

# Self-Harm Distractions

## A practical guide for getting through an urge safely

When the urge to self-harm becomes strong, it can feel as though you have to act immediately. Distraction is not about pretending that the pain is not there. It is about creating a little distance between the feeling and the action. Even ten minutes can give your nervous system time to settle and give you another choice.

## Start with safety

If you think you may seriously hurt yourself, have already injured yourself, or cannot keep yourself safe, seek urgent help. In the UK you can call 999 or go to A&E; in an emergency. You can also contact NHS 111, your GP, a trusted person, or Samaritans on 116 123. Do not stay alone with an immediate risk if you can safely be with someone.

## The pause - distract - delay approach

**Pause:** notice the urge without judging yourself. Put some physical distance between you and anything you could use to harm yourself. **Distract:** choose one activity that occupies your hands, attention, body or senses. **Delay:** tell yourself you will wait ten minutes before making any decision. When the ten minutes are over, repeat the process if you need to.

Remember: an urge can be intense without being permanent. You only need to work with the next few minutes, not solve everything at once.

# **Distractions for Different Kinds of Urges**

## **When your body feels agitated**

Walk around the room or outside, stretch, shake out your hands, do a short burst of movement, tidy one small area, fold washing, dance to one song, or hold a cushion tightly. The aim is to give restless energy somewhere safer to go.

## **When you feel numb or disconnected**

Use grounding: name five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell and one you can taste. Hold a cool drink, notice the texture of a blanket, smell a familiar hand cream, listen carefully to music, or describe the room around you in detail.

## **When your thoughts are racing**

Try a puzzle, counting backwards, an absorbing game, an audiobook, a familiar television programme, drawing, colouring, knitting, organising photographs, making a playlist or writing a list of everything currently circling in your mind.

## **When you need comfort**

Wrap yourself in a blanket, make a warm drink, sit with a pet, take a warm bath or shower, change into comfortable clothes, listen to a familiar voice, message someone safe, or choose a film or programme that feels predictable and reassuring.

## **When you need to express something**

Write uncensored thoughts on paper and then put the page away, draw the feeling as shapes or colours, write a letter you do not send, record a private voice note, make music, paint, or describe what you wish somebody understood about this moment.

# Build Your Own Distraction Toolbox

A distraction plan works better when it is prepared before a crisis. Keep a small physical box, phone note or printed list containing things that are genuinely accessible to you.

## Ideas to include

- Three people I can contact and how I prefer to contact them.
- Three activities that reliably hold my attention for at least ten minutes.
- Comforting sensory items: a soft fabric, scent, music, photographs or another safe grounding object.
- A short list of places where I feel safer or less isolated.
- Reasons to delay acting on the urge - people, pets, plans, values, responsibilities or future experiences that matter to me.
- Professional and crisis-support numbers saved in my phone.

## My ten-minute plan

1. Move away from anything I might use to hurt myself.
2. Tell someone, if I can: "I am having a difficult urge and I need some company."
3. Choose one sensory distraction and one attention-based distraction.
4. Set a ten-minute timer.
5. Check the urge again from 0-10. If it is still high, repeat the plan or seek more support.

You do not have to wait until an urge becomes unbearable before using support. Earlier intervention can make the next step easier.

# Understanding What Is Underneath the Urge

Self-harm can serve different functions for different people. For some it is linked with overwhelming emotion; for others it may interrupt numbness, communicate distress, create a sense of control, punish the self, or provide a temporary release. Understanding the function can help you find alternatives that meet the same need more safely.

## A gentle check-in

### **What happened just before the urge?**

Where was I? Who was I with? What was I thinking about?

### **What am I feeling in my body?**

Tightness, agitation, numbness, heat, heaviness, panic, exhaustion?

### **What emotion might be here?**

Anger, shame, sadness, fear, loneliness, rejection, frustration, overwhelm?

### **What do I need?**

Comfort, release, connection, rest, validation, space, safety, expression or practical help?

Try to treat the answers as information rather than evidence that you have failed. The goal is to become curious about patterns so that you can build more options over time.

## After an urge passes

Notice what helped, even if it only reduced the intensity slightly. Recovery is often built from small repetitions: delaying, reaching out, making the environment safer, understanding triggers and practising alternatives until they become easier to access.

# Support, Treatment and a Message From Me

You deserve support with the reasons behind self-harm, not simply pressure to stop the behaviour. A GP or mental-health professional can help assess risk and discuss appropriate support. Depending on your needs, therapy may explore emotional regulation, trauma, relationships, self-criticism, neurodivergence, coping patterns and the situations that make urges more likely.

Useful approaches can include safety planning, skills for emotional regulation, compassionate and person-centred therapy, CBT-informed work, DBT-informed skills, trauma-informed therapy where appropriate, and practical support around environmental or sensory stressors.

## A message from me

If self-harm has become one of the ways you cope, I want you to know that you do not have to explain everything perfectly before you deserve help. Sometimes the first step is simply recognising, “I am struggling and I need another way through this moment.” Distraction can create that first small space. From there, support can help you understand what is happening underneath and build choices that feel safer and more sustainable.

Please do not measure progress only by whether an urge appears. Progress can also be noticing it sooner, delaying, telling someone, using a distraction, making your environment safer, or choosing support. Those steps matter.

## UK support

**Emergency:** 999 or A&E; if there is immediate danger.

**NHS 111:** urgent health advice.

**Samaritans:** 116 123, 24 hours a day.

**Shout:** text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential text support in the UK.

**Your GP / mental-health team:** for assessment, ongoing support and treatment options.

## Space to Breathe Therapy

This guide is supportive information and is not a substitute for individual medical or emergency care.