EMPOWER & THRIVE COUNSELING

Emotional Regulation & Coping Skills Toolkit

A practical, printable collection of grounding, distress-tolerance, and DBT-informed tools for navigating overwhelming emotions.

> Start here: Emotions are information, not problems to eliminate. Regulation means responding to feelings with more awareness and choice—not forcing yourself to feel calm.

What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice, understand, and respond to feelings in ways that support your safety, relationships, and goals. Everyone experiences moments when emotions feel too intense or difficult to access.

Notice your early signals

Body: tension, heat, shakiness, fatigue, or a racing heart.
Thoughts: “I can’t handle this,” self-criticism, or urgency.
Urges: withdraw, argue, shut down, seek reassurance, or act immediately.

A simple three-step pause

1. Notice: “What am I feeling and where do I notice it?”
2. Name: “This may be frustration, sadness, fear, or overwhelm.”
3. Choose: “What would support me in the next few minutes?”

A helpful reminder

You can take a pause before making a decision. You do not have to solve the entire situation while an emotion is at its strongest.

Grounding & Present-Moment Skills

Grounding helps redirect attention to the present. Try what feels comfortable; if a technique increases distress, stop and choose something else.

5–4–3–2–1 senses

Name five things you see, four you can feel, three you hear, two you smell, and one you taste. You can adapt the number of steps or focus only on sight and sound.

Orient to your surroundings

Look around slowly. Notice the date, where you are, and a few neutral objects. Say to yourself: “I am here, in this moment.”

Steady contact

Press your feet gently into the floor or hold a familiar object. Notice its texture, weight, or temperature without needing to change how you feel.

Comfortable paced breathing

If breathing exercises feel helpful, try a slow, comfortable exhale without forcing a deep breath. Skip this technique if it makes you dizzy or more anxious.

My grounding menu:
One thing I can look at: _____
One object or texture I can notice: _____
One supportive phrase: _____

Choosing a tool

If you feel agitated, try a grounding or slowing skill. If you feel numb or disconnected, gentle movement, orienting, or connecting with a trusted person may feel more useful.

DBT-Informed Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance skills help you get through difficult moments without making the situation worse. They are not a replacement for solving ongoing problems.

STOP skill

S — Stop: Pause before acting.
T — Take a step back: Create a little space; breathe naturally.
O — Observe: Notice thoughts, feelings, urges, and the situation.
P — Proceed mindfully: Choose an action that fits your goals.

Self-soothing through the senses

Try calming music, a soft blanket, a warm drink, a pleasant scent, or a soothing image. Choose sensory experiences that feel safe and accessible to you.

Check the facts

Ask: “What happened?” “What am I assuming?” “What else might be true?” The goal is to see the situation more clearly—not dismiss your feelings.

Opposite action, when appropriate

When an emotion urges an unhelpful response and the situation is safe, consider a small action aligned with your values instead. For example, when shame urges isolation, you might reach out to a trusted person. Do not use this to override real danger or necessary boundaries.

During intense distress: Focus first on safety, basic needs, and a manageable next step. Skills work differently for different people; there is no single “right” way to cope.

My Personal Coping Skills Plan

Use this worksheet to build a short, realistic menu of supports for difficult moments.

1. My early signs of emotional overwhelm:

_____

_____

2. Feelings or situations that tend to be difficult:

_____

_____

3. Grounding skills I would like to try:

_____

_____

4. Distress-tolerance or self-soothing skills that help:

_____

_____

5. People, places, or routines that support me:

_____

_____

6. One small next step I can take when emotions rise:

_____

My compassionate reminder: I can pause, notice what I need, and take one step at a time.

About this toolkit

This educational resource is not a substitute for individualized treatment or crisis care. If emotions feel unmanageable or interfere with daily life, consider working with a licensed mental health professional. For immediate danger call 911; for U.S. mental health crisis support, call or text 988.