

Finding Calm in Crisis: Four Essential Techniques to Manage Emotional Distress

Well-Being Tips ✦



We have all been there. It can feel like the lid popping off a shaken-up bottle of soda or steam blasting through the valve of a pressure cooker. It's the sense that life has pushed you beyond your ability to cope in that moment, which might leave you feeling desperate or powerless.

This kind of emotional distress, characterized by intense unpleasant feelings and sensations, affects everyone sometimes. During periods of intense emotional distress, emotions like worry, shame, or hopelessness, can make it difficult to function or make wise decisions. At its most extreme, emotional distress can cause individuals to experience suicidal ideation. Thankfully, there are evidence-based strategies to cope with emotional distress and reduce overwhelm in the moment. While they are not long-term solutions, the TIPP acronym describes a four-skill process which can reduce emotional distress in the moment, quickly:

1. **Temperature:** It is common to feel physically hot when experiencing emotional distress because the heart rate is elevated. Cooling yourself down can counter this and soothe intense emotion. Try splashing your face with cold water, taking a cool shower, or gently rubbing an ice cube over your skin for a few minutes.
2. **Intense exercise:** Emotional distress can feel like you have pent up energy in your body with nowhere to go. Expelling some of that energy through movement can balance things out. To the extent that it is physically safe and possible for you, try to perform 10-15 minutes of cardiovascular exercise. You might try going for a brisk walk around the block, doing jumping jacks, dancing, or any other cardiovascular activity that works for your body.

3. **Paced breathing:** Our breathing tends to stop or become quick and shallow when we feel distressed. Slowing and deepening your breath can help to slow your heart rate and signal to your brain that you are safe. Try inhaling deeply for four seconds and releasing a long exhale for six seconds. Do this for at least 1-2 minutes.

4. **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Our muscles require less oxygen when they are relaxed, which allows your heart rate to decrease. Research shows that muscles can relax more fully following short periods of tightening them. You can perform progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) while seated in a chair or lying down. Beginning at the top of your head, tense each muscle group in your body for about five seconds, then release and allow it to relax completely. PMR is more effective when you exhale as you release each muscle group. Try tensing and relaxing muscle groups in this order:

- Face and eyes
- Neck and shoulders
- Hands, wrists, and arms
- Abdomen and back
- Upper thighs and buttocks
- Lower thighs and feet



Try practicing these strategies during times of low stress so that you are prepared to use them when emotional distress arises. If you experience intense emotional distress frequently, and your current coping skills aren't working, contact MSCC to meet with one of our mental health counselors.

September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, for more information, visit: <https://afsp.org/national-suicide-prevention-month/>

(Skills adapted from Linehan, M. M. (2015). DBT® skills training manual (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.)

The Medical Student Counseling Center (MSCC) offers free, confidential personal counseling, disability and accessibility services, academic and career development support, and wellness consultations to MD and PA students.

Contact MSCC

osac-mscc@uiowa.edu

(Email should not be used to share confidential information or in the event of an emergency.)

319-335-8056

If you are in crisis or you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, call or text 9-8-8.

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