



MENTAL HEALTH SURVIVAL GUIDE:

10 SKILLS FOR MAINTAINING
YOUR MENTAL HEALTH
DURING THE HOLIDAYS



EHN CANADA

INTRODUCTION

The holidays can be a challenging time for everyone, full of family and social obligations. This holiday season will bring additional new challenges, as things will be very different due to the COVID pandemic.

Many of the skills below are from the dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) repertoire. They are practical skills that help you deal more effectively with the challenges you experience in your life. There are four categories of DBT skills:

Mindfulness

Mindfulness improves your ability to be more aware of your emotional, psychological, and physiological state.

Interpersonal effectiveness

Interpersonal effectiveness helps you effectively communicate with people to ensure your needs are met and your boundaries are respected.

Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation allows you to manage your emotions in your daily life to keep you functioning effectively.

Distress tolerance

Distress tolerance allows you to survive crisis situations and avoid reacting in ways that are destructive or extreme.



MINDFULNESS

Skill #1: Stay in wise mind to make effective decisions

The DBT concept of “wise mind” describes a mind that balances reason and emotion to make wise decisions. The reasonable mind is driven by logic, the emotional mind is driven by feelings—wise mind takes the valuable features of the reasonable mind and the emotional mind, and integrates them.

While it’s important to acknowledge your feelings, it’s equally important to be mindful and not let your emotional mind take over. Call in your reasonable mind to help you stay grounded in reality. Remember that the holiday season is just for a few weeks—the related stresses are temporary and they will pass.

Staying in wise mind will help you make the most effective decisions and produce the best outcomes for yourself and the people around you. This will help you and everyone else have the best holiday season possible.



INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Skill #2: Use DEARMAN to communicate effectively to get your needs met and maintain your boundaries

Everyone is experiencing similar challenges this holiday season. Communicating effectively when you need something or when you want to say “no” will help minimize conflicts between yourself and other people. The DEARMAN skills provide an effective process for reaching mutual understanding with other people about things you want and things you don’t want.

People often forget that being able to say “no” is as important as being able to ask for what you need. Agreeing to things when you want to say “no” can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Say “no” when you need to say “no”—your friends and family will understand if you can't participate in every project and activity.

(D)escribe

Start by describing the facts of the situation, as you see them. “Facts” means things that you can directly observe, at this stage avoid don’t include your reactions, feelings, interpretations, or desires.



(E)xpress

After you've described the facts, express how you feel about them using "I" statements (e.g. "I feel sad"). "I" statements communicate that you accept responsibility for your feelings. They help ensure that the other person doesn't feel that you're accusing them and react defensively. Be sure you're clear about what you're feeling (i.e. which emotions), how intensely you're feeling them, and why you think you're feeling that way. This information will help the other person understand your needs better.

(A)ssert

Assertively communicate, by asking for your need simply and directly, or by saying "no" firmly, depending on the situation. Avoid indirect or ambiguous language—no beating around the bush, euphemisms, sugar coating, or hedging. Also, remember that you don't need to qualify or justify anything when you're asserting your needs or boundaries.

(R)einforce

Reinforce means clearly communicating to the other person how giving you what you need, or respecting your boundaries, will benefit you, them, and the relationship between the two of you.

(M)indful

Staying mindful will help you to maintain focus on the topic at hand and not become distracted. Do your best to resist any attempts by the other person to divert the conversation. This includes staying calm and not reacting if they try to talk tangential topics that you find hurtful or insulting.



(A)ppear Confident

Regardless of how you feel on the inside, present yourself as though you feel confident. Do this by keeping your head up, standing or sitting up straight, making direct eye contact, and speaking loudly and clearly. Keep in mind that it's okay if you feel nervous or scared—but showing it will often make you less persuasive to the other person. Also, keep in mind that there's a fine line between appearing too apologetic or conciliatory and appearing too arrogant.

(N)egotiate

Remember that you aren't demanding anything, you're asking for something. Be willing to propose alternative solutions that satisfy your needs, or ways of sticking to your "no" and satisfying the other person's needs in some other way that's acceptable for you. Also, engage the other person to contribute to the negotiation by offering potential solutions as well.

Be forgiving and compassionate

Even if you follow the DEARMAN skills to the letter, sometimes you will experience conflicts, and sometimes things won't work out to your satisfaction. Practice compassion, and try to be forgiving toward others and also toward yourself. This holiday season is especially challenging for everyone and people are not always at their best.



EMOTION REGULATION

Skill #3: Being mindful of your emotions makes it easier to let go

It's normal to sometimes feel lonely or sad during the holiday season, especially this year. Many of the normal holiday gatherings with friends and family that we typically enjoy will likely be different or absent this year.

Being mindful of the emotions you're feeling means observing, describing, and letting yourself feel them rather than trying to control, suppress, or distract yourself from them. Trying to suppress or ignore an emotion won't make it go away and can often increase your suffering. Allowing yourself to feel it and acknowledging it is often the most effective path to freeing yourself from it.

Acknowledge any feelings of grief, loss, frustration, or any other negative emotions that may come up for you during the holidays this year. Don't judge the emotion or yourself for having it. At the same time, once you have fully felt it, don't cling or hold onto it—be willing to let it go. Remember, you are not your emotion.



DISTRESS TOLERANCE

Skill #4: Practice radical acceptance to reduce your suffering

The holiday season will be different this year and we can't change that, but we can accept the reality of it. Radical acceptance is fully accepting the reality of an unpleasant situation with your mind and body. It means letting go of fighting reality and opening yourself to experiencing reality as it is in the moment.

Radical acceptance is important because rejecting or denying reality doesn't change reality—it just limits your ability to adapt and problem solve. Remember, radical acceptance doesn't mean you approve of a situation, it just means that you don't fight it and make it worse. Accepting reality helps you make peace with it and also allows you to perceive the situation more accurately.

This holiday season, try accepting the reality of unpleasant situations. Focus on understanding the reasons behind them. How did they happen and why? Remember that pain cannot be avoided. Accepting reality and allowing yourself to feel the negative emotions that result, such as bitterness, anger, sadness, or shame, is a necessary step before you can let go of those emotions and be free of them.



Skill #5: STOP yourself before you do something you'll regret

The holiday season can sometimes bring up strong emotions. To avoid acting impulsively in ways that you might later regret, try using the STOP skill.

(S)top

When you feel your emotions are taking over and you might act in a way that's out of control—literally stop, freeze, or pause in any way you can. Some people find it useful to visualize a big red stop sign right in front of their face. This is a skill you can practice and get good at before you're in a situation where you really need to use it.

(T)ake a step back

Give yourself a moment. Take a breath. If necessary, remove yourself physically from the situation for a few minutes.





(O)bserve the situation

Observe and understand what's actually happening. Who's involved? What are they saying or doing? What are you feeling and why? Understand the facts first without making assumptions or jumping to conclusions.

(P)roceed mindfully

Before you act, make sure you clearly understand your objectives—what do you want to get out of the situation, or what do you want to prevent from happening? What actions will likely help you achieve your objectives and what actions will likely be counterproductive?

Skill #6: Use self-soothing when you're feeling overwhelmed

If you feel painful emotions that are threatening to overwhelm you, try doing something that feels nice. Soothe yourself through an activity or experience that is pleasant to one or more of your senses—seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, tasting. The following are some examples of things that you can use for self-soothing:

- **Seeing:** a beautiful flower; stars at night; a dance performance
- **Touching:** a hot bath; sitting in a comfy chair; running your hand along smooth wood or leather
- **Hearing:** sounds of nature (waves, birds, rain, etc.); your favourite song; humming a soothing tune
- **Smelling:** a scented candle; your favourite scented bath or body product; walking in nature and inhaling deeply
- **Tasting:** your favourite food; a warm cup of tea; a food that you feel is a special treat



Skill #7: Use TIP to calm extreme emotions

TIP skills can be effective ways to quickly calm yourself down when you're feeling extreme emotions such as anger or anxiety, when other skills aren't working for you. TIP skills can be effective in these situations because they directly affect your physiology, work very quickly, and don't require a lot of thinking. (There's intentionally only one "P" in "TIP" because paired muscle relaxation can be used together with paced breathing.)

(T)ipping facial temperature

Immerse your face in cold water, press ice or an ice pack against your face, or splash your face with cold water. Use tipping facial temperature when you can't sleep due to ruminating or anxiety. Warning: do not use tipping facial temperature if you have a below-normal heart rate due to a medical condition.

(I)ntense exercise

Intense aerobic exercise for at least 20 minutes can have a rapid positive effect on your mood by helping your physiology self-regulate. An easy example is running up and down stairs. If you're familiar with what it feels like, or if you use a heart rate monitor, you'll want to get your heart rate to 70% of your maximum. Use intense exercise when you're angry, ruminating, or if you feel depressed in the morning and need to lift your mood and feel more motivated.

(P)aced breathing

At its simplest, paced breathing is when you breathe in a way such that your exhale is longer than your inhale. Paced breathing helps calm you down by increasing activation of your parasympathetic nervous system. A good place to start is inhaling for 4 seconds, and then exhaling for 8 seconds, for every breath. Breathe in and out through your nose, if possible. If you like, you can also try adding a pause after the inhale. Use paced breathing especially when you're feeling intense anxiety.

(P)aired muscle relaxation

Tense your muscles as you inhale, and relax them as you exhale. You can focus on a particular group of muscles or try this with your whole body. Be mindful of the sensations in your body as you practice this skill. With each exhalation, you will be able to relax your muscles more and more. This helps you release tension in your body and reduce the bodily sensations of intense negative emotions. Use paired muscle relaxation whenever intense emotions are causing you to feel physical tension in your body.



ADDITIONAL HELPFUL SKILLS



The following skills are not specifically from the DBT repertoire, but they are complementary and can also help you get through the holidays in a way that's more pleasant and satisfying.

Skill #8: Plan effectively for success

Think ahead of all the things you'd like to do during the holidays and plan how you're going to accomplish them. Allocate specific days and times for shopping, baking, holiday crafts, connecting with friends, and other activities. Consider whether you can shop online for things that you need. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list.

Planning will help you avoid stressful, last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients or items. And make sure to line up help for meal preparation and cleanup. Use a weekly planner to ensure that you have adequate time for activities and also adequate time between them to rest and recharge. Too much activity can result in feeling overwhelmed; too little can result in feeling lonely.

When you're planning your days, also don't forget HALT (hungry, angry, lonely, tired). These are all risk factors for triggering negative emotions and moods, or for triggering a relapse if you're in recovery from addiction. To minimize the risk of HALT factors, make plans that ensure you're doing the following:

- Eating healthy food regularly
- Avoiding exposure to too many stressors that might trigger anger or frustration
- Spending sufficient time connecting with others to minimize loneliness
- Getting enough good quality sleep

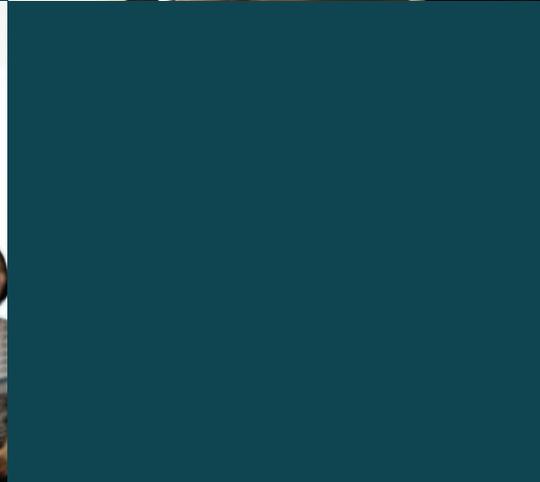
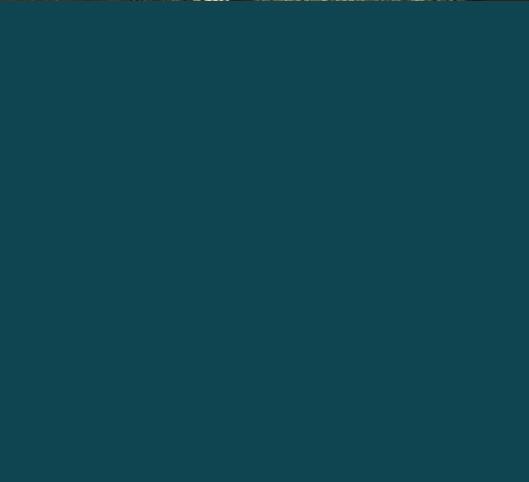
In addition to careful planning, always try to be mindful and notice when HALT factors start affecting you, so that you can address them early, before they become bigger problems.

You can print out and use the following page to plan one week at a time. Alternatively, if you prefer an online solution, Google Calendar is easy to use and has many useful features like reminders.



Skill #9: Practice gratitude to stay focused on the positives

This year will be different than past holiday seasons and it's easy to focus on the bad things and forget about the good things. It can be helpful to intentionally practice gratitude for the positives in your life, both big and small. You can print out and use the following gratitude journal page to write down all the people and things that you're grateful to have in your life. And remember, practicing gratitude works best when you do it every day.



GRATITUDE JOURNAL

MORNING GRATITUDE

Before you begin your day, list 10 things you're grateful for.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

WHAT I'M LEARNING FROM MY CHALLENGES

List three obstacles and what you're learning from them

1.

What I'm learning:

2.

What I'm learning:

3.

What I'm learning:

PEOPLE I'M GRATEFUL FOR

List 5 people who made your life a little happier today. These could be friends, family, or strangers!

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

THE BEST PART OF MY DAY

Choose one moment of your day that made you happy and focus on it for 5 minutes before bed

Skill #10: Reach out and connect

Despite the need to maintain physical distance this holiday season, it's more important than ever to stay connected to your social support network. This can take many forms, including the following:

- Virtual self-help groups—there are always many 12
- Step drop-in groups available over the holiday season
- Religious or spiritual organizations (e.g. temple, mosque, church)
- Video calls with your loved ones
- Community events online—for example, the Santa Claus Parade is online this year
- Volunteering for community agencies that require help with meal delivery, food banks, etc.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP

If you need professional help with your mental health or substance use during the holidays, don't hesitate to reach out to us—we're here for you.



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WE'RE HERE WHEN YOU NEED US.

GIVE US A CALL WHEN YOU'RE READY TO HEAL:

1 866-690-0429