

Coping with intense urges to self-harm

This kind of distraction isn't intended to cure the roots of your self-injury; you can't run a marathon when you're too tired to cross the room. These techniques serve, rather, to help you get through an intense moment of badness without making things worse for yourself in the long run. Use these interim methods to show yourself that you can cope with distress without permanently injuring your body. Every time you do you score another point and you make SI that much less likely next time you're in crisis. Deciding means breaking the cycle, forcing yourself to try new coping methods. You do have to force yourself to do this; it doesn't just come. You can't just think about new ways to cope -- when you pick up that knife or that lighter or get ready to hit that wall, you have to make a conscious decision to do something else. Even if you don't make that decision the next time, nothing can take away that moment of mastery. If you choose to hurt yourself next time, you will know that it is a choice, which implies the existence of alternative choices. It takes helplessness out of the equation.

Take a few moments and look behind the urge. What are you feeling? Are you angry? Frustrated? Restless? Sad? Craving the feeling of SI? Depersonalized and unreal or numb? Unfocused? Next, match the activity to the feeling. A few examples:

angry, frustrated, restless

(These strategies work better sometimes if you talk to the object you are cutting/tearing/hitting. Start slowly, explaining why you're hurt and angry. It's okay if you end up ranting or yelling; it can help a lot to vent feelings that way.)

- Slash an empty plastic soda bottle or a piece of heavy cardboard or an old shirt or sock.
- Make a soft cloth doll to represent the things you are angry at. Cut and tear it instead of yourself.
- Flatten aluminum cans for recycling, seeing how fast you can go. Or break sticks.
- Hit a punching bag.
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow-fight style or beat up the pillow.
- Rip up an old newspaper or phone book.
- On a sketch or photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do. Cut and tear the picture.
- Make Play-Doh or Sculpey or other clay models and cut or smash them.
- Get a few packages of Silly-Putty or something similar and squeeze it, bounce it off a wall, stretch it, snap it.
- Throw ice into the bathtub or against a brick wall hard enough to shatter it. Throw water balloons at the wall.
- Crank up some music and dance.
- Clean your room (or your whole house).
- Go for a walk/jog/run or play a sport like handball or tennis. Swim laps.
- Stomp around in heavy shoes.
- Play handball or tennis.

sad, soft, melancholy, depressed, unhappy

- Do something slow and soothing, like taking a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles, curling up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book, babying yourself somehow -- whatever makes you feel taken care of and comforted.
- Light sweet-smelling incense.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt. Put Band-Aids on the place you want to hurt.
- Call or visit a friend and just talk about things that you like.
- Make a tray of special treats and tuck yourself into bed with it and watch TV or read.

craving sensation, feeling depersonalized, dissociating, feeling unreal

Do something that creates a sharp physical sensation:

- Squeeze ice hard (this really hurts) or hold it where you want to burn. It hurts and leaves a slight red mark.
- Put a finger into a frozen food (like ice cream) or in a pitcher of ice, water, and salt for a few seconds.
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of gingerroot.
- Rub liniment under your nose.
- Slap a tabletop hard.
- Snap your wrist with a rubber band.
- Take a cold bath or shower.
- Stomp your feet on the ground.
- Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.

wanting focus

- Do a task (a computer game like Tetris, writing a computer program, needlework, etc.) that is exacting and requires focus and concentration.
- Eat a raisin mindfully. Pick it up, noticing how it feels in your hand. Look at it carefully; see the asymmetries and think about the changes the grape went through. Roll the raisin in your fingers and notice the texture; try to describe it. Bring the raisin up to your mouth, paying attention to how it feels to move your hand that way. Smell the raisin; what does it remind you of? How does a raisin smell? Notice that you're beginning to salivate, and see how that feels. Open your mouth and put the raisin in, taking time to think about how the raisin feels to your tongue. Chew slowly, noticing how the texture and even the taste of the raisin change as you chew it. Are there little seeds or stems? How is the inside different from the outside? Finally, swallow.
- Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can. Include everything: size, weight, texture, shape, color, possible uses, feel, etc.
- Pick a subject and research it on the web.

wanting to see blood

- Draw on yourself with a red felt-tip pen or lipstick.
- Take a small bottle of liquid red food coloring and warm it slightly by dropping it into a cup of hot water for a few minutes. Uncap the bottle and press its tip against the place you want to cut. Draw the bottle in a cutting motion while squeezing it slightly to let the food color trickle out.
- Draw on the areas you want to cut using ice that you've made by dropping six or seven drops of red food color into each of the ice-cube tray wells.
- Paint yourself with red tempera paint.

wanting to see scars or pick scabs

- Get a henna tattoo kit. You put the henna on as a paste and leave it overnight; the next day you can pick it off as you would a scab and it leaves an orange-red mark behind.

delaying tactics

- The fifteen-minute game: tell yourself that if you still want to harm yourself in 15 minutes, you can. When the time is up, see if you can go another 15.
- Make your tools hard to get at; commit to using only one particular set of tools and put them in a small box. Wrap the box completely in duct tape and attach a list of reasons not to hurt yourself to the outside. Put that box in another box and repeat, then put the package on a high, out-of-the-way shelf.
- If you cut, fill a gallon jug halfway with water, freeze it, put your tools in, then fill the jug with hot water and freeze again. Since you've already told yourself you will only use those things, when an urge comes you have the amount of time it takes for the ice to thaw to try other distractions.