

# Tolerating Distress- Introduction

We all experience emotions. Emotions are an important part of being human, and are essential to our survival. As humans we are designed to feel a whole range of emotions, some of which may be comfortable to us, and others may be uncomfortable.

Some people tell us that they “can’t face”, “can’t bear”, “can’t stand”, or “can’t tolerate” emotional distress. Being intolerant of experiencing emotional discomfort can actually breed a whole bunch of problems, as it interferes with living a fulfilling life, and can make worse any emotional discomfort we might be experiencing.

## What is Distress Intolerance?

Perceived inability to fully experience unpleasant, aversive or uncomfortable emotions, and is accompanied by a desperate need to escape the uncomfortable emotions.

Difficulties tolerating distress are often linked to a fear of experiencing negative emotion. Often distress intolerance centres on high intensity emotional experiences, that is, when the emotion is ‘hot’, strong and powerful (e.g., intense despair after an argument with a loved one, or intense fear whilst giving a speech).

There are varying types of negative emotions that could potentially be distressing for people:

**The Sad**

**The Mad**

**The Scared**

What Negative Emotions do you find difficult to deal with?

---

---

Now, it makes a lot of sense to try to get away from things that feel unpleasant. This strategy seems to work for other things that make us uncomfortable (e.g., heat, cold, pain, hunger, etc). However, when we apply the same strategy to our emotions, it seems to back-fire. **This is the paradoxical nature of distress intolerance. That is, the more we fear, struggle with, and try to avoid any form of distress, generally the worse that distress gets.** Our fear and avoidance of the distress actually magnifies the distress.

## Am I Distress Intolerant?

1. Feeling distressed or upset is unbearable to me
2. When I feel distressed or upset, all I can think about is how bad I feel
3. I can’t handle feeling distressed or upset
4. My feelings of distress are so intense that they completely take over
5. There is nothing worse than feeling distressed or upset
6. I don’t tolerate being distressed or upset as well as most people
7. My feelings of distress or being upset are not acceptable
8. I’ll do anything to avoid feel distressed or upset
9. Other people seem to be able to tolerate feeling distressed or upset better than I can
10. Being distressed or upset is always a major ordeal for me
11. I am ashamed of myself when I feel distressed or upset
12. My feelings of distress or being upset scare me
13. I’ll do anything to stop feeling distressed or upset
14. When I feel distressed or upset, I must do something about it immediately
15. When I feel distressed or upset, I cannot help but concentrate on how bad the distress actually feels

Day/Time	Negative Emotions	Intolerable (0-5)	Reaction to Situation

## How Does Distress Intolerance Develop?

It is likely a combination of biological and environmental factors that lead some people to be more intolerant of emotional distress than others.

**Biological** - some people are more sensitive to negative emotions, experiencing negative emotions more easily, at a higher level of intensity, and for a longer duration than other people.

**Environment** – non-validating environment; unhealthy modelling; repeated use of unhealthy escape mechanisms reinforcing our beliefs that emotions cannot be tolerated.

## Healthy Distress Tolerance

An important thing to consider when assessing your own level of distress tolerance, is that like many things in life, doing anything at the extreme can be unhelpful. Think of distress tolerance as a continuum where at one end people can be extremely intolerant of distress, and at the other end people can be extremely tolerant of distress. Sitting at either end of the spectrum isn't good for you.

## Distress Intolerant Beliefs

**These beliefs tend to centre on the notion that negative emotion is bad in some way, unbearable, unacceptable, or will lead to disastrous consequences.** These beliefs tend to make any negative emotion that we may feel, become a highly distressing emotional experience. Below are some of the common beliefs that people with distress intolerance have when they start to experience negative emotion:

- *I can't stand this*
- *It's unbearable*
- *I hate this feeling*
- *I must stop this feeling*
- *I must get rid of it*
- *Take it away*
- *I can't cope with this feeling*
- *I will lose control*
- *I'll go crazy*
- *This feeling will keep going on forever It is wrong to feel this way*
- *It's stupid and unacceptable*
- *It's weak*
- *It's bad*
- *It's dangerous*

Ask yourself:

1. What does it mean to me when I start to feel uncomfortable emotions?
2. What do I think will happen if I let myself feel distressed?
3. What must I do when I feel any emotional discomfort?

## Distress Escape Methods

1. Avoidance
  - a. Situational Avoidance
  - b. Reassurance seeking or checking
  - c. Distraction/Suppression (invalidating)
2. Numbing and Withdrawing (e.g., binge eating, drugs and alcohol)
3. Harmful Releases (self-injurious behaviors)

**Ask yourself, what do I do to get rid of unpleasant emotions?**

---

---

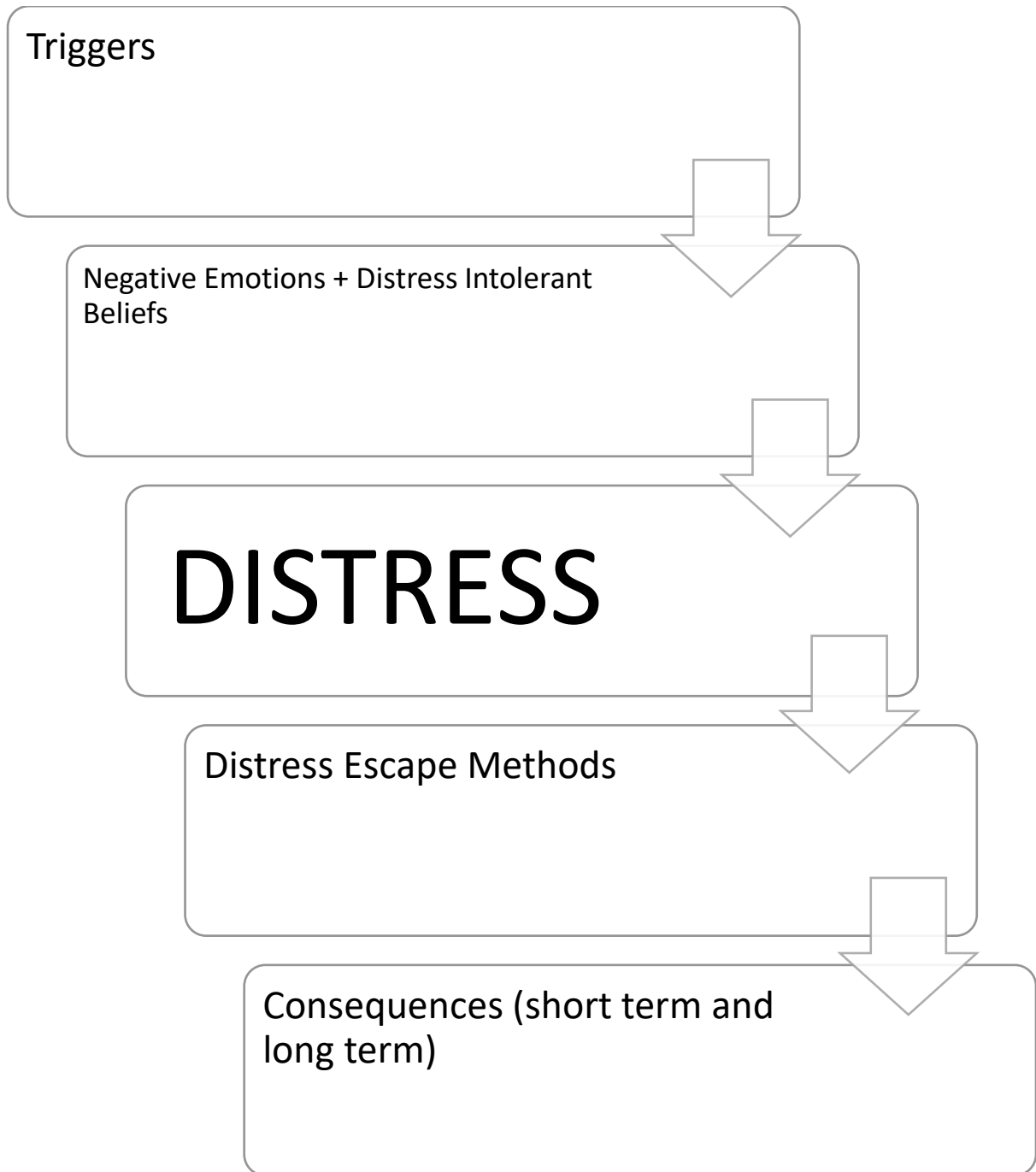
---

The issue with each of these escape methods is that they only work in the short-term. However, over the long-term it all falls apart because:

- The escape strategy itself is damaging and causes other problems in your life,
- Your negative emotions usually worsen because you feel you haven't coped well,
- By continually using your escape strategy, you never learn other more helpful ways of tolerating emotional distress, and
- By continually using your escape strategy you never have the opportunity to stay with the emotional distress and therefore challenge the beliefs you hold about not being able to tolerate negative emotions (maybe you can tolerate them, but you have just never given yourself the chance???)

**Please note. If the distress you experience is extremely intense unbearable emotional pain, such that you are currently unable to apply the acceptance strategies outlined in next module, then skip ahead to the module on tips for how to improve your distress. This is particularly relevant for people who engage in self-harm, or drug and alcohol use to manage their distress.**

## Distress Intolerance Model



# Accepting Distress

Negative emotions are important to our survival, rather than something to be feared and avoided at all costs.

Another way you might start to see your emotions differently is to recognise that your **emotions are not permanent**. Instead you might start to consider your emotions as changing experiences that are always fluctuating but eventually pass.

**Emotions act more like a wave**, at times increasing and becoming more intense, but inevitably always reaching some plateau, subsiding and finally passing. Sometimes the emotion may rear up again, setting off another wave or smaller ripple. But the key is that emotions move and change, they are not permanent.

**Accepting distress is not about having to like emotional discomfort, or being resigned to feeling miserable, or wallowing in negative emotions. Instead, accepting distress is about seeing the negative emotion for what it is, and changing how you pay attention to the emotion.** Reacting in an accepting way towards your emotion, often changes the effect the emotion has on you.

This approach is often referred to as **learning to watch your emotions “mindfully”**. Mindfulness is state of being where you are in the present moment, watching whatever you happen to be experiencing at that time, with an attitude of curiosity, and without judging or trying to change your experience.

## Steps/Guidelines to Accept Emotions

- Watch or Observe (**Regardless of what the emotion is doing, you are NOT your emotions, you are the watcher of your emotions**).
- Label or Describe (The self-talk that goes with this might sound something like “...there is fear, I can feel it in the fast beating of my heart”, or “...there is sadness, I can feel it in the heaviness of my shoulders”, or “...there is anger, I can feel it in the tightness of my jaw”).
- Curious and non-judgmental
- Imagery (**ocean wave; non-stop express train; clouds in the sky; empty room with two doors; naughty child throwing a temper tantrum; balloons floating in air**)

Once you feel you have fully watched and experienced the negative emotion, feeling it come to its natural conclusion, it might then be time to gently direct your attention to the present moment. This could be anything sensory, a particular task you are doing, a sound, taste, smell, sight or feeling of touch you may not have realised you were experiencing that you can now tune into. And if you can't think of anything to be present-focused on, there is one thing you can guarantee will always be present to practice on...your breath.

**Its important to take time out and practice these skills regularly, starting with emotions that are not particularly distressing.**

## **Mindfulness of Emotions Script**

Position yourself comfortably in the chair...feet flat on the floor, arms placed comfortably, chair fully supporting your body... allow your eyes to close...begin by paying attention to your breathing, taking a few long breaths to get settled...

Now gently guide your attention to how you are feeling emotionally within yourself at this moment...note whatever feelings arise within you whether they be positive, neutral or negative...whether they be strong or weak in intensity...they are all just emotions...all just feelings to be felt. Whatever feelings arise, remind yourself that it is OK to allow yourself to feel it. Remember that you are not your emotions, you are the watcher of your emotions. Take some time just to observe your emotional experience, making no attempt to change how you are feeling...

You might label the emotion to yourself (i.e., "ah there is calmness/ happiness/ indifference/ surprise/ boredom/ frustration/ fear/ sadness, etc")...You might describe where and how you feel the emotion in your body...take time to notice the physical signs that you are feeling the way you feel...

Watch as the emotion changes in intensity and nature. Bring whatever image to mind that helps you be the watcher of your emotions (e.g., seeing your emotion like an ocean wave, express train, cloud floating in the sky, leaf floating on a stream, an empty room, a naughty child, etc)...

You don't have to buy into your emotions and get swept up in them. You don't need to change your emotions, fight them or get rid of them. You are just here to watch, observe and experience what is going on right now. See if you can make some space for the emotion, seeing it as part of a broader landscape within you that contains lots of things like other feelings, thoughts, memories, body sensations, etc. Your emotions are just emotions...your feeling just feelings...nothing more and nothing less...

When you have fully experienced whatever emotion is there, and the experience has run its natural course, redirect your attention towards your breath...note each inhalation and each exhalation...bind your attention to the back and forth movement of the belly as you breathe in and out...note the sensations in your body as you draw breath in and then out again. Take some time now to allow your breath to be your anchor to the present moment...

If your mind wanders away from the breath to an emotion, or thought or sensation. That's ok, that's what minds do. Congratulate yourself for noticing, and give your mind the time to again observe and watch what you are experiencing... Once that observation has run its natural course, again gently bring your attention back to the breath as your anchor to the present...

Try to continue your mindfulness practice for the next 10 minutes or more...

When you feel ready, you can gradually open your eyes, bringing this mindfulness exercise to a close...

Now that you are getting a good sense of how to be mindful of your emotions generally, another way to develop the skill of accepting distress is to plan specifically how you will extend this new attitude to dealing with the distressing emotions you most often struggle with. **To help with this, you can devise your own step-by-step mindfulness plan of what to do when emotional distress arises for you.**

**Recognise & Allow Emotion:**

*Aha! I'm feeling...[angry/sad/scared]. It is OK, I can allow myself to have this feeling...I can make space for it...I don't have to be afraid of it or try to get rid of it.*

**Watch Emotion:**

*I can just watch this feeling and see what it does, I don't have to get caught up in it. Let's see, where do I notice the emotion in my body?*

*This is just an emotion, just a feeling to be felt, nothing more and nothing less.*

*I am not my emotions, I am the watcher of my emotions.*

*The feeling is just like a...[ocean wave...I don't need to fight the wave frantically...I can just go with the wave, letting it bob me up and down, or riding it into shore]*

**Be Present:**

*I will turn my attention back to the task I am doing now ...noticing what I can feel...hear... see... smell... taste...*

OR

*I will turn my attention towards my breath...the breath being my anchor to the present moment...noticing each in breath and each out breath*

**Deal with Emotional Comebacks:**

*I feel the emotion returning...that's OK, that's what emotions do, they like to rear their head again. I will just go back to watching it again...it is just another [ocean wave]...*

# Improving Distress

## Balancing Acceptance & Improvement

Accepting and improving distress are quite different approaches, and maintaining a balance between acceptance and improvement is the key to building distress tolerance. It is unhelpful to be at either extreme (i.e., only accepting how you feel or only trying to improve how you feel). To tolerate distress you really need to learn how to do both.

## Doing the Opposite Action

You have identified your particular escape methods. Below is a table summarising the opposite actions for each distress escape method we have covered. There is also a box at the bottom for if you engage in a particular escape method that we have not covered.

Most of the opposite actions initially require that you stay with, ride through, allow and experience the distress, rather than escaping it. **Doing these opposite actions can be challenging**, and so **words of encouragement and compassion to ourselves** may be important when we are finding it tough. It can be useful to think:

*“what encouragement would I give to someone else feeling this way?”*, *“what would I say to them and what tone would I use?”*

*“I can stay with this feeling”*; *“it is good practice for me to get comfortable being uncomfortable”*;

*“I can get through this”*;

*“I can tolerate this”*; *“It will pass”*;

*“this is good for me in the long-run”*;

*“I can focus on just getting through this moment”*; *“I can breathe with this feeling”*;

*“this is helping me build my tolerance”*...

Situational Avoidance	Don't avoid situations that distress you. Instead gradually face these situations and stay in them, until you have ridden through the distress. <b>Remember to reward your efforts when you are done, by doing things that are active or soothing.</b>
Reassurance seeking	Minimise or eliminate reassurance seeking or checking behaviours. Try to cope independently with the distress you feel, riding through these feelings without resorting to checking things or seeking the reassurance of others. <b>Remember to reward your efforts when you are done, by doing things that are active or soothing.</b>
Distraction and Suppression	Don't push away distressing feelings. Instead allow and experience these feelings. Remember to reward your efforts when you are done, by doing things that are active or soothing.
Alcohol or Drugs or Binge Eating	Don't numb the distress by using alcohol or drugs. Instead allow and experience these feelings. Also do things that are active or soothing, rather than withdrawing from life.
Self-injurious behavior	Self-soothe and be active in the moment, rather than harming yourself.



## Distress Improvement Activities

Finding small ways to participate and be active in the moment when distressed, or to self-soothe and self-nurture when you are feeling distressed, are important for improving your emotional experience. Activities that centre on the concepts of activating and soothing are called 'distress improvement activities'.

The activities in the left-hand column are more about **participating actively in the moment** (i.e., being involved, active and absorbed in something that may improve your distress), whilst the activities on the right-hand side are more about **soothing yourself** (i.e., activities that make us feel a sense of warmth and being cared for and that help us get through things).

ACTIVATE	SOOTHE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise; Walk; Jog; Gym ;Weights; Exercise class; Boxing;</li> <li>• Cleaning, Washing Dishes;</li> <li>• Dusting;</li> <li>• Gardening;</li> <li>• Cooking;</li> <li>• Call a friend;</li> <li>• Go out to lunch, dinner, a coffee; Shopping;</li> <li>• Favourite movie, book, music or TV show;</li> <li>• Books/movies/music that create a different emotion;</li> <li>• Magazines, Newspaper, Games, Puzzles;</li> <li>• Volunteer somewhere;</li> <li>• Give someone a present;</li> <li>• Do something thoughtful;</li> <li>• Make something for someone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a good meal, Have a nice snack;</li> <li>• Favourite drink (non-alcohol);</li> <li>• Have a picnic;</li> <li>• Light a candle;</li> <li>• Look at beautiful art or scenery, Watch the stars;</li> <li>• Go to a beautiful place;</li> <li>• Soothing or invigorating music;</li> <li>• Enjoy sounds of nature; Enjoy smells of nature or flowers</li> <li>• Singing;</li> <li>• Favourite perfume;</li> <li>• Favourite lotion;</li> <li>• Bubble bath, Shower, Massage;</li> <li>• Pat dog or cat;</li> <li>• Soak feet, Brush hair, Do nails;</li> <li>• Imagine a relaxing scene/safe place;</li> <li>• Imagine coping/distress flowing away/distress passing;</li> <li>• Read/think of your spiritual values, Pray</li> <li>• Focus on any positive aspects in your life;</li> <li>• Tense and release muscles, Slow breathing;</li> <li>• Count to 50</li> <li>• Smile; Laugh out loud</li> <li>• Take a break (stay in bed for 20mins)</li> </ul>

The only way to get a sense of what distress improvement activities work well for you, is to start experimenting with those that sound promising, and then evaluate what impact they have on your distress. Below is a table to keep track of the findings from your experiments.

DATE	DISTRESS IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITY	OUTCOME	EVALUATION

## Improving Distress Practice

Now that you have some general ideas of things not to do when you feel distressed (i.e., my usual distress escape methods), and things you can do to improve your distress (i.e., opposite actions and distress improvement activities), it is good to personalise and clarify these ideas for your own situation.

### What NOT to do?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

### What TO DO?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

## Problem Solving Approach

1. Identify and Define Problem Area/issue
2. Generate possible solutions and tick POSSIBLE solutions and options

- i. \_\_\_\_\_
- ii. \_\_\_\_\_
- iii. \_\_\_\_\_
- iv. \_\_\_\_\_
- v. \_\_\_\_\_
- vi. \_\_\_\_\_
- vii. \_\_\_\_\_
- viii. \_\_\_\_\_
- ix. \_\_\_\_\_

3. Evaluate solutions

Solution No.	Advantages	Disadvantages

4. Decide on a Plan and Implement it
5. Evaluate the outcome

# Tolerating Distress

## Distress Tolerance Action Plan

### 1. Triggers

For an action plan to be useful, you need to first have some awareness of the common things that trigger your distress. Being more aware of what ignites your distress, will give you a 'heads up' for when you might particularly need to be using your action plan. Common examples include:

- Relationship problems
- Friendship problems
- Family problems
- Partner/spouse behaviour
- Anniversaries
- Socialising
- Financial problems
- Unemployment
- Body sensations/symptoms
- Going out in public
- Untidiness
- Thinking about myself negatively
- Comparing myself to others
- Hearing bad news
- Seeing family
- Seeing friends
- Arguments
- People being unfair or rude
- Medical appointments
- Work or study stress
- Thinking about the past
- Thinking about the future
- Being disorganised
- Health problems
- Physical sensations
- Physical appearance

### 2. Warning Signs

In addition to being aware of common triggers of your distress, it is also useful to be aware of the **warning signs that tell you that you are having trouble dealing with your distress**, and hence need to focus on using your action plan. **Warning signs are the feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, and behavioural urges or actions that signal you are feeling overwhelming distress**, and need to decide how best to handle this feeling. Some common warning signs are:

**Feelings:** Disappointment, Hurt, Despair, Guilt, Shame, Sadness, Depression, Grief, Misery, Irritation, Agitation, Frustration, Disgust, Jealousy, Anger, Rage, Hatred, Nervousness, Anxiety, Dread, Fear, Panic, Terror

**Thoughts:** "I can't cope"; "This is hopeless"; "This is unbearable"; "This isn't going to get better"; "I am losing control"; "I can't deal with this"; "I'm a mess"; "I am weak"; "I have to stop this"

**Physical Sensations:** Low Energy, Fatigue, Heaviness, Crying, Excessive Energy, Tension, Increased Heart Rate, Fast Breathing, Sweating, Hot, Shaking, Stomach Problems, Chest Pressure, Restlessness, Fidgety.

**Urges or Actions:** Pace, Can't Sit Still Withdraw/Isolate Self, Lash Out, Yell, Throw Things, Avoid, Reassurance Seeking, Checking, Distraction, Suppression Alcohol or Drug Use Binge Eating, Excessive Sleep, Harming Self.

### **3. Commit to drop escape methods and do the opposite action**

Once you acknowledge your distress, via being more aware of your triggers and warning signs, you are then in a better position to make a commitment to dropping your usual escape methods (i.e., situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction and suppression, alcohol or drugs, binge eating, excessive sleep, harmful releases, etc).

Making a commitment to drop your usual escape methods and do the opposite, could be something you do mentally, or say out loud to yourself, or write down, or tell someone else about. It is up to you. The main thing is making your actions a conscious choice, rather than an automatic habit.

E.g.:

*“I will try to tolerate this distress, rather than using my old habit of drinking to dull the pain”*

or

*“I will stay with this feeling, rather than avoiding situations that make me feel this way”*

**What would you say to yourself?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **4. Accepting Distress**

Following the script that you have been practicing will help you to:

- i) recognise and allow the emotion;
- ii) watch the emotion by detaching from it, describing it and using imagery;
- iii) be present focused on a task or your breath; and
- iv) deal with the inevitable emotional comebacks.

### **5. Improving Distress**

## Distress Tolerance Action Plan

**My Triggers**

**My Warning Signs**

**My Commitment**

**Accepting Distress**

**Recognize and Allow Emotions**

**Watch and Label emotions**

**Be Present**

**Improving my distress (strategies)**

## Adjusting Distress Intolerant Beliefs

It is important to realise that if you keep using your Distress Tolerance Action Plan, and keep facing your distress rather than trying to escape it, then over-time your distress intolerant beliefs will weaken and erode. This is because by the very act of tolerating your distress, you will be gathering evidence and experiences that show you these beliefs are not true. **This adjustment process does rely on time, and your persistence in practicing what you have learned.**

Beliefs I want to change are:

---

---

---

---

---

---

**The Distress Intolerant Belief I want to adjust is:**

**Do I have any evidence or experiences that go against this belief, particularly from when I have used my Distress Tolerance Action Plan (either spontaneously or via planned distress exposure)**

**Why is distress not necessarily a bad thing, and may even be important?**

*“Negative emotions like sadness, fear and anger are normal and important to the survival of human beings; they can protect us, keep us safe, and show that certain things in our life are important to us.”*

*“If we didn’t feel negative emotions we would be like lifeless robots.”*

*“Experiencing distress may allow me to be more sensitive to other people’s distress.”*

**What is a realistic expectation of human beings, when it comes to experiencing distress?**

*“All human beings experience distress.”*

*“It would be unnatural if people didn’t experience negative emotions when something went wrong for them.”*

**If a friend held the same distress intolerant belief for themselves, what advice would I give to them?**

**What would be a new Distress Tolerant Belief I would like to hold?**

**What would I need to do to be living my life in accordance with this new belief?**

*“Keep using my Distress Tolerance Action Plan when I feel distressed, and make a note of times I use it effectively so I remember that I can do it.”*

*“Challenge myself by purposely doing something that makes me feel distressed, to reinforce to myself that I can handle distressing emotions.”*

*“Don’t avoid distress by using drugs, or avoiding emotional situations”*