

Adult Mental Health Services  
Stabilisation Workbook 7

# Distraction and distancing: Learning to step back from difficult thoughts and feelings





## Introduction

This workbook is all about learning ways to distract and distance ourselves from difficult thoughts and feelings.

When feelings of distress become overwhelming, it is not always possible to change the situation (for example, what has happened in the past or what may be happening right now) in order to help ourselves feel better. In these situations, we need to find ways of tolerating our difficult thoughts and feelings, without using riskier or less helpful behaviours such as self-harm. Distraction and distancing are both methods for managing difficult thoughts and feelings in a more helpful way.

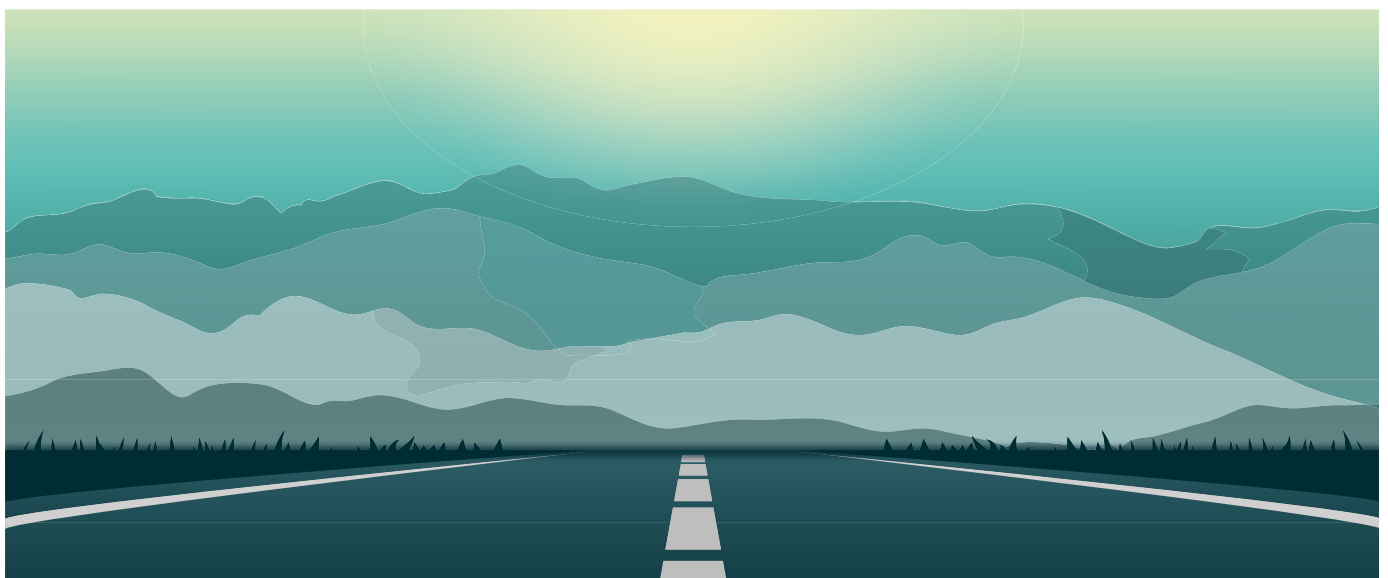
### Distraction

Distraction is all about finding ways to temporarily take our mind and body away from distressing thoughts and feelings, and re-orient our attention to something different. Most people already use some kind of distraction to help them manage distress. Over the course of this workbook, you will be introduced to a range of distraction methods that you might want to try in addition.

### Distancing

Distancing is about creating some space between you and the difficult thoughts and / or feelings. This is not to say that you ignore them, or try to get rid of them, but is about acknowledging they are there and taking a step back so you can deal with them later. Again, we will be introducing you to a range of different distancing methods later on in this workbook.

The strategies discussed in this section of the manual overlap and can be used alongside some of the strategies described in other sections of the manual, such as 'Mindfulness' and 'Grounding'.



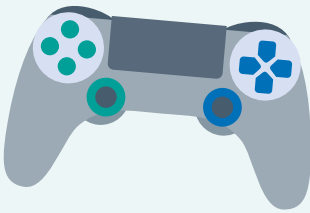
## Distraction strategies

We can categorise methods of distraction in three main ways: (1) distraction through **activity**, (2) distraction by **occupying the mind**, and (3) distraction through the use of **sensation**. A range of different ideas for distraction within each of these three categories has been provided below.



### Activities

Activities that take up your attention such as cleaning the house, tidying up, having a phone conversation, walking or any other type of exercise, gardening, writing, painting and dancing to loud music. The choice of activity doesn't really matter as long as it fits you and your lifestyle, and is active and engaging enough to hold your attention.



### Occupying the mind

Occupying your thoughts and engaging the mind with mental tasks and activities. This could include online games, reading, watching funny and feel good videos or movies, concentration exercises like counting back from 100 in 7s, counting your breaths, or looking through photographs of happy memories.



### Using sensations

Using sensations such as splashing your face with cold water, drinking something cold, using an ice cube on your skin, using an elastic band around your wrist and flicking it, smelling flowers, perfume or candles.



## General tips for distraction

Choose something you enjoy doing and that interests you if you can.

It may be helpful to choose a distraction that creates the opposite emotion to what you are feeling. For example, if you are angry and frustrated, you could try a relaxing activity. If you are very anxious, you could try something that helps you to feel safe and soothed or makes you feel more confident about yourself.

Activities such as reading or watching television work for some people but are too passive for others. In such cases, activities such as exercise, walking and tidying may work better. Give yourself time to practice and find the distraction techniques that work best for you.

It's a good idea to try and do distraction activities as mindfully as possible, which means giving them your full attention, focussing on the present moment, and only doing one thing at a time. Our minds will naturally wander away from the distraction task, but when you notice this you can gently bring it back to what you were doing. More information on this can be found in the 'Mindfulness' workbook.

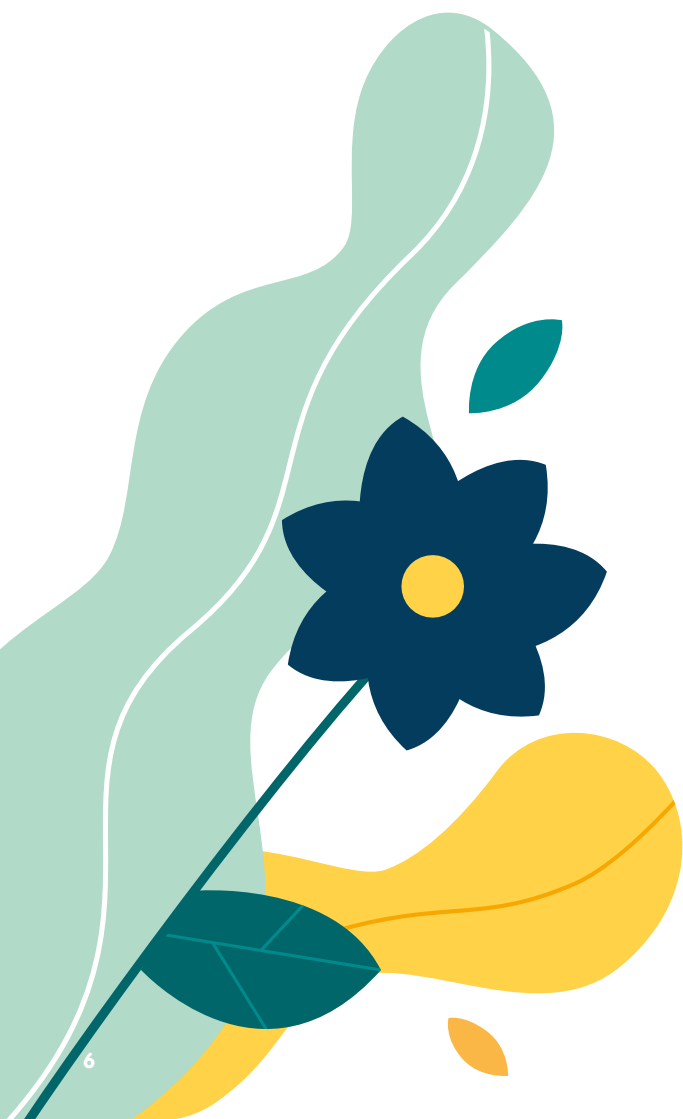


## Creating a distraction plan

As we have discussed in other sections of this manual, when we are very distressed it can be difficult to think rationally and decide how to help ourselves. It is therefore a good idea to have a personal distraction plan that you have prepared in advance, which you can access in times of distress to help you through that difficult moment.

Sometimes we may need to use several distraction strategies, one after the other, to get us through a difficult period. Other times, we may find that some of our distraction techniques are less helpful than they have been in the past. If you draw up a list of all your distraction strategies, you will have more options available to you in times of distress. You can then work through these strategies one by one, until the period of intense distress has passed or is feeling more manageable.

It will be important to keep this plan in a prominent place, where it is easy to find and ready for when you need it. You may wish to keep a copy in your soothing box (which is covered in the session on 'Soothing and Safety').



## My distraction plan

Remember to include a combination of distraction strategies (as discussed on page 4 of this workbook).

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2.

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4.

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10.

## Distancing strategies

The strategies below all describe different methods that you could try to create a temporary distance from difficult and intense thoughts and feelings. Distancing won't get rid of the difficult thoughts and feelings but enable you to go back to them at a different time, when you are feeling strong enough to manage them again.



### The container

You could try and place all of the intense feelings into an imaginary container that is strong enough to hold them all, to give some temporary emotional release. Imagine what this container looks like. How big is it? How does it close? Where do you leave it?



### Closing the book

You could try placing images, memories or emotions into an imaginary book of things that trouble you, and then close this book. Again take some time to imagine what this book looks like, what it feels like to close it, and where you are going to leave it after its been closed.



### Turning down the size with a remote

Imagine the distressing image, thought or sensation and place it on a TV screen. Now try and shrink the image so that it is in a small corner of the television, perhaps the size of a 50 pence piece. You can then use the remote to increase and reduce the size of the image. Try and increase it to a size that feels tolerable. Remember you can always reduce it again if needed.





### Writing or drawing the distress

You could try writing your difficult thoughts and feelings down on a piece of paper or drawing them out if this feels more helpful. This is similar to the 'closing the book' exercise, but this time you are physically doing the writing / drawing rather than imagining it. After you have done this, you can make a decision about what would be the most helpful way of distancing yourself from them. This may be folding up the paper and putting it in a drawer or different room. You may wish to rip it up and put it in the bin, down the toilet, or let the pieces blow away in the wind.

Try and practice each of the exercises in this section to develop your skills in distancing and find out which ones work best for you.







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Stabilisation Pack