

Noticing Distress

When we combine the skills of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy with the theories of personality involved in Schema Therapy, managing the behavioural responses that are causing the problems we want to eliminate from our lives means managing the modes of behaviour as they cycle through their automatic responses to our uncomfortable emotional experiences. Mode management is all wrapped up in using the DBT Skills of Distress Tolerance in combination with the new internal narrative we're developing through our use of the RAAVEN exercise. This means building into our daily routines the many different aspects of the DBT ACCEPTS skill so we can learn new habits to distract and avoid in a healthy and effective way. As well as incorporating each part of the DBT IMPROVE skill into our daily mindfulness practice so we can build the capability to sit with the emotional experiences we fear the most and explore the different stories that add unnecessary meaning to our daily lives.

“When we venture outside of our window of emotional tolerance, we enter into a state of emotional distress. Knowing what this looks like, and building awareness for its presence in our system, is the only way we learn how to activate STOP!”

~Steven Morris RP.

When practicing Distress Tolerance, everything starts with STOP. Which is why, in my opinion, the STOP skill is the most important skill for us to first build an understanding for, and then put into practice every single day, multiple times within each 24-hour period. For me, when I first started living the life I wanted to live, by learning and practicing the skills of DBT, on average, I was probably using the STOP skill 40 to 50 times a day. And while this may sound like a daunting proposition, in actuality when we begin to notice the number of times we go in and out of distress, it's actually quite practical. So, what does it mean for us to go into a state of distress, and how can we build awareness for this internal way of being? From the perspective of the work we do when combining these skills of DBT with the theories of personality associated with Schema Therapy, Distress is a fear-based state that activates one of the 5 automatic coping mechanisms associated with what is more commonly known as the Fight or Flight response.

The term fight or flight is a little misleading when it comes to how we cope with fear. Every single one of us has a window of tolerance inside of which we are quite capable of dealing with the situation we're facing in an adaptive and effective way that keeps us in line with living the life we want to live, and being the person we want to be. This window of tolerance is dependant on a number of different factors. First, where abouts on the continuum of emotional sensitivity we might fall. In other words, what temperament, or nature were we born with. On one side of this continuum, we have nonreactive, where there are people who are completely disconnected from there emotions, they lack empathy for others, or understanding for how people might feel at any point in time, which often includes their own emotional state. On the other side of the continuum sit those of us that are extremely sensitive to our emotional experiences. Where feelings hit us like a Mack truck out of nowhere. The mildest hint of an emotive sensation sends our system spiraling into a state of fight or flight.

"Our emotional experiences are driven by the story we have about the situation we are facing. Noticing the distress that's activated by these stories, and building awareness for their presence in our system, is key to making behavioural changes."

~Steven Morris RP.

Almost all of us fall somewhere between these 2 extremes. For me, I identify as someone who falls on the side of emotional sensitivity, which means my window of tolerance for regulating my reactions to the emotional experience I'm having is smaller than someone who is on the nonreactive side of the line. This window of tolerance also gets smaller due to the different experiences we had growing up, and the way we live our lives right now. When we're not taking care of our physical needs, eating a healthy diet, exercising on a regular basis, practicing good sleep hygiene, and avoiding mood altering substances, our window of tolerance shrinks. When we've experienced childhood trauma, things that can be identified as leaving us with unmet childhood needs, the window of tolerance shrinks a little more.

A lack of self awareness, the kind that comes from the practice of mindfulness as an adult, is also a contributing factor to the window once again being diminished in its size. So, if you're someone who was born with emotional sensitivity, who grew up in an emotionally invalidating environment. You experienced childhood trauma, you lack self awareness, and you're not taking care of yourself both emotionally and physically, there's a high probability you spend most of your time in a fear-based state outside of your own window of opportunity to regulate your behavioural responses to the situations you're in.

As I said before, the term fight or flight is a little bit misleading. First, there are at least 5 different responses instead of the 2 most people commonly know. And it also seems to be the case that the 2 most people are aware of aren't really known with an accurate representation of what they actually mean. Next let's go over the 5 different responses to shed some light on how we notice their launch within our personality system, and the activation of our parts.

The Primary Responses

FIGHT (Overcompensation)

Noticing when we're in this behavioural response, is all about recognizing when there are parts of our personality that are confronting a situation in an over the top, or extreme way. Yes, anger is the common way this response can show up. A disproportionate level of frustration, even rage, that attacks the situation head on, is the way most people see this mode of behaviour playing out. At the same time, Overcompensation can show up in other ways too. A disproportionate level of humour, telling more and more inappropriate jokes in an attempt to alleviate the tension in the room by confronting it with an act of comedy.

Excessive manipulation, taking on the situation by gas lighting or controlling the other person with our words and actions in a direct attempt to have them see things our way, is another overcompensation technique that may slip by our awareness for the response we've learned for fear. Now this doesn't mean that everyone who manipulates or tries to control other people are highly sensitive individuals who exist in a fear-based state. Far from it. At the same time, it also doesn't mean that if I notice there's a part of me that tends to manipulate others, or tries to control what it is they're doing, then it must be true that I'm a raging narcissist with antisocial personality disorder either.

This is why its important for us to build our own self awareness, to contemplate why we do what we do. In your own self reflection practice, when you're in a state of "Fight" notice what the situation was that activated this particular way of being. Sit in contemplation for what was going on. See if you can find something that led to a fear-based state and explore the dialectical perspective for what was happening in your system. This is all

wrapped up in our journals and the DBT skill we call IMPROVE as this advocates for the development of our capacity to sit with uncomfortable feelings. When we can sit with these difficult emotional experiences for a short period of time, it opens up the possibility for us to activate STOP.

FLIGHT (Physical Avoidance)

Noticing a Flight response means paying attention to when there are parts of our personality that are trying to avoid things physically. Yes, physically running away from danger is the more common way that this response is known. At the same time, a state of flight can show up in other ways too. Excessively walking or exercising when we're feeling really anxious. Procrastination, spending lots of time in bed, or at home, without engaging with the outside world. Not having needed conversations, calling in sick, or declining invitations to social engagements that would normally be a healthy place for us to be, are all representations of a possible Flight Mode in full swing.

Substance use is also a representation of a person being in a behavioural response that's designed to avoid the emotional experience that's active in our system. Noticing the Flight mode means reflecting on behaviours once again. When we can recognize this type of response is present in our behaviours, and we document the situations that are activating it, it gives the opportunity later to explore the possibility of our system being in a fear-based state. Once again, this is done through the effective use of journalling, and IMPROVE. Reflecting on the emotional state, the meaning we attach to things, and the red flags to identify this particular behavioural response, is how we recognize the time for us to activate STOP.

When Fight or Flight was not an option:

Fight or flight are the primary responses to fear that are pretty much innate in all of us. As adults, they are part of our primal brain, and they are generally the most common responses we turn to. This is unless our system was exposed to fear and anxiety at a young age, and when it was, we didn't have a healthy adult around to comfort this emotional experience in the way we really needed.

When this is the case, we usually instinctively know we are too small to fight and probably too weak to survive if we run away, so we have to learn different ways to cope with the fear-based state that we tend to find ourselves sitting in. Next, let's take a look at some of the different ways we learn to cope with the continuum of feelings connected to fear as children. These learned behaviours often continue to show up when we're adults in what can be described as maladaptive and ineffective behavioural responses.

FREEZE (No Reaction)

A freeze mode is pretty self explanatory. When fear is in our system, we are like a deer in the headlights. Frozen in time, hoping that the situation just passes us by and goes away on its own without us actually needing to do anything. This can sometimes be identified as one of the many different forms of dissociation. An out of body experience where we feel like we are watching things play out, not reacting in any way, just zoning out of the fear-based state in an attempt to keep us safe. Building a sense of internal safety is the way we want to work with this debilitating response.

Practicing the Safe Place exercise so we can develop this feeling internally away from the activation, is the way to increase the possibility of this sense of safety and security being present when we need it most. Recognizing the story through the practice of journalling and IMPROVE, also helps shed some light on what it is we're experiencing in these moments of Freezing up. It's also important to build a list that contains all of the red flags we are aware of for the early warning signs of this freeze mode in our bodily sensations as this can indicate the perfect time for us to activate STOP.

SUBMIT (Give in to the Narrative)

Giving in to whatever the dominant narrative might be is the best way to describe a state of submit. Noticing this state of distress means recognizing the part of our personality that's becoming compliant, surrendering to the story being generated in the environment. Language leads to behavioural rigidity. I must do what I'm being told, I have to comply to the thing that's being asked of me, are all statements coming from parts of our personality system that are using a submit response. Fixing other people's problems, constant people pleasing, and consistently compromising our own individual needs in favour of the needs of others can be a pretty good sign we are in a state of distress.

The thing to be aware of is this doesn't only happen when the request is coming from an external source, it also applies to the internal narrative too. If my internal critics are telling me I'm a loser, I'm worthless and I might as well give up. My compliance to this narrative means I agree with these self-deprecating statements, which usually leads to an overwhelming sense of sadness that can quickly become depression. Noticing these behaviours in our journals, practicing IMPROVE to build awareness for the meaning we attach to the situations we identify as problematic, builds awareness for this mode and helps to recognize when we need to activate STOP.

DISTRACT (Lack of Focus)

A common diagnosis that seems to be on the rise in the world these days is ADD or ADHD. Basically, in a very simplistic definition, as well as other problematic symptoms, this is a distracted state of mind that means we find it difficult to focus for extended periods of time. While there are those for whom this definitely may be a genetic thing, one that requires regular and effective medication to regulate, there's also a lot of research, and a large number of academics who hold the opinion that this state of distraction is actually a learned behaviour designed to cope with anxiety and fear. For example, if I grew up in an environment that left me in a regular state of anxiety, I will find myself searching for ways to get away from this unwanted emotional state. Whether these feelings are justified by the events of actuality or not, simply doesn't matter.

This fear is often activated by the things we identify as childhood trauma. At the same time, anxiety in the child's environment can be caused by situations that may not be completely clear at first. If you found you spent a lot of time alone, fending for yourself and your needs, without the regular comfort and support of an adult to take care of you, this is a frightening thing for any child's brain to process. Situations such as this do not have to be something that's done deliberately from a place of abuse or neglect. In fact, it's often the case that it can be caused by something as innocuous as the modern-day requirement for both parental caregivers to work fulltime jobs so the financial obligations of life these days can actually be met.

When we look at things from this perspective, it makes sense that any young mind would distract itself to avoid the fear and anxiety its experiencing. This creates a sense of safety, as well as much needed security, so we feel we can survive. While this was definitely an effective skill to use in that early childhood environment, as an adult it's a learned behaviour that causes problems for us all the time. Any time we feel anxious, focus goes out the window. We wander around struggling to stay on track, looking for distraction from the fear and anxiety that's present within our system.

This shows up for me when I'm trying to study, if I'm going out, if I have an upcoming event that has some sort of fear attached to it, I notice I find it hard to stay focussed. Also, when I get a sense of, what my mom used to call, ants in my pants. I just can't sit still, like there's somewhere I have to be, I don't know where it is, but its just not here, and even if I find where this place might be, it won't be there either. These are all signs that my system is in a space of distress, and when I build my awareness for what this looks like, what it feels like, and what it sounds like through journalling, brainstorming, and practicing IMPROVE, it tells me when its time for me to activate STOP.

Building Awareness:

Learning which of these coping mechanisms we use means paying attention to our behavioural responses. If you haven't figured it out yet, we do this by regular Mode Journalling, practicing IMPROVE, and documenting what the red flags look like for our system in Distress. When we do this effectively and consistently, we can find the commonalities in the way we're dealing with our fear-based system. This is the trigger for us to activate the STOP Skill!!

Practice, practice and then more practice is the way we make this habit. Stop, take a deep breath, then Observe and Describe nonjudgmentally the part of our personality that's been kicked into action by following the narrative we created earlier through the RAAVEN skill. This effectively helps to practice what we call Cognitive Defusion. Which when practiced consistently helps to change the way we cope.

On the following page, you will find a worksheet to help highlight your common responses. If you can, download this document and take the time to work through the process slowly. Journal about the situations in your life where you think this might be active. Build awareness for your behavioural responses and reflect on the possibility of fear within your personality system. It's only when we are able and willing to actually take this type of work on, we can effectively build the capability to make the changes we want to make.

Mode Awareness Diary

Day	What situation were you in?	What thoughts were you having?	What feelings were you having?	What physical sensations were you having?	What urges were active in your system?
Example	I was in a group discussion	I don't understand what people are talking about, I am so stupid, I can't let anyone see how stupid I am.	I feel vulnerable and afraid, I don't want to feel embarrassed	I feel lightheaded, spacey, with a tight sensation in my chest	I wanted to run away from the group. I didn't want to be there!
Monday					
Tuesday					

Mode Awareness Diary

Day	What situation were you in?	What thoughts were you having?	What feelings were you having?	What physical sensations were you having?	What modes were active?
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					

Mode Awareness Diary

Day	What situation were you in?	What thoughts were you having?	What feelings were you having?	What physical sensations were you having?	What modes were active?
Saturday					
Sunday					

Try to use this worksheet in conjunction with your Mode Awareness Worksheet to begin to build your understanding of the many different parts of your personality that are active in your system at any given time in any given situation. Journaling on a daily basis can also be a useful tool to help you recognize the different behaviours associated with these parts of your personality system.

Worksheet

Based on the information about your response to difficult and challenging situations that you're noticing in your Mode Journals, which of the following coping modes do you see active in your behavioural reactions? Please keep in mind, you may notice one, or multiple examples for each of these coping mechanisms. It is important to document each one so we can practice Planning Ahead to Build Mastery for their activation in the future.

FIGHT (Overcompensation)	
The desire to avoid the difficult and challenging situation with a behavioural response that controls the situation by confronting it head on.	
Active in your system	<u>YES</u> <u>NO</u>
FLIGHT (Physical Avoidance)	
The desire to physically avoid the situation by removing yourself or staying away from difficult and challenging circumstances.	
Active in your system	<u>YES</u> <u>NO</u>
FREEZE (No Reaction)	
The desire to avoid the overwhelming emotion like a deer in the headlights, hoping it passes by, without the need for action of any kind.	
Active in your system	<u>YES</u> <u>NO</u>

SUBMIT (Give in to the Narrative)	
The desire to avoid emotional distress by giving in to the narrative that's dominant in the situation. This can be either internal or external.	
Active in your system	<u>YES</u> <u>NO</u>
DISTRACT (Lack of Focus)	
The desire to avoid the emotional experience by distracting our thoughts and feelings away from the present moment, over and over again.	
Active in your system	<u>YES</u> <u>NO</u>

Now that you have an awareness for the type of distress that enters your system, and the parts of your personality that are dominant in this experience, practice your use of the STOP Skill whenever you notice its presence. Take some time to work through the RAAVEN Skill worksheet and create the new language that's needed to first manage this mode of behaviour in a nonjudgmental and compassionate way!! This opens up the possibility of Planning Ahead to Build Mastery for future activations that can remove the belief that this behavioural response is the ONLY reaction that you need to cope with the emotional experience.