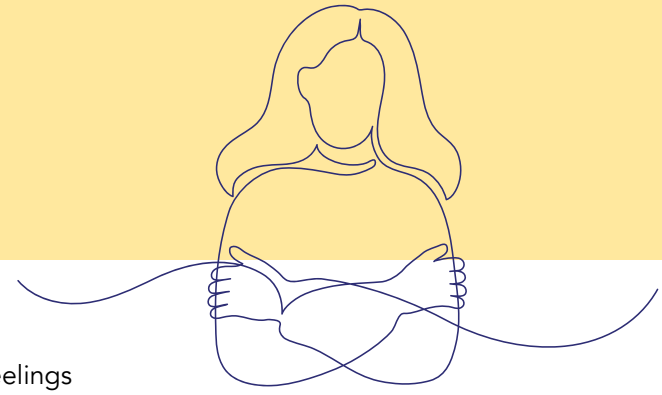
Self-harm alternatives for adolescents



Sometimes people hurt themselves, or self-harm, to deal with hard feelings or stressful things that happen in their lives. This often happens when no one has taught them how to recognize, talk about or express those feelings in healthier ways.

Learning new ways to cope with tough emotions can help reduce urges to self-harm and support healing over time. Noticing what you're feeling and challenging the thoughts that push you toward hurting yourself can make a real difference. Getting help from a therapist or another trusted professional can also be a helpful step. Stopping self-harm is easier when you have safer ways to express your feelings and get through hard moments.



What are some reasons that people self-harm?

- To feel in control of body/mind
- Relieve stress or pressure
- Express feelings
- To cope with a history of trauma
- Sometimes there is no distinct reason
- Feels good/energy rush
- Cope with anxiety/negative feelings

Where do these feelings and urges come from?

The Cornell Research Program on Self Injury and Recovery provided the following questions to help you identify the negative feelings or situations that lead to self-injury:

- What was going on in my life when I first began to injure myself?
- How do I feel just before I want to injure myself?
- What are my habits and routines? Am I always in the same place or with a particular person when I get the urge to injure myself?
- Do I always feel the same emotion when I get the urge to injure myself?
- How can I better deal with the situations that trigger me?

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I want to stop self-harming, but what can I do instead?

Ignoring an urge to self-harm can be difficult, but having several, ready to use, distractions or substitute behaviors can allow for the urge to subside. The Cornell Research Program on Self Injury and Recovery recommends matching the coping skill that you choose to how you are feeling at the moment. Below is a list of distractions and substitute behaviors that align with certain emotions.

Feeling angry

- Squeeze ice
- Do something that will give you a sharp sensation, like eating lemon
- Flatten aluminum cans for recycling, seeing how fast you can go
- Hit a punching bag
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow-fight style
- Rip up an old newspaper or phone book
- Make clay models and smash them
- Throw ice against a brick wall hard enough to shatter it
- Dance
- Clean
- Exercise
- Stomp around in heavy shoes

Craving sensation/ feeling empty or unreal

- Squeeze ice
- List the many uses for a random object (For example, what are all the things you can do with a twist-tie?)
- Interact with other people
- Put a finger into a frozen food (like ice cream)
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root
- Take a cold bath
- Stomp your feet on the ground
- Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.

Feeling sad or depressed

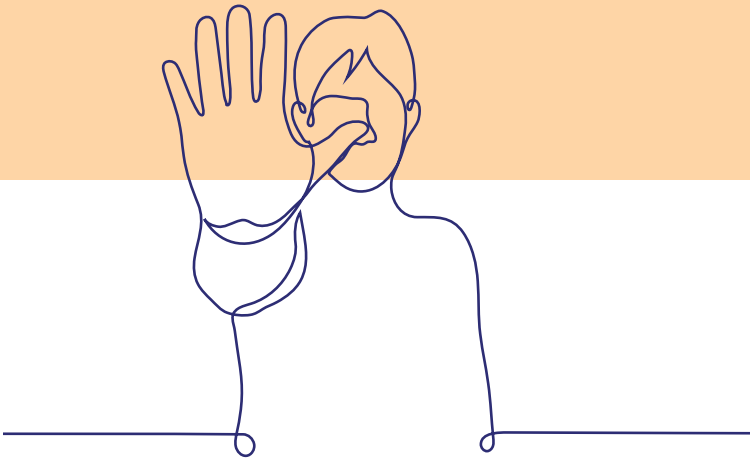
- Do something slow and soothing
- Take a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles
- Curl up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book
- Give yourself a present
- Hug a loved one or stuffed animal
- Play with a pet
- Make a list of things that make you happy
- Do something nice for someone else
- Light sweet-smelling incense
- Listen to soothing music
- Call a friend and just talk about things that you like
- Make a tray of special treats
- Watch TV or read
- Visit a friend

Feeling guilty or like a bad person

- List as many good things about yourself as you can
- Read something good that someone has written about you
- Talk to someone that cares about you
- Do something nice for someone else
- Remember when you've done something good
- Think about why you feel guilty and how you might be able to change it

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STOP skill



The STOP skill is a dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) skill that helps a person recognize they are in distress, regulate emotions and move forward thoughtfully. Distress tolerance skills don't aim to make everything better; the goal is to decrease the intensity of the emotion, so that you can make more effective choices.

S – Stop

Freeze your body for 3 seconds

- Put your feet on the floor
- Drop your shoulders
- Don't react yet

T – Take a breath

Slow your body down

- One slow breath in
- One slow breath out
- Repeat three times

O – Observe

Notice without judging

What am I feeling in my body? What emotion is here? What thoughts are showing up?

P – Proceed mindfully

Choose what helps, not what hurts

- What would help future me?
- What's one safe choice I can make right now?

"When might I need STOP?"

- ☐ During an argument
- ☐ When I get a triggering text
- ☐ When I feel overwhelmed in class
- ☐ When I want to react immediately
- ☐ Other: _____

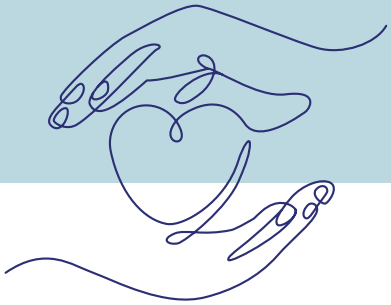
"What are some physical signs of distress for me?"

- ☐ Heart racing
- ☐ Obsessive thoughts/overthinking
- ☐ Urges to self harm
- ☐ Urges to act impulsively
- ☐ Other: _____

STOP doesn't fix everything—it allows you to reset and move forward with intention.

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Self-soothing with your five senses



Self-soothing means calming your nervous system using your five senses. This is another dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) skill that can help you better tolerate distress, while decreasing urges to self-harm. Distress tolerance skills don't aim to make everything better; the goal is to decrease the intensity of the emotion, so that you can make more effective choices.

When emotions are intense, your thinking brain goes offline. Using your senses helps your body feel safer, which helps your mind slow down.

This skill is especially helpful when you feel:

- Overwhelmed
- Anxious
- Angry
- Urges to react quickly
- Shut down or disconnected

You don't need to fix everything. You just need to lower the intensity a little.

1. **Sight** (Things you can see)

How sight helps: Looking at something calming or interesting can shift your focus and slow your thoughts.

Examples:

- Watch a calming YouTube video (nature, aquarium, clouds)
- Look at photos that make you feel safe or happy
- Light a candle and watch the flame
- Organize something visually satisfying
- Look outside and count five different colors

My sight ideas:

1.
2.
3.

2. **Sound** (Things you can hear)

How sound helps: Music and steady sounds can regulate your heartbeat and breathing.

Examples:

- Listen to a favorite song (calm or empowering)
- Play white noise or rain sounds
- Put on a comfort TV show in the background
- Listen to a podcast you enjoy
- Sit quietly and notice five different sounds

My sound ideas:

1.
2.
3.

3. **Smell** (Scents that calm you)

How smell helps: Certain smells send calming signals directly to your brain.

Examples:

- Lightly scented lotion
- Essential oils (lavender, peppermint)
- Fresh laundry
- A favorite candle
- Smelling a hoodie that feels comforting

My smell ideas:

1.
2.
3.

4. **Taste** (Safe, comforting flavors)

How taste helps: Strong or pleasant flavors can ground you in the present moment.

Examples:

- Mint or gum
- Sour candy (to shift focus)
- Warm tea or hot chocolate
- A favorite snack eaten slowly
- Cold water with lemon

My taste ideas:

1.
2.
3.

5. **Touch** (Physical sensations)

How touch helps: Physical sensations can calm or reset your nervous system quickly.

Examples:

- Wrap up in a soft blanket
- Take a warm shower
- Hold ice or splash cool water
- Pet an animal
- Use a stress ball or fidget
- Put your feet flat on the floor and press down

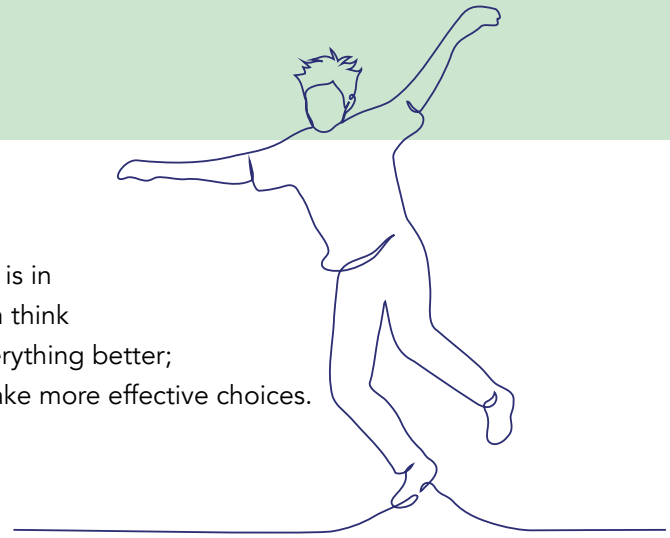
My touch ideas:

1.
2.
3.

Self-soothing isn't about avoiding feelings.
It's about helping your body feel safe enough to handle them.

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TIPP skill



TIPP is another DBT skill that helps you calm your body quickly when emotions are intense. When you're overwhelmed, your nervous system is in survival mode. TIPP works by changing your body chemistry so you can think more clearly. Remember, distress tolerance skills don't aim to make everything better; the goal is to decrease the intensity of the emotion, so that you can make more effective choices.

TIPP stands for:
T – Temperature
I – Intense exercise
P – Paced breathing
P – Paired muscle relaxation

These are not long-term solutions. They're reset buttons.

T – **Temperature** (Cool your system down)

Changing your body temperature can quickly calm your stress response.

Try:
- Splash cold water on your face
- Hold an ice cube in your hand
- Put a cold pack on your cheeks
- Step outside into cool air
- Hold a cold water bottle to your face

TIP
Cold signals your brain to slow your heart rate.

When I could use this:

I – **Intense exercise** (Burn off stress energy)

When emotions are high, your body is full of adrenaline. Moving helps release it.

Try:
- 30–60 seconds of jumping jacks
- Wall sits
- Push-ups
- Running in place
- Fast stair climbing
- Dancing hard to one song

TIP
You don't need a full workout. Just enough to feel your heart rate rise.

My go-to quick movement:

P – **Paced breathing** (Slow it down)

Slower breathing tells your nervous system that you're safe.

Try:

- Inhale for four, exhale for six
- Box breathing (4-4-4-4)
- Breathe in slowly through your nose, out through your mouth
- Make your exhale longer than your inhale

TIP
Longer exhales = stronger calming effect.

Breathing pattern I like:

P – **Paired muscle relaxation** (Release tension)

Tense a muscle group for five seconds, then release.

Try:

- Clench fists ⇨ release
- Shrug shoulders ⇨ drop them
- Tighten legs ⇨ relax
- Scrunch face ⇨ soften

TIP
Notice the difference between tight and relaxed.

Muscle area that holds my stress:

When should I use TIPP?

Check what fits:

- ☐ When I feel like I might explode
- ☐ When I'm panicking
- ☐ When I want to react immediately
- ☐ When urges feel intense
- ☐ When I'm overwhelmed

Before & after check-in

Before TIPP, my emotion level (0–10):

After trying one TIPP skill:

Did it:

- ☐ Lower intensity
- ☐ Help a little
- ☐ Not much yet (may need practice)

My 60-Second emergency plan

If my emotions spike, I will:

1.
2.
3.

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