

Distraction Techniques for Eating-Disorder Urges

A practical toolkit for difficult thoughts, feelings and moments

What distraction is - and what it is not

When an eating-disorder thought or urge becomes very loud, it can feel as though you have to act on it immediately. Distraction is a short-term coping strategy that deliberately moves your attention towards something safer while the intensity of the urge or emotion begins to change. Beat recommends having a ready-made list because it can be difficult to think of alternatives when distress is high.

Distraction is not a replacement for nourishment, medical care or eating-disorder treatment. It should not be used to avoid an agreed meal or snack. Instead, it can help you get through a difficult period without immediately acting on an eating-disorder behaviour, and can be especially useful after meals, around triggers or while waiting for support.

Start by noticing what you need

BORED	Choose something absorbing: a familiar programme, game, book, podcast, puzzle, craft, tidy-up task or change of scenery.
LONELY	Text or call somebody safe, sit near another person, put on a comforting voice in the background, spend time with a pet, or use a moderated support space.
ANGRY	Write uncensored feelings on paper, squeeze a stress ball, tear scrap paper, talk to somebody you trust, or choose a concentration task that interrupts rumination.
STRESSED	Ground through your senses, slow your breathing, break a task into smaller steps, use colouring or repetitive craft, or move to a quieter environment.
TIRED	Choose low-effort support: rest, soothing audio, a familiar programme, a warm shower, comfortable sensory input or quiet company. You do not have to turn every difficult moment into productivity.

Quick distractions for the first few minutes

The aim here is not to make the feeling disappear instantly. It is to create a small pause between the urge and the action. Urges can rise and fall like waves. Even a short delay can create room for another choice.

60 SECONDS	Name five things you can see. Put both feet on the floor. Describe the room in detail. Count backwards slowly. Hold a grounding object. Say out loud what you are doing right now.
2-5 MINUTES	Send a message, make a hot drink if appropriate to your recovery plan, step into another room, brush a pet, play one song, do a small puzzle, water a plant, organise a drawer or use a breathing exercise.
10-20 MINUTES	Watch part of a familiar programme, colour, knit, draw, shower, play a game, journal, phone somebody, listen to a podcast, do a gentle sensory activity or work on something that requires concentration.

After meals

Post-meal anxiety can be particularly intense. The NHS specifically suggests distraction after meals for people worried about purging. Choose activities that keep you supported and occupied without becoming compensatory exercise: a film, board game, conversation, craft, puzzle, music, sitting with somebody safe or another activity agreed in your recovery plan.

If you know the period after eating is difficult, plan before the meal. Decide where you will be, what you will do, who can be with you and what you will say if the urge becomes stronger. Removing the need to make decisions in the hardest moment can help.

Sensory and grounding distractions

SIGHT	Look for five objects of one colour, watch fish or clouds, use a calming lamp, look through photographs, colour or draw.
TOUCH	Use a soft blanket, grounding stone, textured object, putty, stress ball, hand cream or something cool or warm that feels safe.
SOUND	Create a recovery playlist, use an audiobook, podcast, nature sounds, radio or the voice of somebody you trust.
SMELL	Use a familiar safe scent, fresh air, flowers or another non-triggering smell that brings you back into the present.

When the eating-disorder voice is loud

Try naming the thought rather than automatically obeying it: 'I am having an eating-disorder thought' or 'This is an urge, not an instruction.' Beat suggests separating yourself from the eating-disorder voice and pairing triggers with alternative behaviours. You do not have to argue with every thought. Sometimes noticing it and redirecting attention is enough for the moment.

Create different lists for different energy levels

VERY LOW ENERGY	Familiar TV, audio, soft sensory item, simple phone game, breathing, lying down with music, texting a trusted person.
MEDIUM ENERGY	Colouring, journaling, puzzle, gaming, craft, sorting photographs, baking/cooking only if this is safe and appropriate for you, or a calm shared activity.
MORE ENERGY	A creative project, outing with somebody safe, gardening, learning something, organising a space or another absorbing activity. Avoid turning movement into compensation if exercise is part of your eating disorder.

Build a self-soothe box

Keep useful distractions somewhere easy to reach. Your box might contain a grounding object, colouring materials, a notebook, photographs, sensory items, a list of safe people, headphones, puzzle book, comforting scent, affirmations and a written reminder of why you are choosing recovery. Beat recommends making distraction easy to access rather than requiring lots of effort when you are already distressed.

When distraction is not enough

Distraction is one tool, not a test of whether you are trying hard enough. If urges are becoming stronger, you are repeatedly unable to stay safe, your eating disorder is escalating, or your physical health is deteriorating, tell somebody and contact your GP, eating-disorder team or another appropriate professional. In an emergency or immediate danger, use 999/A&E; NHS 111 can provide urgent advice when the situation is not immediately life-threatening.

A message from Maggie

If your mind is very loud right now, you do not have to solve your whole recovery today. Sometimes the task is simply to get through the next ten minutes without making things harder for yourself. Pick one thing from this guide. Let somebody sit with you. Change rooms. Put something familiar on. Hold something grounding. Give the urge time to move. And if you need more help than distraction can give you, please reach out. Needing support is not failure.

Warmly, Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy

My Distraction Toolkit

Fill this page in while things feel relatively calm, so you have ideas ready when eating-disorder thoughts or urges become louder.

My 2-minute distractions	
Things that absorb my attention	
Things that calm my senses	
People I can contact	
What helps me after meals	
What helps when I am alone	
Low-energy distractions	
My reminder to myself	

This toolkit is for coping and reflection. It is not a substitute for an eating plan, treatment plan or professional care.