Handouts for Reality
Acceptance Skills
DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT 10
(Distress Tolerance Worksheets 8–12a)

Overview:
Reality Acceptance Skills

These are skills for how to live a life that is not the life you want.

RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

TURNING THE MIND

WILLINGNESS

HALF-SMILING AND WILLING HANDS

ALLOWING THE MIND:
MINDFULNESS OF CURRENT THOUGHTS
Radical Acceptance

(When you cannot keep painful events and emotions from coming your way.)

WHAT IS RADICAL ACCEPTANCE?

1. Radical means all the way, complete and total.
2. It is accepting in your mind, your heart, and your body.
3. It’s when you stop fighting reality, stop throwing tantrums because reality is not the way you want it, and let go of bitterness.

WHAT HAS TO BE ACCEPTED?

1. Reality is as it is (the facts about the past and the present are the facts, even if you don’t like them).
2. There are limitations on the future for everyone (but only realistic limitations need to be accepted).
3. Everything has a cause (including events and situations that cause you pain and suffering).
4. Life can be worth living even with painful events in it.

WHY ACCEPT REALITY?

1. Rejecting reality does not change reality.
2. Changing reality requires first accepting reality.
3. Pain can’t be avoided; it is nature’s way of signaling that something is wrong.
4. Rejecting reality turns pain into suffering.
5. Refusing to accept reality can keep you stuck in unhappiness, bitterness, anger, sadness, shame, or other painful emotions.
6. Acceptance may lead to sadness, but deep calmness usually follows.
7. The path out of hell is through misery. By refusing to accept the misery that is part of climbing out of hell, you fall back into hell.

Radical Acceptance: Factors That Interfere

**RADICAL ACCEPTANCE IS NOT:**
Approval, compassion, love, passivity, or against change.

**FACTORS THAT INTERFERE WITH ACCEPTANCE**

- 1. You don’t have the skills for acceptance; you do not know how to accept really painful events and facts.
- 2. You believe that if you accept a painful event, you are making light of it or are approving of the facts, and that nothing will be done to change or prevent future painful events.
- 3. Emotions get in the way (unbearable sadness; anger at the person or group that caused the painful event; rage at the injustice of the world; overwhelming shame about who you are; guilt about your own behavior).

- Other: ____________________________
DISTRESS TOLERANCE HANDOUT 11B

(Distress Tolerance Worksheets 9, 9a)

Practicing Radical Acceptance Step by Step

- Observe that you are questioning or fighting reality (“It shouldn’t be this way”).

- Remind yourself that the unpleasant reality is just as it is and cannot be changed (“This is what happened”).

- Remind yourself that there are causes for the reality. Acknowledge that some sort of history led up to this very moment. Consider how people’s lives have been shaped by a series of factors. Notice that given these causal factors and how history led up to this moment, this reality had to occur just this way (“This is how things happened”).

- Practice accepting with the whole self (mind, body, and spirit). Be creative in finding ways to involve your whole self. Use accepting self-talk—but also consider using relaxation; mindfulness of your breath; half-smiling and willing hands while thinking about what feels unacceptable; prayer; going to a place that helps bring you to acceptance; or imagery.

- Practice opposite action. List all the behaviors you would do if you did accept the facts. Then act as if you have already accepted the facts. Engage in the behaviors that you would do if you really had accepted.

- Cope ahead with events that seem unacceptable. Imagine (in your mind’s eye) believing what you don’t want to accept. Rehearse in your mind what you would do if you accepted what seems unacceptable.

- Attend to body sensations as you think about what you need to accept.

- Allow disappointment, sadness, or grief to arise within you.

- Acknowledge that life can be worth living even when there is pain.

- Do pros and cons if you find yourself resisting practicing acceptance.
TURNING THE MIND is like facing a fork in the road. You have to turn your mind toward the acceptance road, and away from the road of rejecting reality.

TURNING THE MIND is choosing to accept.

The CHOICE to accept does not itself equal acceptance. It just puts you on the path.

TURNING THE MIND, STEP BY STEP

1. **OBSERVE** that you are not accepting. (Look for anger, bitterness, annoyance; avoiding emotions; saying “Why me?” “Why is this happening?” “I can’t stand this,” “It shouldn’t be this way.”)

2. Go within yourself and **MAKE AN INNER COMMITMENT** to accept reality as it is.

3. **DO IT AGAIN**, over and over. Keep turning your mind to acceptance each time you come to the fork in the road where you can reject reality or accept it.

4. **DEVELOP A PLAN** for catching yourself in the future when you drift out of acceptance.
Willingness

Willingness is readiness to enter and participate fully in life and living.

Find a WILLING RESPONSE to each situation.

Willingness is DOING JUST WHAT IS NEEDED:
- In each situation.
- Wholeheartedly, without dragging your feet.

Willingness is listening very carefully to your WISE MIND, and then acting from your WISE MIND.

Willingness is ACTING WITH AWARENESS that you are connected to the universe (to the stars, people you like and don’t like, the floor, etc.).

Replace WILLFULNESS with WILLINGNESS.

- Willfulness is REFUSING TO TOLERATE the moment.
- Willfulness is refusing to make changes that are needed.
- Willfulness is GIVING UP.
- Willfulness is the OPPOSITE OF “DOING WHAT WORKS.”
- Willfulness is trying to FIX EVERY SITUATION.
- Willfulness is insisting on BEING IN CONTROL.
- Willfulness is ATTACHMENT TO “ME, ME, ME” and “what I want right now!”

WILLINGNESS, STEP BY STEP

1. OBSERVE the willfulness. Label it. Experience it.
2. RADICALLY ACCEPT that at this moment you feel (and may be acting) willful. You cannot fight willfulness with willfulness.
3. TURN YOUR MIND toward acceptance and willingness.
4. Try HALF-SMILING and a WILLING POSTURE.
5. When willfulness is immovable, ASK, “WHAT’S THE THREAT?”

Situations where I notice my own:

Willfulness: __________________________
Willingness: __________________________
Half-Smiling and Willing Hands

Accepting reality with your body.

HALF-SMILING

1st. Relax your face from the top of your head down to your chin and jaw. Let go of each facial muscle (forehead, eyes, and brows; cheeks, mouth, and tongue; teeth slightly apart). If you have difficulty, try tensing your facial muscles and then letting go. A tense smile is a grin (and might tell your brain you are hiding or masking your real feelings).

2nd. Let both corners of your lips go slightly up, just so you can feel them. It is not necessary for others to see it. A half-smile is slightly upturned lips with a relaxed face.

3rd. Try to adopt a serene facial expression. Remember, your face communicates to your brain; your body connects to your mind.

WILLING HANDS

Standing: Drop your arms down from your shoulders; keep them straight or bent slightly at the elbows. With hands unclenched, turn your hands outward, with thumbs out to your sides, palms up, and fingers relaxed.

Sitting: Place your hands on your lap or your thighs. With hands unclenched, turn your hands outward, with palms up and fingers relaxed.

Lying down: Arms by your side, hands unclenched, turn your palms up with fingers relaxed.

Remember, your hands communicate to your brain; your body connects to your mind.
Practicing Half-Smiling and Willing Hands

1. HALF-SMILE WHEN YOU FIRST WAKE UP IN THE MORNING.

Hang a branch, any other sign, or even the word “smile” on the ceiling or wall, so that you see it right away when you open your eyes. This sign will serve as your reminder. Use these seconds before you get out of bed to take hold of your breath. Inhale and exhale three breaths gently while maintaining a half-smile. Follow your breaths. Add willing hands to your half-smile, or practice willing hands alone.

2. HALF-SMILE DURING YOUR FREE MOMENTS.

Anywhere you find yourself sitting or standing, half-smile. Look at a child, a leaf, a painting on a wall, or anything that is relatively still, and smile. Inhale and exhale quietly three times.

3. HALF-SMILE WITH WILLING HANDS WHILE YOU ARE LISTENING TO MUSIC.

Listen to a piece of music for 2 or 3 minutes. Pay attention to the words, music, rhythm, and sentiments of the music you are listening to (not your daydreams of other times). Half-smile while watching your inhalations and exhalations. Adopt a willing-hands posture.

4. HALF-SMILE WITH WILLING HANDS WHEN YOU ARE IRRITATED.

When you realize “I’m irritated,” half-smile or adopt a willing-hands posture at once. Inhale and exhale quietly, maintaining a half-smile or willing hands for three breaths.

5. HALF-SMILE IN A LYING-DOWN POSITION.

Lie on your back on a flat surface, without the support of mattress or pillow. Keep your two arms loosely by your sides, and keep your two legs slightly apart, stretched out before you. Maintain willing hands and a half-smile. Breathe in and out gently, keeping your attention focused on your breath. Let go of every muscle in your body. Relax each muscle as though it were sinking down through the floor, or as though it were as soft and yielding as a piece of silk hanging in the breeze to dry. Let go entirely, keeping your attention only on your breath and half-smile. Think of yourself as a cat, completely relaxed before a warm fire, whose muscles yield without resistance to anyone’s touch. Continue for 15 breaths.

6. HALF-SMILE IN A SITTING POSITION.

Sit on the floor with your back straight, or on a chair with your two feet touching the floor. Half-smile. Inhale and exhale while maintaining the half-smile. Let go.

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7. HALF-SMILE WITH WILLING HANDS WHILE YOU ARE CONTEMPLATING A PERSON YOU DISLIKE OR ARE ANGRY WITH.

- Sit quietly. Breathe and smile a half-smile. Hold your hands open with palms up.
- Imagine the image of the person who has caused you suffering.
- Regard the features you dislike the most or find the most repulsive.
- Try to examine what makes this person happy and what causes suffering in his or her daily life.
- Imagine the person’s perceptions; try to see what patterns of thought and reason this person follows.
- Examine what motivates this person’s hopes and actions.
- Finally, consider the person’s consciousness. See whether the person’s views and insights are open and free or not, and whether or not the person has been influenced by any prejudices, narrow-mindedness, hatred, or anger.
- See whether or not the person is master of him- or herself.
- Continue until you feel compassion rise in your heart like a well filling with fresh water, and your anger and resentment disappear. Practice this exercise many times on the same person.

Notes/Other times to half-smile and/or form willing hands:

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## Mindfulness of Current Thoughts

1. **OBSERVE YOUR THOUGHTS.**
   - As waves, coming and going.
   - Not suppressing thoughts.
   - Not judging thoughts.
   - Acknowledging their presence.
   - Not keeping thoughts around.
   - Not analyzing thoughts.
   - Practicing willingness.
   - Stepping back and observing thoughts as they run in and out of your mind.

2. **ADOPT A CURIOUS MIND.**
   - Ask, “Where do my thoughts come from?” Watch and see.
   - Notice that every thought that comes also goes out of your mind.
   - Observe but do not evaluate your thoughts. Let go of judgments.

3. **REMEMBER: YOU ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS.**
   - Do not necessarily act on thoughts.
   - Remember times when you have had very different thoughts.
   - Remind yourself that catastrophic thinking is “emotion mind.”
   - Remember how you think when you are not feeling such intense suffering and pain.

4. **DON’T BLOCK OR SUPPRESS THOUGHTS.**
   - Ask, “What sensations are these thoughts trying to avoid?” Turn your mind to the sensation. Then come back to the thought. Repeat several times.
   - Step back; allow your thoughts to come and go as you observe your breath.
   - Play with your thoughts: Repeat them out loud over and over as fast as you can. Sing them. Imagine the thoughts as the words of a clown, as recordings getting all tangled up; as cute animals you can cuddle up to; as bright colors running through your mind; as only sounds.
   - Try loving your thoughts.
Chapter 15: Distress Tolerance

Handout 15a: Practicing Mindfulness of Thoughts

**PRACTICE MINDFULNESS OF THOUGHTS BY OBSERVING THEM**

- 1. Notice thoughts as they come into your mind. As a thought comes into your mind, say “a thought has entered my mind.” Label the thought as a thought, saying, “The thought [describe thought] arose in my mind.” Use a gentle voice tone.

- 2. As you notice thoughts in your mind, ask, “Where did the thought come from?” Then watch your mind to see if you can see where it came from.

- 3. Step back from your mind, as if you are on top of a mountain and your mind is just a boulder down below. Gaze at your mind, watching what thoughts come up when you are watching it. Come back into your mind before you stop.

- 4. Close your eyes and scan your body for the first physical sensation that you notice. Then scan your mind for the first thought you notice. Shuttle back and forth between scanning for physical sensations and scanning for thoughts. Another time, replace scanning your body for physical sensations to scanning yourself for any emotional feelings. Then shuttle back and forth between an emotional feeling and a thought.

**PRACTICE MINDFULNESS OF THOUGHTS BY USING WORDS AND VOICE TONE**

- 5. Verbalize thoughts or beliefs out loud, using a nonjudgmental voice tone, over and over and over:
  - As fast as you can until the thoughts make no sense.
  - Very, very slowly (one syllable or word per breath).
  - In a different voice from yours (high- or low-pitched, like a cartoon character or celebrity).
  - As a dialogue on a TV comedy show (“You’ll never believe what thought went through my mind. I was thinking, ‘I’m a jerk.’ Can you believe that?”).
  - As songs, sung wholeheartedly and dramatically, in a tune that fits the thoughts.

**PRACTICE MINDFULNESS OF THOUGHTS WITH OPPOSITE ACTION**

- 6. Relax your face and body while imagining accepting your thoughts as only thoughts—sensations of the brain.

- 7. Imagine things you would do if you stopped believing everything you think.

- 8. Rehearse in your mind the things that you would do if you did not view your thoughts as facts.

- 9. Practice loving your thoughts as they go through your mind.

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PRACTICE MINDFULNESS OF THOUGHTS BY IMAGINING THAT YOUR MIND IS:

- 10. A conveyor belt, and that thoughts and feelings are coming down the belt. Put each thought or feeling in a box labeled with the type of thought that it is (e.g., worry thoughts, thoughts about my past, thoughts about my mother, planning what to do thoughts). Just keep observing and sorting thoughts into the labeled boxes.

- 11. A river, and that thoughts and feelings are boats going down the river. Imagine sitting on the grass, watching the boats go by. Try not to jump on the boat.

- 12. A railroad track, and that thoughts and feelings are train cars going by. Try not to jump on the train.

- 13. A leaf that has dropped off a tree into a beautiful creek flowing by you as you sit on the grass. Each time a thought or image comes into your mind, imagine that it is written or pictured on the leaf floating by. Let each leaf go by, watching as it goes out of sight.

- 14. The sky, and thoughts have wings and can fly through the sky. Watch as each flies out of sight.

- 15. The sky, and thoughts are clouds. Notice each thought-cloud as it drifts by, letting it drift out of your mind.

- 16. A white room with two doors. Through one door, thoughts come in; through the other, thoughts go out. Watch each thought with attention and curiosity until it leaves. Let go of judgments. Let go of analyzing thoughts and of figuring out if they fit the facts. As a thought comes into your mind, say, “A thought has entered my mind.”