

How to recognise and manage your emotional distress



Part 1

Emotions and feelings.

First of all, let's look at what is the difference between *emotions and feelings*. Many people use the terms interchangeably but it is worth making a distinction. Emotions are things like happiness, sadness, jealousy. Feelings are how certain things feel in our body as physical sensations. It is the *felt sense* of that emotion. So when we experience happiness that will feel a certain way in our body. We might describe it as light, free, weightless, bubbly etc. Guilt might feel heavy or like a stone in your chest. Grief might feel like a hollow sensation in your chest or stomach. It can be the emotion as well as the feeling that can be hard to manage.

We all experience a range of emotions. (In fact not experiencing a wide range of emotions can be sign that something is wrong.) It is totally normal to experience a range of emotions from happiness and joy, through to anger, hurt, guilt and so on. We tend to like to feel the "good" ones. Those are the ones that are usually comfortable to feel. Happiness, contentment, joy, pride, satisfaction, awe and so on. Though some people will have issues with the "good" ones as well. Perhaps feeling that they feel too good, that they don't deserve it, don't trust it as it won't last, and so on. What most people have a harder time with though and the focus of this handout, are the ones we tend to label as negative emotions. Like sadness, anger, rage, hurt, betrayal, guilt, shame, horror, and so on. Sometimes even the less extreme ones can be difficult like boredom, loneliness, dissatisfaction, worry. The bottom line is, some emotions can be distressing and it is learning to manage these ones that some people find challenging. No-one particularly likes negative or distressing emotions. However, accepting that they are an inevitable part of life and learning ways to accept and tolerate them is the aim of this handout and the aim of having a healthy, full, meaningful life. This is what is called learning *distress tolerance*.

Distress INTolerance

What does it mean to be distress intolerant? It has two parts. It is a perceived inability to fully experience unpleasant, aversive or uncomfortable emotions and their accompanying feelings. Secondly it is followed by a desperate need to escape the uncomfortable emotions. Even to the point for some people of wanting to do extreme things like self-harm, wanting to commit suicide, or wanting (even temporarily) to hurt others. This is not that hard to understand because most of us try to avoid unpleasant things. We can build up a fear of so called "negative" emotions. This is usually linked to high intensity emotions or when the emotion is "hot" or powerful. However, it can also occur with lower intensity emotions like nervousness. If we have distress intolerance, it means we feel like when we have certain emotions and feelings, that we can't stand it. We will do almost anything to prevent ourselves from experiencing them.

In terms of negative emotions, we can categorise them into three broad areas:



The Sad emotions

In this group are emotions and feelings that reflect sadness to varying degrees of intensity. Things like grief, sorrow, despondency, misery, wretchedness, gloom, disappointment, despair, hurt, guilt, shame, depression, feeling betrayed. These may be accompanied by low physiological arousal such as fatigue, low energy, a feeling of heaviness and slowness, sighing. Or by feelings of more heightened arousal such as restlessness, crying, sobbing. Thoughts or ruminations of hopelessness, loss, regret, inadequacy, loneliness and the urge to want to hide away.



The Mad emotions

Here we have emotions that reflect anger at varying degrees. Including irritation, agitation, frustration, disgust, jealousy, anger, resentment, wrath, rage, fury, antagonism, hatred, animosity, and the angrier side of feelings of betrayal. Anger type emotions are usually accompanied by arousal states such as increased heart rate, increased body temperature, feeling sweaty, muscle tension. Thoughts tend to centre around unfairness, injustice, wrong doing, an assumption of intentionality, feeling targeted, taking things personally, and the urge to lash out in some way. Often the anger is directed outwards towards others, but it can also be directed inwards toward the self.



The Scared emotions

This group reflects fear to one degree or another. These might include trepidation, nervousness, anxiety, worry, fretfulness, fear, dread, panic, terror, horror. Fear emotions are usually accompanied by high arousal such as increased heart rate, rapid and shallow breathing, body shaking, butterflies in the stomach feeling, body temperature increase, but with blood retreating from the skin surface resulting in cold sweats at times, feeling light headed or like you might faint. Thoughts tend to centre on threat, vulnerability, helplessness, impotence, and the urge to hide or escape.

Take a moment to think about which type emotions you find the hardest to tolerate. Are all of them a problem or only some? Jot down the emotions you have difficulty with. Also note if there are positive emotions you find difficult to tolerate.

Are you distress intolerant?

Below are a few questions that you can answer to see how much this might apply to you

Distress Tolerance Scale

Think of times that you feel distressed or upset. Circle the item that best describes your beliefs about feeling distressed or upset. Please answer regarding your feelings of distress 'in general', that is, on the average.

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

If you agreed with a lot of the above statements, then it may be a sign that you are having difficulties with tolerating emotional distress.

So what is the problem with finding negative emotions and distress hard to tolerate? Doesn't everyone?

Well, yes and no. People have differing degrees of tolerance to perceived negative emotions as you may be able to gather from the above scale. Clearly, some people like feeling scared or mad or sad. Otherwise why would we watch certain types of movies? First of all, an emotion can be experienced as negative, but not distressing. We can feel sad, but not be overly distressed by being sad. So it is not necessarily the emotion itself that is the problem. We may feel more distress than necessary because we evaluate our emotional experience as a bad thing. In other words, what we tell ourselves about what we are feeling is more important than the emotion itself. Secondly, even if the emotion *is* distressing it does not mean it is intolerable or bad or wrong. It just means it is distressing to feel that way, but tolerable.

Have a think about some of the things you tell yourself about the emotions, or when you feel the emotions, that you identified as being troublesome above. Sometimes it may be subtle so have a good think about it. Sometimes it is a result of what others have told us, or experiences in childhood or later life that have contributed. Or sometimes the emotion is confused with a behaviour that is associated with it. Like Anger and violence.

Emotion	Evaluation of the emotion
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

To get a better handle on your emotional distress reactions it might be useful to track it for a week or two.

Event/situation	-ve emotion(s)	Intolerable 0 tolerable to 10 intolerable	My reaction (thinking/behaviour) to the emotion
Partner said something unkind	Sad, Hurt	6 8	went to the bedroom and cried - felt better Drank several glasses of wine - felt worse Thought about how unkind and mean it was and every other time he/she or anyone else has said mean things - felt worse
	Angry	9	Thought a lot about how to get them back. Then felt bad for thinking that Yelled at them later for something unrelated and minor
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Why do people develop distress intolerance?

A number of things may contribute. We all have different personalities and predispositions. Some of us may just be born with a greater emotional sensitivity. It is also likely that experiences particularly in childhood, but also in adolescence and adulthood will contribute. We may not have been shown (modelled) how to tolerate emotional discomfort. We may have been punished or belittled for displaying certain normal emotions. Or we may adopt less helpful ways of coping with emotions that we see our parents or other significant people using. Like drinking to excess or bottling things up and showing as little as possible. Also, we will do whatever we can to cope with difficulty and some of the ways we try are effective in the short term so get reinforced, but are extremely unhelpful in the long term. Whatever it is we do, we do it regularly and so it becomes a habit. It becomes a habit of thinking, and of behaving. These habits become self-reinforcing.

What are the **thoughts or beliefs** that reinforce distress intolerance?

- I can't stand it
- I can't cope
- This is unbearable
- I will lose control
- This feeling will never go away
- I'll go mad if I feel this
- It's weak to feel this
- It's bad to feel this
- I'm a loser and pathetic if I feel this way
- People will judge me if they know or see how I feel
- It's dangerous to feel like this
- I should be able to control myself better
- I hate feeling this way
- I am stupid for feeling like this
- I'll never get over it
- I am a bad person if I feel this
- I should be able to just get over it
- Showing this emotion is bad, so I have to hide it
- Showing this emotion is weak, so I have to hide it
- Someone will take advantage of me if I give in to this feeling
- No-one likes a cry baby
- I must stop this feeling

Do any of these resonate with you? Circle the ones that do and what emotions they relate to. Maybe you have others that you are aware of. Jot them down as well.

What behaviours do we engage in to escape emotional distress?

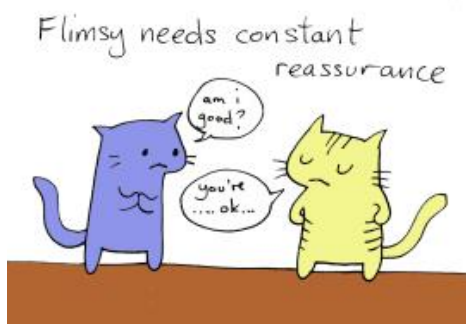


Avoidance (Run away!)

As mentioned, it is common to try to avoid things that are unpleasant. This avoidance can come in many shapes and sizes. One obvious one is we try to **avoid situations or people** that might prompt us to feel certain distressing emotions. We might avoid conflict at all costs for example, by agreeing with everyone all the time. Or we might avoid certain people who upset us, like anyone who shows anger, or anyone who asks questions we don't want to think about or answer. We might avoid tests or dentist appointments because they trigger anxiety. We might get to the point where it is easier to just stay home and avoid most of life.

Another way we avoid is by **distraction and suppression**. The “la la la” approach.

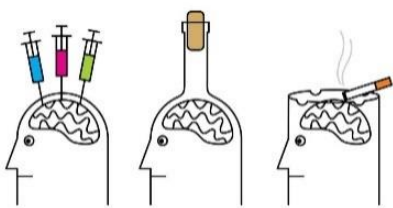
This means trying to get rid of the distress as quickly as possible. If I feel sad I can distract myself by watching funny movies or TV. Or I will tell myself to stop it, or try to shut it out by repeating positive statements or trying to think of something else. “Not listening!”



Reassurance seeking or checking

This is a subtler means of avoiding negative emotions. At the first sign of distress we immediately and excessively seek someone to reassure us we are okay. In fact, we may start to see it as their job or role to make us feel better or okay. And we may even get angry or upset with them if they fail to do this to our satisfaction. Repetitive checking can be another way we try to reassure ourselves. Such as repetitively checking a body sensation or symptom, or checking you have locked

the door, or over-preparing for things, overly seeking others opinions to calm you down (friends, doctors, the internet, psychics, tarot etc).



Numbing and withdrawing

Numbing is what we do when we don't want to feel things. Numbing is a common way of dealing with distress in our society. We use alcohol, drugs (prescription, legal and illegal), binge or comfort eating, or various other addictions like shopping or gambling, computer games, or sex. Another common escape or

withdrawal from distress is excessive sleeping as a way of zoning out and not having to deal with our emotions. What is the difficulty with this? For one thing no drug or buzz lasts forever, so when it wears off we are back where we started. Sometimes with a hangover! Sometimes what we use to numb becomes a problem in itself and now we have an addiction issue as well. And the other thing is we can't *selectively* numb. If we numb some feelings, we numb all feelings. We become less able to feel anything. Life becomes one big beige flat horizon.





Controlling In order to evade distressing emotions, we may also try various ways of controlling. This may be trying to control ourselves. Like by rigidly trying to control our reactions or by trying to control our environment (including other people) so that triggers are avoided altogether. This may mean trying to manipulate situations so that we can avoid any uncomfortable feelings. This can be tiring, and tiresome to others who don't appreciate our attempts to control things.

Damaging releases Sometimes we are so intent on escaping our distress that we do things that are harmful to ourselves or others. We do these things to vent or release the pent up distress. We might do things to hurt ourselves like cutting, scratching, hair pulling, head banging and so on. Sometimes the venting may be directed outwards like when we act out violently (verbally or physically) with others to release pent up anger. Sometimes the person we vent at is not even the person we are really angry with.



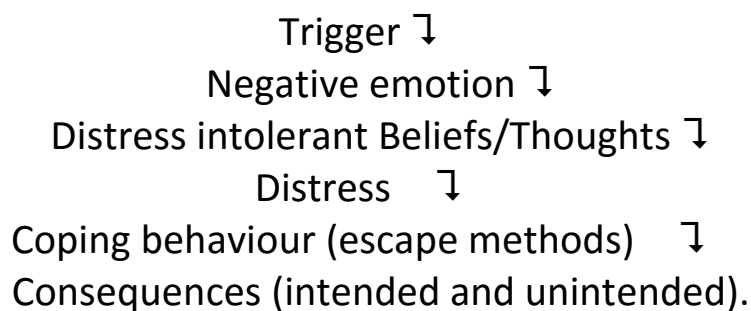
As you have been reading you have probably noticed ones that you do yourself. Note down your common methods for escaping distress.



Consequences The problem with all these methods is that while they work in the short term (or we wouldn't use them), they do not work well in the long term, and in fact often create more problems. And the bottom line is they don't help us to get any better at managing our emotions, feeling good about ourselves, or having a full rich life.

Have a think about it yourself by looking at your favoured methods of escaping distress identified above. Have they helped you to overcome the issues you have faced or made you any better at handling things? You may also be able to identify things that they have made worse in the longer run. Like your self- esteem, belief in your coping ability, relationships, work situations, and so on.

The process looks like this:



Usually there is some **trigger** to the emotion. Triggers can be internal or external; small and seemingly inconsequential, to big and obvious. Triggers might be things like a physical sensation in our own body like a pain (internal) or a person or event like a breakup (external). It can be small like worrying what someone thought of what you just said, to big like losing your job.

The trigger then creates a “**negative**” **emotion** (and its attendant feeling). Emotions such as: Anger, sadness, fear. Feelings like shaky, tight, hollow, flat, heavy, trembling.

We then have certain **thought/belief** reactions to that emotion and feeling and around distress more generally. If we are distress intolerant we are likely to have a range of distress intolerant beliefs. “I can’t stand this. This is a catastrophe. I am weak.”

This then leads to feeling **distress**, we experience the emotion as extremely aversive, and we tell ourselves it is intolerable. So now not only are we feeling the normal emotional reaction, but we are compounding it by making it wrong or bad. It is important to stress again here that what we label negative emotions are not in themselves necessarily distressing. They may not be pleasant but they are not in themselves deeply distressing. If they are they are not intolerable. We tend to make them intolerable by convincing ourselves (unconsciously) that they are.

This level of distress then leads us to **behavioural coping** methods to try to **escape** from the emotions and distress, which we do in various ways like avoiding, distracting, numbing etc.

These methods have various **consequences**, both intended and unintended. The intended consequence is short term relief. The unintended consequence is that we reinforce our distress intolerance, have less confidence in our ability to cope, and stay in the unhelpful cycle and begin again with the next trigger. Other unintended consequences can be damage to relationships.

And no matter how hard or cunningly we try to avoid triggers, it is impossible, so the cycle is repeated endlessly.

Celebrate awareness. Without too much effort you can probably come up with examples of your own distress intolerance cycles. If you can, that is really great. Doing so is a really helpful first step! Instead of feeling dismayed by identifying your cycle, you can see it as impressive that you have managed to be aware enough to see what is going on. And you can congratulate yourself for your courage in being so honest with yourself, rather than engaging in self-deception. We tend to engage in self-deception because most of the time we beat ourselves up when we think we have made an error. No wonder we are invested in not looking at them. It generally tends to lead to feeling bad about ourselves. So instead it is much more effective to celebrate seeing ourselves clearly, as that is the starting point for meaningful change.



Have a go at noting down your main distress intolerance cycles.

Cycle 1

What is a common **trigger**? _____

What **emotions** result? _____

What **beliefs** and thoughts are you aware of that you have about this?

What is the level of **distress** you often encounter as a result? 0 – 10 _____

What **behaviour** do you do to cope with this distress?

What are the **intended consequences** of this? _____

What are the **unintended consequences** of this? _____

Cycle 2

What is a common **trigger**? _____

What **emotions** result? _____

What **beliefs** and thoughts are you aware of that you have about this?

What is the level of **distress** you often encounter as a result? 0 – 10 _____

What **behaviour** do you do to cope with this distress?

What are the **intended consequences** of this? _____

What are the **unintended consequences** of this? _____

The really good news is that there is an alternative to distress intolerance. And you guessed it – it is distress tolerance. And it is a skill. And like any other skill, you can learn it. That is what we will cover in Part 2.

This Handout is adapted from the Centre for Clinical Interventions modules.