



Cornell Research Program on Self-Injurious Behavior in Adolescents and Young Adults

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Distraction Techniques and Alternative Coping Strategies

Who is this for?

Those who struggle
with self-injury

What is included?

Identifying negative
feelings and
situations related
to self-injury

Distraction and
substitution
techniques

Self-injury is sometimes used as a way of coping with negative events and feelings. It is often used as a result of not having learned how to identify or express difficult feelings in a more healthy way. Finding new ways of coping with difficult feelings can help to suppress the urges that lead to self-injury and may help in the recovery process. Focusing on identifying feelings and challenging the thoughts that lead to self-injury can be helpful. Seeking outside professional assistance or engaging in individual therapy may be a good idea as well. Stopping is easier if you can find other ways of expressing or coping with your feelings.

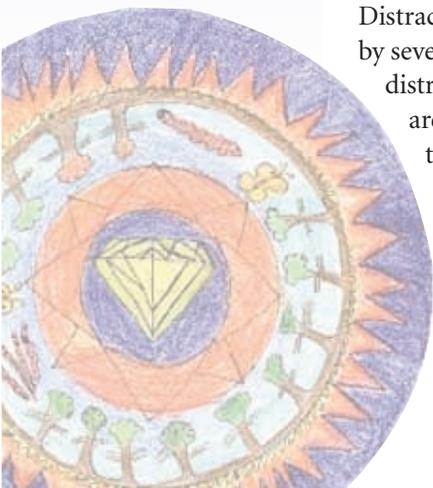
You can ask yourself the following questions which may help you to identify the negative feelings or situations that lead to self-injury:

- 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?

You may want to keep a diary in which you write down your feelings at different times so that you can better answer these questions.

I want to stop self-injuring but I still have urges. What do I do instead?

Distract yourself or use a substitution behavior. Many report that just delaying an urge to self-injure by several minutes can be enough to make the urge fade away. One way to increase the chances of a distraction or substitution helping calm the urge to self-injure is to match what you do to how you are feeling at the moment. It may be helpful to keep a list on hand so that when you get the urge to self-injure you can go down the list and find something that feels right to you in the moment. See examples of alternatives on the next page.



Feeling angry:

- 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.
- Dance.
- Clean.
- Exercise.
- Bang pots and pans.
- Stomp around in heavy shoes.
- Play handball or tennis.
- Run, jump, skip, lift weights, ride your bike, swim – anything that helps you move the angry energy through and out of your body.

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.
- Baby yourself somehow.
- 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.
- Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt.
- Call a friend and just talk about things that you like.
- Make a tray of special treats.
- Watch TV or read.
- Visit a friend.

Craving sensation/Feeling empty or unreal:

- 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.
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root.
- Rub liniment under your nose.
- 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.

“... I made a mix of 10 happy songs I would listen to sometimes when I was rollerblading to put myself in a good mood... It was uplifting music. It was good. It was like ‘Walking on Sunshine’ and ‘It’s Raining Men’ and stuff like that. I was like, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t listen to depressing, abusive music when I’m feeling like this. Maybe I should try to get in a better mood.’”

– Interviewee

Wanting focus:

- Do a task that is exacting and requires focus and concentration.
- Eat a raisin mindfully. Notice how it looks and feels. Try to describe the texture. How does a raisin smell? Chew slowly, noticing how the texture and even the taste of the raisin change as you chew it.
- Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can.
- Choose a random object, like a twist-tie, and try to list 30 different uses for it.
- Pick a subject and research it on the web.

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.

Other General Distraction and Substitution Techniques:

Reach Out to Others

- Phone a friend.
- Call 1-800-DONT-CUT.
- Go out and be around people.

Express Yourself

- Write down your feelings in a diary.
- Cry – crying is a healthy and normal way to express your sadness or frustration.
- Draw or color.

Keep Busy

- Play a game.
- Listen to music.
- Read.
- Take a shower.
- Open a dictionary and learn new words.
- Do homework.
- Cook.
- Dig in the garden.
- Clean.
- Watch a feel-good movie.

Do Something Mindful

- Count down slowly from 10 to 0.
- Breathe slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Focus on objects around you and thinking about how they look, sound, smell, taste and feel.
- Do yoga.
- Meditate.
- Learn some breathing exercises to aid relaxation.
- Talk to someone you trust and care about. It doesn't matter what you talk about, just talk.
- Find a child to play with. Ask to play a game.
- Do something kind for someone.
- Think about all the details of a time or place that made you happy – remember how all of your senses felt.
- Punch pillows.
- Scream into a pillow.
- Yell or sing at the top of your lungs.
- Exercise.

FYI

USEFUL LINKS:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/coping_skills.shtml
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm
<http://www.selfinjury.com>

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