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# Distress Tolerance

## SKILLS GUIDE

### What Calls for “Tolerance”

- Situations that feel overwhelming, triggering or disorienting
- Situations that are unwanted and also unavoidable
- Situations that the clients cannot improve right away

### Solution

**Therapists need to help clients manage distress because:**

- Clients can learn to confront and skillfully maneuver crises rather than avoid them
- If clients can learn to manage their body and their emotions during a time of crisis, they can lessen their reactivity to the crisis.

### When to Use/Not Use

**Do use when situations are:**

- Short-term
- Acting on urges would make things worse
- Highly stressful

**Don't use skills for:**

- Everyday problems
- Solving all problems
- Feeling more connected to and fulfilled by life

### Crisis Survival Skills

**Surviving Crisis without making things worse**

- These skills are not about addressing the crisis directly, necessarily, they are designed to increase coping skills for successful survival of the crisis

### The Problem

- Many clients do not have the skills to effectively manage crises or significantly distressing situations.
- When clients feel urges that will make things worse, if they do not have alternative skills, they may act on those urges.

### What Clients Gain

- More adaptive coping
- Lower levels of distress tolerance have been associated with both poorer life quality & reduced life satisfaction (Hu et al., [2014](#)).
- Poorer DT has been associated with an increased use of unhelpful self-regulation strategies (Lass et al., [2020](#); McHugh & Otto, [2012](#)).

### Goals of Distress Tolerance

- Survive crisis effectively
- Practice accepting reality as it is
- Recognize choice regarding giving into urges and overwhelming emotions
- Can also allow clients to develop their own goals for why learning distress tolerance skills might be important for them

### Acceptance

- It is not agreement
  - It is not defeat or “giving in” “it is what it is”
  - It is not minimizing the significance of an event
  - It does not mean that you do not want/believe in/are fighting for change
  - It often allows a more honest exploration of available options and examination of limitations
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