Oasis Mental Care

EMOTIONAL TOOLKIT

Emotional first aid kit

A plan prepared in advance for the hard moments

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Print and write by hand

TO BEGIN

What this kit is for

When distress rises high enough, the part of the mind that plans shuts down. That is not a failure of character: it is physiology. This kit is meant to be put together **beforehand**, on a calm day, and used later, when you are in no state to invent anything.

The tools here come from the distress tolerance module of dialectical behavior therapy, a model developed by psychologist Marsha Linehan. Their purpose is not to solve the problem or to make you feel good: it is to **bring the intensity down far enough** that you can think again.

What to expect, and what not to

- They help you get through a peak of distress without making decisions you will regret.
- They work better if you practice them while you are well. A skill you never rehearsed does not show up on its own at the worst moment.
- **They are not treatment.** They are a bridge to your next appointment, not a substitute for it.
- They are not meant to make an emotion disappear. Emotions come down on their own; this only helps you hold on while they do.
- If you are in crisis or having thoughts of harming yourself, this guide is not the right resource. Call or text **988**.

READ THIS FIRST

Before you use cold

The first tool in this kit uses cold water on the face. It is effective, and for that same reason it deserves care: **it acts directly on heart rhythm**.

Do not practice the cold technique without checking with your health professional first if you:

- Have an **arrhythmia** or any disorder of heart rhythm.
- Have a **pacemaker**.
- Have **uncontrolled high blood pressure** or known heart disease.
- Have a **seizure disorder**.
- Have, or have had, an **eating disorder**.
- Take **beta-blockers** or any other medication that affects heart rate.

Cold water on the face triggers the *dive reflex*: the body slows the heart rate and redirects blood toward the core organs. In a healthy person that effect is safe and brief. On top of an existing cardiac vulnerability it can trigger an arrhythmia, because cold activates the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems at the same time — what the literature calls *autonomic conflict*.

If any of those apply to you, that is fine: the other three tools in the kit carry no such restriction and work just as well. Bring it up at your next appointment.

FOR THE PEAK

The four quick tools

They are ordered from fastest to slowest. You do not need all of them: one is usually enough.

1

Cold on the face

Fill the sink with cold water and hold your face in it for twenty to thirty seconds, holding your breath. If you would rather not submerge, hold a cold gel pack or a wet cloth over your eyes and cheekbones while leaning forward. Repeat once or twice. **Check the warning about cold first.**

2

Short, intense movement

Climb stairs, walk fast or do squats for five to ten minutes, until you are out of breath. Spend the energy anxiety left loose in your body. If you have an injury, a heart condition or you are pregnant, check first.

3

Paced breathing

Breathe more slowly than usual and make the out-breath longer than the in-breath — for example, in for four and out for six — for one or two minutes. The long exhale is the part that matters.

4

Release the body in parts

Tense one muscle group as you breathe in, hold for five seconds, and let go completely as you breathe out. Work from feet to head. As you release, notice the difference between tense and loose: that difference is what teaches the body to come down.

When you feel yourself disconnecting

If what shows up is not distress but a sense of unreality — as if you were behind glass, or watching yourself from outside — the tools above are not the right ones. What helps is coming back through the senses, one at a time, out loud if you can.

5-4-3-2-1 sensory inventory

- **Five** things you can **see**. Name them in detail: the colour, the texture.
- **Four** things you can **touch**. Actually touch them.
- **Three** things you can **hear**. Include the background sounds.
- **Two** things you can **smell**.
- **One** thing you can **taste**.

It is not magic, and it is not distraction: it is filling attention with information from the present, which is exactly what dissociation stops registering. If you lose count, start again. Losing count is part of the exercise.

FILL THIS IN ON A CALM DAY

My personal kit

This is the part that makes the kit yours. Write it now, while you are well, because in the hard moment you will not be able to work it out.

My early warning signs

What shows up before things get hard: sleeping badly, withdrawing, a clenched jaw, checking your phone constantly, not eating.

What has helped me before

Concrete things that brought the intensity down another time, however small they seem.

What does NOT help me

Just as important. The things that feel like relief at the time and leave you worse afterwards.

Who I can call

Write them down now. Hunting for a number while you are unwell is one more barrier you do not need.

Name	Relationship	Phone	Best time to call

My sentence for the hard moment

Something true you want to remind yourself of. It does not have to be beautiful, it has to be true. For example: “this has happened before and it passed”.

IMMEDIATE HELP

If this is not enough

There are moments when no self-regulation tool is enough, and recognising that in time is itself a form of self-care. These resources are free, available twenty-four hours a day, and you do not need insurance or to be anyone's patient.

- **988** — Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Call or text. Support is available in more than 240 languages.
- **911** — Medical emergency, if there is immediate risk to life.
- **Crisis Text Line** — Text **HOME** to **741741**. A trained person answers, usually within a few minutes. Useful when you cannot speak out loud.
- **SAMHSA** — 1-800-662-4357. Free, 24 hours, in English and Spanish, for mental health and substance use.

And if what you are looking for is scheduled psychiatric care, write to us. We are here for you.

References

- *Diving responses and cold-water face immersion: resting heart rate affects the cardiac response*. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2023. Documents the bradycardia of the dive reflex.
- *Autonomic conflict during cold water immersion*. Physiological literature on simultaneous sympathetic and parasympathetic activation and its relation to arrhythmia in people with pre-existing cardiac pathology.
- *TIPP skills: procedure, evidence and contraindications*. Clinical review of the distress tolerance skills, including the cardiac, seizure and eating-disorder contraindications reproduced in this guide.
- *Feasibility and Efficacy of Brief DBT Intervention for Adults: A Systematic Review*. 2025.
- *Dialectical Behavioral Therapy for Adults with Mental Illness: A Review of Clinical Effectiveness and Guidelines*. CADTH, NCBI Bookshelf.
- Linehan, M. The distress tolerance module these four tools come from was developed by psychologist Marsha Linehan.

Sources last reviewed: August 2026. If you are unsure whether any of these techniques is right for you, bring it up at your next appointment.