

STOP

DBT SKILLS · DISTRESS TOLERANCE

A four-step pause between an urge and an action

Strong emotions can bring powerful urges to act straight away: to say something, send something, leave, or react in a way we may later regret. STOP is a distress tolerance skill from dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT). It creates a brief pause, so you have a chance to choose your response rather than act on autopilot.

01 The STOP sequence

four steps, a few seconds each



Original diagram. The whole sequence can take just a few seconds, or longer if you need it.

02 Why a pause can help

Urges rise and fall

Even very strong urges usually peak and then ease with time, although in the moment they can feel as if they will last.

Emotion can narrow thinking

When emotion is very high, it can be harder to think through consequences or remember what matters to you.

Small pauses add up

With practice, pausing may become more automatic, making it easier to respond in line with your goals.

03 When to use STOP

- ☐ Before sending an angry message
- ☐ In the middle of an argument
- ☐ When a strong urge to react appears
- ☐ When a request feels overwhelming
- ☐ Before a big decision under pressure
- ☐ When frustration or panic is rising
- ☐ When tempted to leave or shut down
- ☐ When an old habit pulls strongly

When emotion is extremely high

If you are too overwhelmed to pause, a body-based skill such as TIPP may help bring intensity down first. STOP can then follow.

When there is real danger

STOP is for moments when reacting quickly could make things worse. If you are in danger, focus on getting safe first.

04 STOP in action

one example

The moment

A friend cancels plans at the last minute. You feel hurt and angry, and start typing a sharp reply.

S · T

You put the phone face down, sit back and take three slow breaths.

O

You notice hurt under the anger, the thought “they don't care”, and a tight chest.

P

You decide to reply later, when calmer, saying you were disappointed and asking to rearrange.

05 If STOP feels hard

common obstacles

“I forget in the moment”

This is very common. Practising in low-stakes situations, and planning your cues in advance, can help the skill come to mind.

“Pausing feels like giving in”

Pausing is not the same as agreeing or avoiding. It gives you time to respond in the way you choose.

“The urge is too strong”

Some moments are too intense to pause straight away. A body-based skill first, then STOP, may be more manageable.

What the research suggests

EVIDENCE NOTE

STOP is one of the crisis survival skills taught in dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 2015). DBT has good evidence as a whole treatment, and in one analysis, increases in skills use accounted for some of the improvements seen during DBT (Neacsiu et al., 2010).

Research on STOP as a standalone skill is limited, so it is best seen as a practical tool that becomes easier with regular practice, ideally with support from your psychologist.

STOP

WORKSHEET · PLANNING AND PRACTISING STOP

Preparing your pause before you need it

Skills are easiest to use in a difficult moment when they have been planned and practised in calmer times. Short notes are fine.

06 My STOP plan prepare it before you need it

S How I will stop
e.g. put my phone down, hands in my lap, stay still

T How I will step back
e.g. leave the room, three slow breaths, wait ten minutes

O What I will observe
e.g. what I feel, what I am telling myself, what actually happened

P What I want to remember when I proceed
My goals and values, e.g. "stay close to the people I care about"

07 Knowing when I need it

Signs that an urge is building for me:

- ☐ Heat in my face
 ☐ Clenched jaw or fists
 ☐ Heart racing
 ☐ Racing thoughts
 ☐ Tight chest
 ☐ Urge to type or speak
 ☐ Wanting to walk out
 ☐ Other

Situations where I am likely to need STOP:

08 Practice record urge 0 = none · 10 = strongest

Date	Situation	Urge 0-10	Steps I used	What I did instead and how it went
		___/10	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ S T O P	
		___/10	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ S T O P	
		___/10	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ S T O P	
		___/10	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ S T O P	
		___/10	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ S T O P	

09 Looking back

What helped me pause, and what made it harder?

To bring to my next session

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE

Thinking about difficult moments can bring up emotions. You can pause, stop, or return to this later. If you become significantly distressed, consider speaking with your psychologist or another appropriate professional.

SOURCES

Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT skills training handouts and worksheets* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
 Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT skills training manual* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Neacsiu, A. D., Rizvi, S. L., & Linehan, M. M. (2010). Dialectical behavior therapy skills use as a mediator and outcome of treatment for borderline personality disorder. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 48(9), 832-839. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2010.05.017>