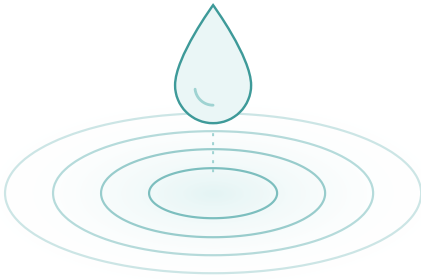


Cool Water for a Calmer Nervous System

A simple way to steady yourself when emotions run high



When emotions surge, the body speeds up: heart racing, breath quick, thoughts spinning. Cool water on the face can help the body **shift gears quickly**. It is one of the crisis-survival skills taught in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), useful for getting through an intense moment so you can think more clearly.

first A shift

The sudden coolness pulls attention out of spiralling thoughts and into your body.

then A slowing

Cool water on the face, with a brief held breath, can trigger the diving response, which slows the heart.

and A settling

With the body a little calmer, slow breathing and other skills become easier to use.

01 Ways to use cool water

Choose what feels comfortable and safe for you



Face in a bowl

Lean forward, hold your breath and place your face in cool water for 15–30 seconds, then breathe out slowly.



Splash your face

Cool water on eyes, cheeks and forehead, with slow breaths in between.



Cool pack

A cold pack wrapped in a cloth, held over your eyes and cheeks.



Hands and wrists

Run cool water over your hands and wrists, or hold a cold glass.



Cooler shower finish

A brief cooler finish to a normal shower. Warm up afterwards.

02 When, how and with care

WHEN IT CAN HELP

- ☐ Feeling panicky or overwhelmed
- ☐ A wave of intense emotion
- ☐ Racing, spiralling thoughts
- ☐ Before a difficult conversation
- ☐ Feeling flooded and unable to think
- ☐ A strong urge to act on impulse

FOR BEST RESULTS

- ☐ Use cool, not icy, water
- ☐ Start with 15–30 seconds
- ☐ Breathe out slowly afterwards
- ☐ Notice how your body feels
- ☐ Follow with another skill, such as paced breathing
- ☐ Practise when calm, so it's easier in a crisis

WITH CARE

- ☐ Check with your doctor first if you have a heart condition, a slow heart rate, take heart medication, or have an eating disorder
- ☐ Avoid if you have Raynaud's or poor circulation
- ☐ Skip ice baths and cold plunges unless medically advised
- ☐ Stop if you feel dizzy, faint or unwell

What we know

The **diving response** (a slowing of heart rate when the face meets cold water) is well documented in physiology. Cool water is widely used as a DBT crisis skill, but research testing it specifically for emotional distress is still limited. It is a short-term regulation tool, **not a treatment on its own**. Very cold full-body immersion carries real risks, including cold shock.

03 Trying it

Rate your distress from 0 (calm) to 10 (most distressed)

DAY · TIME	WHAT WAS HAPPENING	METHOD I USED	BEFORE → AFTER	WHAT I NOTICED

If you are having urges to harm yourself, please don't rely on this skill alone: follow your safety plan and reach out to someone you trust, a crisis line, or emergency services.

A cool moment can create a little space, and a little space can help you choose what comes next.