



Linden Oaks

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

A part of Edward-Elmhurst Healthcare



Coping Strategies to Regulate Anxiety: An Introduction to Distress Tolerance

Laura Koehler, Psy.D.

Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Linden Oaks

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

A part of Edward-Elmhurst Healthcare

Definition of Anxiety

- "A feeling of worry, nervousness or unease typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome." (Merriam-Webster's)
- Anxiety is a normal emotion and common experience.
- It is one of the most basic of human emotions.
- In general, anxiety serves to motivate and protect an individual from harm or unpleasant consequences.

When Anxiety Becomes a Problem

- Constant or excessive anxiety disrupts their daily activities and quality of life
- Moves you away from your values:
 - ✓ Friendships/family relationships/role-modeling
 - ✓ Education
 - ✓ Religion/spirituality
 - ✓ Self-care
 - ✓ Hobbies/interests
- Anxiety disorders are so common that more than 1 in every 10 Americans will suffer with one at some point in their lives.

Sources of Anxiety in Schools

- A situation in which physical safety is at risk
- A situation in which self-worth is threatened
- Concern about physical appearance
- A new situation
- Judgment or evaluation by others
- Frustrating subject matter
- Excessive classroom demands
- Classroom tests
- Concern about the future

Signs of Anxiety

- Intense physical sensations, like stomach aches or headaches
- Asking to stay home from school
- Leaving class frequently to go to social workers office or bathroom
- Unwilling to engage in school related activities (homework, clubs, sports)
- Struggles with concentration/focus/retrieving information

Effects of Anxiety on Learning

- Decreased ability to pay attention and concentrate to what needs to be learned.
- Decreased ability to process information effectively (e.g., organizing or elaborating on it).
- Decreased ability to retrieve information and demonstrate skills that have been previously learned.

School Refusal versus School Truancy (Freemont, 2003)

School Refusal (Anxiety)	School Truancy
Severe emotional distress about attending school	Lack of excessive anxiety or fear about attending school
Parents are aware of absence, child tries to persuade parents to allow child to stay home	Absence is concealed from parents
Absence of antisocial behaviors	Frequent antisocial behavior, such as lying, breaking rules or stealing
Child usually wants to stay home, as they consider it safe and secure	Child prefers to be away from home
Child expresses willingness to do schoolwork, however anxiety may present itself while completing it	Lack of interest in schoolwork and unwillingness to conform to academic expectations

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy

- Developed by Marsha M. Linehan, Ph.D. from the University of Washington, Seattle
- Dr. Linehan focused treatment on
 - ✓ Emotional sensitivity
 - ✓ Management of high risk behaviors
- DBT is an organized, systematic approach to enhance decision making

Goals of Skills Training

- General goal: to learn and refine skills in changing behavioral, emotional, and thinking patterns associated with problems in living, that is, those causing misery and distress
- Behaviors to decrease:
 - ✓ Interpersonal chaos
 - ✓ Labile emotions, moods
 - ✓ Impulsiveness
 - ✓ Confusion about self, dysregulation

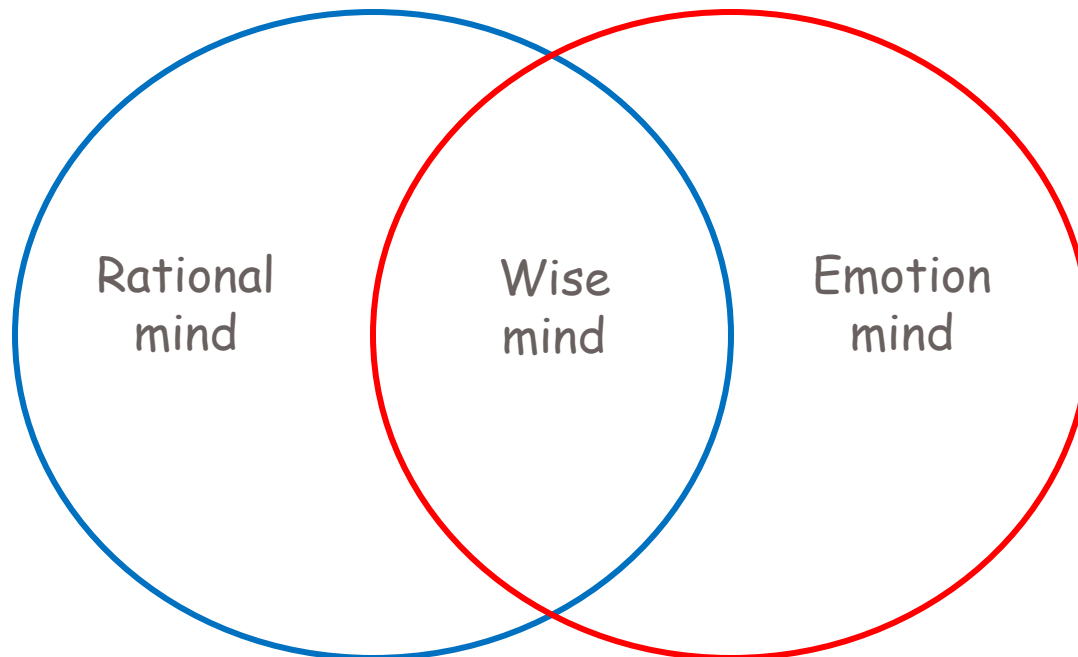
The Core Four Skills

- Mindfulness
- Interpersonal Effectiveness
- Emotion Regulation
- Distress Tolerance



- Wise Mind

Wise Mind



Emotion Regulation

- Many individuals experience emotional dysregulation in that they are frequently emotionally intense and labile. They can become intensely angry, frustrated, depressed, anxious, etc. very quickly, they hold on to that high level of emotion for a long time, and it can take a very long time to come down from the emotional experience.
- Emotion regulation skills work towards keeping individuals at lower emotional levels.
- Goals of Emotion Regulation:
 - ✓ Understand emotions you experience and decrease the frequency of unwanted emotions
 - ✓ Decrease emotional suffering
 - ✓ Reduce emotional vulnerability

Distress Tolerance

- If individuals avoid discomfort (unwanted thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, urges, memories, etc.) then their tolerance level will decrease.
- Distress tolerance emphasizes learning to bear pain skillfully by allowing to make space for it.
- Goals of Distress Tolerance
 - ✓ Survive emotional situations
 - ✓ Accept reality
 - ✓ Become free of having to satisfy the demands of any unhealthy urges

Avoidance Results in Emotion Dysregulation and Decreases Tolerance to Distress

- As an individual opts to avoid discomfort, they systematically reduce their tolerance level for discomfort, thereby making the world more and more uncomfortable, until things that were once slightly stressful are now perceived as overwhelming and completely unapproachable.
- As their tolerance level decreases, their urge to avoid intensifies, resulting in a negative self-sustaining pattern that ultimately reduces functioning over time and results in emotional dysregulation.

Increasing Tolerance Levels and Restoring Emotion Regulation

- Exposure is the number one, most effective and quickest way to increase someone's tolerance level.
- Therefore, expectations should be set above the individual's comfort level, while still allowing them the opportunity to be successful.
- Natural consequences for not meeting expectations should be incurred.
- If the individual is shielded from appropriate consequences, their motivation for functioning often decreases.

1st Step: Creating an Emotion Ladder

- The individual identifies different levels of their emotions by creating a ladder.
- The ladder is a scale of physical sensations/urges/impulses/thoughts that individuals report they experience when they have anxiety, depression, anger, etc.
- The scale is from 1 to 10 with 10 being the most amount of the emotion that individuals have ever experienced.
- Individuals identify a crisis zone. The typical crisis zone is between 7 and 10, however it does vary.

Example: Anxiety Ladder

Common Physical Sensations, Urges and Impulses

- Heart palpitations
- Chest tightness
- Numbness/tingling
- Fidgeting
- Short of breath
- Dizziness
- Blurred or distorted vision
- Nausea
- Sweating
- Butterflies stomach
- Having a lump in your throat
- Headaches
- Difficulties concentrating
- Crying
- Suicidal thoughts/plans/actions
- Self harm urges/behaviors
- Substance use
- Restrict/binge eat
- Aggressive urges/acts
- Avoidance/isolation
- Run away/hide
- Nap/sleep

ANXIETY LADDER

10	Self harm behaviors
9	Panic attack
8	Self harm urges
7	Stomach aches / nausea
6	Chest tightness / heavy breathing
5	Heart racing
4	Muscle tension in neck and shoulders
3	Racing thoughts
2	Playing with clothes and hair
1	Leg or foot tapping

Emotion Regulation Skills

- Observe and Describe Emotions
- Reducing Vulnerability to Emotion Mind and Build a Life Worth Living
 - ✓ Accumulate Positive Experiences
 - ✓ Build Mastery
 - ✓ Cope Ahead of Time with Emotional Situations
 - ✓ PLEASE; Taking Care of your Body
- Increasing Mindfulness to Current Emotion to Manage Difficult Emotions
- Taking Opposite Action to Change Emotional Response
- Applying Distress Tolerance Techniques

Observe and Describe Emotions

- Broadening one's repertoire of emotion labels
- Learning to accurately describe the context in the which the emotion occurred
- Tapping into one's interpretations of the emotional experience
- Exploring the dialectics of the emotion
- The aftermath of the emotional experience

Accumulating Positive Experiences

- Individuals are encouraged to increase the number of pleasurable activities in order to increase the ability to access positive emotions
- Value exploration and taking action by identify goals to move towards them
- Short term: increase pleasant events each day that prompt positive emotions
- Long term: make changes in your life so that positive events will occur more often

Build a life worth living.

Build Mastery

- Engage in at least one activity per day to increase a sense of accomplishment
- Gradually increase difficulty over time

Cope Ahead of Time with Emotional Situations

- Describe the situation that may prompt problem behavior
- Decide coping skills to be used
- Imagine the situation, including coping effectively
- Practice calming skills after imagining scenario

Taking Care of your Body (PLEASE)

- Treat Physical Illness
- Balance Eating
- Avoid Mood-Altering Substances
- Balance Sleep
- Get Exercise

Increasing Mindfulness to Current Emotion

- Observe your emotion: notice its presence, step back, get unstuck
- Experience your emotion as wave: don't push it away, hold on to it, or amplify it
- Remember that you are not your emotion: do not act on your emotion
- Practice loving your emotion: don't judge instead practice willingness and acceptance

Taking Opposite Action

- Change the emotion by acting opposite to its action urge
 - ✓ Fear: do what you are afraid of doing
 - ✓ Guilt/Shame: repair the transgression, accept the consequences, and then let it go
 - ✓ Sadness: get active, do things that make you feel confident
 - ✓ Anger: do something nice rather than mean or attacking or imagine sympathy for the other person rather than blame

Distress Tolerance Skills

- **Acceptance Strategies** are skills to reduce suffering by letting go of struggles and engaging in life:
 - ✓ Willingness
 - ✓ Turning the Mind Towards Acceptance
 - ✓ Radical Acceptance
- **Crisis Survival Skills** focus on tolerating painful events, urges, impulses, unwanted thoughts, feelings when individuals cannot control the situation
 - ✓ STOP
 - ✓ TIPP
 - ✓ Distracting (ACCEPTS)
 - ✓ Improve the Moment (IMPROVE)
 - ✓ Self-Soothing
 - ✓ Thinking of Pros and Cons

Acceptance Strategies

- **Willingness:** moving body towards values while carrying any discomforts (unwanted thoughts, feelings and physical sensations) lightly
- **Turning the Mind:** the mind and body are more willing to move towards values however the mind continues to struggle
- **Radical Acceptance:** letting go of things you cannot control, as well as pain creates suffering only when you refuse to accept the pain
 - ✓ Pain x lack of acceptance = degree of suffering

STOP

- Stop
- Take a step back: practice breathing exercises
- Observe: thoughts, feelings, urges, situations, other people
- Proceed mindfully: move towards values and let wise mind make decisions

TIPP to Change Your Body Chemistry

- Tip the Temperature of your face with cold water
 - ✓ "Dive response" to slow heart rate and reduce blood flow to nonessential organs so it flows to brain and heart
- Intense exercise
- Paced breathing
- Paired with muscle relaxation

Distracting (ACCEPTS)

- **Activities:** exercise, hobbies, games, sports, walk dog, jumping jacks, ride bike, active video games, dance, jump rope, yoga, high knees
- **Contributing:** volunteer, make a gift, surprise someone, chores, cook/bake, help team mate, coach, babysit, call friend/talk about them
- **Comparison:** moving towards values vs avoidance, day 1 of treatment vs current progress, unhealthy urges vs healthy behaviors
- **Emotions:** joke book, comedies, music, quotes, bubble bath, body scan
- **Pushing Away:** mentally stepping back from situation by using imagination, such as pain in box, emotion draining from body, defusion
- **Thoughts:** reading, homework, puzzles, paint, ABC game, word searches, Sudoku, cross words, count backwards by 13, 20 questions, I spy
- **Sensations:** hold ice in hand (touch), spicy food (taste), loud music (sound), spices (smell), optical illusions (sight)

IMPROVE the Moment

- **Imagery**: imagine relaxing scene, imagine coping, fantasy, nature, memories, vacation, dance routines, moving towards values, sport plays
- **Meaning Making**: identify values underneath the distress, explore reasons to be willing to experience discomfort
- **Prayer/Meditation**: connect with higher power, increase in trust, support, hope, contact with present, calm physical sensations, grounding
- **Relaxation**: body scan, yoga, breathing exercises, walking, 4 square breathing, singing, dancing, get fresh air, play with hair/jewelry/clothes
- **One Thing in the Moment**: bring self back to present moment by doing one thing at a time, 100% focus, use 5 senses to get grounded
- **Vacation**: (1) 15-20 minute break, (2) practice skill (3) return to experience
- **Encouragement**: self-cheerlead, quotes, poems, DBT phrases, song lyrics, encouraging words from family and friends

Self-Soothe

- **Vision:** flowers, candle/watch flame, food, art, pictures of family/friends/pets, star gaze, walk/drive mindfully, you tube videos, books, dance performances, television, movies, celebrities, nature
- **Hearing:** listen to soothing music, sounds of nature (waves, birds, rainfall, leaves rustling), sing your favorite song, play musical instrument, friends/family voices, audio books
- **Smell:** favorite perfume or cologne, lotion, spray fragrance in the air, scented candles, potpourri, bake cookies/bread/cupcakes, cook favorite meal, mindfully walk in nature, wax melts
- **Taste:** favorite meal, soothing drinks (herbal tea, hot cocoa, chocolate milk), treat yourself to a dessert, mints, gum, water, hard candy, chocolate. *remember to eat and/or drink mindfully
- **Touch:** bubble bath, pet dog/cat, fresh clothes from dryer, get a massage, soak your feet, put lotion on, cold compress on forehead/back of neck, soft material, brush hair/run fingers through hair, hug family member/friend, fidget toy/stress ball/bendy stick, small stuffed animal

Distress Tolerance Exercise: Crisis Kit/Self-Soothe Kit/Skills Kit

- Crosswords/word searches/Sudoku/logic puzzles
- Pictures of family/friends/pets
- Favorite smelling lotion/perfume/cologne
- Chap stick/lip gloss
- Gum/mints/candy
- Fidget toy (stone/squishy toy/cloth/coins)
- Ear buds/playlist of high energy songs/soothing songs
- Deck of playing cards
- Silly putty/Play-doh
- Pen/paper/journal
- Coloring pages/markers/crayons
- Cinnamon stick/tea bags/wax melts
- Book/magazine/jokes/poetry
- Shell for ocean sound plus fidget
- Inspirational quotes/lyrics/poems
- Travel sound machine
- Water bottle

Distress Tolerance Exercise (cont.): Index Card of Skills

- 4 square breathing, follow your breath, value breathing, count your breaths
- Watch thoughts
- ABC game
- 20 questions, I Spy, tic tac toe
- DBT phrases: ride the wave, get out of your future, move towards values
- Count backwards by 7's from 1,000
- Exercise: jumping jacks, high knees, push-ups
- Imagine calming scenes, nature, moving towards values
- You Tube videos of animals or babies, watch clips of movies or television shows
- 5/4/3/2/1 with five senses
- Splash cold water on face

Book Recommendations

- Parenting Your Anxious Child with Mindfulness and Acceptance by Christopher McCurry, Ph.D.
- Parenting a Child Who Has Intense Emotions by Pat Harvey and Jeanine Penzo
- The Expanded Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Training Manual by Lane Pederson, Psy.D.

Contact Information

- Linden Oaks Behavioral Health
 - ✓ Assessment & Referral Center (ARC):
630-305-5027
 - ✓ Laura Koehler: lkoehler@edward.org