



The Cornell Research Program  
on *Self-Injury and Recovery*

# Distraction Techniques and Alternative Coping Strategies

by Ericka Kilburn  
& Janis Whitlock

## Who is this for?

Those who struggle  
with self-injury

## What is included?

Identifying negative  
feelings and situations  
related to self-injury

Distraction and  
substitution techniques

**Self-injury is sometimes used** as a way of coping with negative events and feelings. It is often used as a result of not having learned how to identify or express difficult feelings in a more healthy way. Finding new ways of coping with difficult feelings can help to suppress the urges that lead to self-injury and may help in the recovery process. Focusing on identifying feelings and challenging the thoughts that lead to self-injury can be helpful. Seeking outside professional assistance or engaging in individual therapy may be a good idea as well. Stopping is easier if you can find other ways of expressing or coping with your feelings.

## You can ask yourself the following questions which may help you to identify the negative feelings or situations that lead to self-injury:

- What was going on in my life when I first began to injure myself?
- How do I feel just before I want to injure myself?
- What are my habits and routines? Am I always in the same place or with a particular person when I get the urge to injure myself?
- Do I always feel the same emotion when I get the urge to injure myself?
- How can I better deal with the situations that trigger me?

You may want to keep a diary in which you write down your feelings at different times so that you can better answer these questions.

## I want to stop self-injuring but I still have urges. What do I do instead?

Distract yourself or use a substitution behavior. Many report that just delaying an urge to self-injure by several minutes can be enough to make the urge fade away. One way to increase the chances of a distraction or substitution helping calm the urge to self-injure is to match what you do to how you are feeling at the moment. It may be helpful to keep a list on hand so that when you get the urge to self-injure you can go down the list and find something that feels right to you in the moment. See the following examples of alternatives.

### Feeling angry:

- Slash an empty plastic soda bottle or a piece of heavy cardboard or an old shirt or sock.
- Squeeze ice.
- Do something that will give you a sharp sensation, like eating lemon.
- 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.
- Hit a punching bag.
- Pick up a stick and hit a tree.
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow-fight style.

# Distraction Techniques and Alternative Coping Strategies

continued  
page 2 of 3

*"... I made a mix of 10 happy songs I would listen to sometimes when I was roller-blading to put myself in a good mood... It was uplifting music. It was good. It was like 'Walking on Sunshine' and 'It's Raining Men' and stuff like that. I was like, 'Maybe I shouldn't listen to depressing, abusive music when I'm feeling like this. Maybe I should try to get in a better mood.'"*

— Interviewee

- 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 clay models and cut or smash them.
- Throw ice into the bathtub or against a brick wall hard enough to shatter it.
- Dance.
- Clean.
- Exercise.
- Bang pots and pans.
- Stomp around in heavy shoes.
- Play handball or tennis.

## Feeling sad or depressed:

- Do something slow and soothing.
- Take a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles.
- Curl up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book.
- Baby yourself somehow.
- Give yourself a present.
- Hug a loved one or stuffed animal.
- Play with a pet.
- Make a list of things that make you happy.
- Do something nice for someone else.
- Light sweet-smelling incense.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt.
- Call a friend and just talk about things that you like.
- Make a tray of special treats.
- Watch TV or read.
- Visit a friend.

## Craving sensation/Feeling empty or unreal:

- Squeeze ice.
- List the many uses for a random object. (For example, what are all the things you can do with a twist-tie?)
- Interact with other people.
- Put a finger into a frozen food (like ice cream).
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of

ginger root.

- Rub liniment under your nose.
- Slap a tabletop hard.
- Take a cold bath.
- 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 that is exacting and requires focus and concentration.
- Eat a raisin mindfully. Notice how it looks and feels. Try to describe the texture. How does a raisin smell? Chew slowly, noticing how the texture and even the taste of the raisin change as you chew it.
- Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can.
- Choose a random object, like a twist-tie, and try to list 30 different uses for it.
- Pick a subject and research it on the web.

## Feeling guilty or like a bad person:

- List as many good things about yourself as you can.
- Read something good that someone has written about you.
- Talk to someone that cares about you.
- Do something nice for someone else.
- Remember when you've done something good.
- Think about why you feel guilty and how you might be able to change it.

# Distraction Techniques and Alternative Coping Strategies

continued  
page 3 of 3

## Other General Distraction and Substitution Techniques:

### Reach Out to Others

- Phone a friend.
- Call 1-800-DONT-CUT.
- Go out and be around people.

### Express Yourself

- Write down your feelings in a diary.
- Cry – crying is a healthy and normal way to express your sadness or frustration.
- Draw or color.

### Keep Busy

- Play a game.
- Listen to music.
- Read.
- Take a shower.
- Open a dictionary and learn new words.
- Do homework.
- Cook.

- Dig in the garden.
- Clean.
- Watch a feel-good movie.

### Do Something Mindful

- Count down slowly from 10 to 0.
- Breathe slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Focus on objects around you and thinking about how they look, sound, smell, taste and feel.
- Do yoga.
- Meditate.
- Learn some breathing exercises to aid relaxation.
- Concentrate on something that makes you happy: good friends, good times, laughter, etc.

### Release Your Frustrations

- Break old dishes.
- Rip apart an old cassette tape, smash the casing.
- Throw ice cubes at a brick wall.
- Throw eggs in the shower.
- Rip apart an old phone book.
- Smash fruit with a bat or hammer.
- Throw darts.
- Punch pillows.
- Scream into a pillow.
- Slam doors.
- Yell or sing at the top of your lungs.
- Exercise.

## If you still feel the urge to injure you might try:

- Putting stickers on the parts of your body you want to injure.
- Drawing slashing lines on paper.
- Drawing on yourself with a red felt-tip pen.
- Taking 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.
- Drawing 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.
- Painting yourself with red tempera paint.

## Useful Links:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental\\_health/coping\\_skills.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/coping_skills.shtml)  
[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self\\_injury.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm)  
<http://www.selfinjury.com>

## Suggested Citation

Kilburn, E. & Whitlock, J.L. (2009). *Distraction techniques and alternative coping strategies*. The Practical Matters Series, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. Cornell University. Ithaca, NY

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE: [www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu](http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu)**

This research was supported by the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station federal formula funds, received from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.