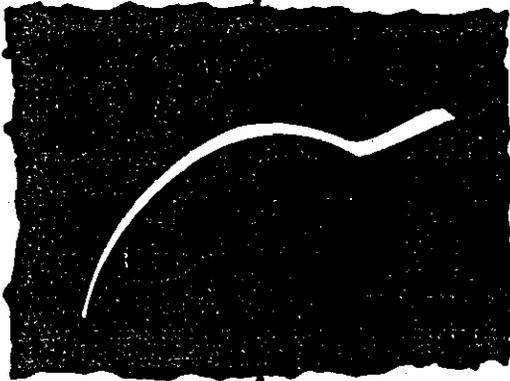
Make a list of the pros and cons of *tolerating* the distress. Make another list of the pros and cons of *not tolerating* the distress—that is, of coping by hurting yourself, abusing alcohol or drugs, or doing something else impulsive.

Focus on long-term goals, the light at the end of the tunnel. Remember times when pain has ended.

Think of the positive consequences of tolerating the distress. Imagine in your mind how good you will feel if you achieve your goals, if you don't act impulsively.

Think of all of the negative consequences of not tolerating your current distress. Remember what has happened in the past when you have acted impulsively to escape the moment.

Drawing a Breath



Post-traumatic stress can affect the way you breathe. Holding your breath, as well as breathing rapidly or shallowly may be related to chronic anxiety which can be a symptom of post-traumatic stress. Awareness and regulation of the quality of your breathing can have several positive effects. Slowing and deepening your breath allows for adequate intake of oxygen and output of carbon dioxide, both of which are necessary for physical well-being. Conscious breathing during times of distress can allow you to release muscular and emotional tension, reducing your level of distress. Focusing awareness on your breathing can shift your thoughts away from flashbacks and non-productive or obsessive thinking and bring your consciousness back into the present.

This art experience helps you to use the quality of your breathing to manage distress. You will be making two line drawings to depict the quality of your breathing.

Estimated Completion Time 45 - 60 minutes

Art Materials

- scratch paper
- one sheet of 18" x 24" white drawing paper cut into two 12" x 18" pieces
- black oil pastel

Getting Started

1. Sit in a comfortable chair and place your feet solidly on the floor. Notice the sensation of your feet pressing against the floor.
2. Notice the quality of your breathing by considering the following:
 - the depth of your breathing: shallow, deep, moderate
 - the rate of your breathing: fast, slow, moderate
 - the pause between the inhalation and exhalation of your breath
 - the expansion and contraction of your rib and abdominal areas
 - changes in the overall pattern of your breathing

Artmaking Guidelines

1. Practice drawing different kinds of lines with the oil pastel on scrap paper: long and short; thick and thin; curved and angular; quick and slow; light and heavy pressure; dashes and dots.
2. Focus on your breathing. As you are inhaling and exhaling, visualize your breath as a line and draw each breath with the oil pastel on the sheet of 12" x 18" white drawing paper. Use one or more types of lines to represent your breathing. Take about five minutes to record your breathing. If you feel comfortable doing so, close your eyes while you draw.
3. Alter the quality of your breathing until you achieve a more relaxed state by letting your abdomen expand when you are inhaling and contract when you are exhaling. As you are inhaling and exhaling, try saying silently to yourself: "breathing in calm, breathing out tension." You may want to substitute your own words for "calm" and "tension."
4. Draw your altered breathing on another sheet of 12" x 18" white drawing paper. Take about five minutes to record your breathing. Use one or more types of lines to depict each breath. Close your eyes while you are drawing, if you are comfortable doing so.

Written Reflections

1. Describe the visual qualities of the lines in each of your drawings. (See DESCRIBING YOUR ART on page 135 for suggestions.)

2. Describe the similarities and differences between the two drawings. Compare both the quality/quantity of the lines and the use of space on the paper.

3. Consider how the line quality reflects your distress level.

Drawing a
Breath

MANAGING TRAUMATIC STRESS
THROUGH ART
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4. Describe how you were able to consciously change the quality of your breathing and note the difference it made in your distress level.

5. You can use breath awareness as an indicator of your distress level. How would a drawing of your breathing differ if you were petting a dog, watching a scary movie, riding a ferris wheel, or watching the clouds go by on a lazy summer afternoon?

6. You can consciously change the quality of your breathing to reduce your stress level. Think of ways you can remind yourself to modify your breathing when you are experiencing distress. With practice, breath regulation will become more automatic.

Drawing a Breath

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