Lesson 2-4

STOP(P)

DISTRESS TOLERANCE

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THE STOP(P) SKILL

The **STOPP SKILL** is a *crisis tool* that is helpful when we find ourselves in *any intensely emotional situation* - or in other words, while in the heat of the moment. As stated by Carol Vivyan *(Getselfhelp.co.uk, 2015)*, “If you’re struggling with controlling your emotions, consider how to STOPP.”

As with other distress tolerance skills, this skill is intended to survive a crisis - without doing something that would make the situation worse, and/or without avoiding an action that would make the situation better.

The STOPP Skill is one of the DBT Skills that originated in CBT (Cognitive Behavior Therapy), which is a therapeutic process that teaches people how to change unhelpful thought patterns that influence them. Many of the DBT skills *(like this one)* incorporates aspects of CBT with mindfulness, combining these to create a DBT Skill.

This Skill’s focus is to help us to address and manage our emotional response to challenging, difficult, and/or rage inducing situations.

**THE STOP(P) ACRONYM**

Like many of the DBT skills “STOPP” is presented as an *Acronym*, as an easy to remember mnemonic. Unfortunately, this is an Acronym that is still in a morphing state. All of the elements of the skill remain virtually the same from CBT, DBT - and anywhere in between. *Deciding however, which points should go with which Acronym letters, varies from specialist to specialist and author to author.*

Since the STOP/STOPP *Acronym* is intended to make the skill elements easier to remember, and different therapists have given us different possible options, each person should decide which form of the *Acronym* is going to be easiest for them to remember (as long as all the elements are included).

The Chart below gives an overview of this *Acronym* as it was *originally introduced* in CBT, the evolved *Acronym* - as most frequently used in DBT, and a blend between the two. The *Blended Acronym* is the formula that we will be using for this lesson. The reasons for this choice will become clearer as we proceed.

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<td>T</td>
<td>TAKE A STEP BACK <em>(and focus on breathing)</em></td>
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<td>PULL BACK PUT IN SOME PERSPECTIVE <em>(take a step back)</em></td>
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While this skill is actually very simple to learn, *(for some it may be so simple as to feel condescending)* it *may not be so easy to use when we are in a crisis.* Once we hit *crisis mode*, we can become stuck in a particularly vulnerable mental state. We may find that our urges are to *act impulsively* in order to satisfy our *immediate desires right now* - even if the impulsive action may be harmful to us or have negative consequences. *This is why it is so important to train our brains to “STOP(P)”*, because once we hit the heat of the moment, our Emotion Mind won’t just stop on its own.

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S-STOP

Once the momentum of stimulus in any situation has hit a triggering point in us, the emotions triggered will naturally cause us to desire that we meet it with an immediate reaction. The earlier we notice the signs that our mind and/or body are reacting to a trigger, the sooner we can put the STOPP skill into action. The sooner we put this skill into action, the easier this skill will be to use - and the more effective it will be for us.

Don’t act immediately! Don’t react while your emotions are running hot and full of energy. Your emotions will attempt to make you act - or continue acting without thinking. Don’t give control to your emotions. Just pause for a moment.

“STOP”~ping helps to add in a little space between the stimulus (whatever we are reacting to in the situation - the trigger) and our response to it. Just pause for the moment.

Say it to yourself, (literally form the word, or even shout it inside your head if need be). STOP: say it to yourself as soon as you notice the earliest signs that your body or your mind is reacting to a “Trigger”.

It may be helpful for you to add a visual to the internal verbal command. Try to visualize a large red stop sign right in front of you, or any other visual that would cause you to freeze in your tracks.

Freeze! Literally STOP! Don’t just react. Don’t act impulsively Don’t move a muscle! Do not loose your control!

This moment of stillness will give you time to observe your emotions, and break the old, ineffective patterns of reactions you have usually used in the past. During your paused state, you will have a chance to decide if there is a better, more effective response to your situation. It will give you the opportunity to process your emotion - without being overwhelmed by it or giving it sole control of your response.
T-Take a breath

Don’t just breathe,
Take a slow, deep, soothing breath. Pull the air deep into your diaphragm.
Breathe in slowly, steadily, deeply through your nose.
Breathe out even slower through your mouth, calming yourself a little more with each of your breaths.

Anxiety (along with any other overwhelming emotion) and the “fight-or-flight” response causes our body to begin to tense, the heart rate to increase, and our breathing to quicken. Prolonged shallow rapid breathing reduces the oxygen going to the brain. This oxygen reduction makes it more difficult for us to think clearly.

Breathing slowly and deeply not only soothes the nervous system - it also increases oxygen flow.

Most people have had someone tell them at some point in their lives to take a deep breath, or slow down and just breathe. Slow deep breaths truly can make a difference in our anxiety level. Remember from our TIPP lesson that this type of paced breathing is an extremely effective method of self-calming. This form of breathing can literally reset your physiological system, to bring you out of a crisis level arousal.

Changing the speed of your breathing can trigger changes to occur in sympathetic and parasympathetic activity. Slowing your breath (to a rate of 10-12 seconds for each complete breath cycle - an average of 5-6 breaths per minute) will activate the parasympathetic nervous system - which effectively reduces emotional arousal.

If possible, a few rounds of The 4-7-8 Relaxing Breathing might be most helpful. This is a paced breathing exercise - with the addition of a held breath.

1) By taking a slow, deep breath (drawing out your inhalation for 4 seconds) you are consciously breathing in slowly enough to take more oxygen into your lungs.
2) The addition of holding that breath for 7 seconds, allows the inhaled oxygen to saturate your bloodstream. The increase of oxygenated blood cleanses and energizes your cells, tissues, and organs.
3) Ending with an 8 second exhalation (beyond activating the PNS, calming the body) it also ensures that you expel as much carbon dioxide from the lungs as possible.

Breathe Mindfully!
Pay attention to each breath.

IN – Notice how the air feels as it goes through your nostrils. focus on the sensations. Is the air cool, warm, hot? Notice how your lungs feel as they expand. Pay attention to the feeling of the muscle tension in your chest as you inhale.

OUT – Be aware of the sensations caused by the air passing through your mouth as you exhale. Notice the feeling of your torso muscles as they relax to release the air.

If your mind is focusing on your breathing, you can not be as focused on your thoughts and your feelings of distress. The change of focus helps the mind to calm and clear, making it possible to think more rationally and more logical.

Feelings come and go
like clouds in a windy sky.
Conscious breathing is my anchor.

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O-OBSERVE

Observing (using the "What" observe skill) means we are simply noticing what is happening. Our observation skills inform us about external events, thoughts, attitudes, objects, sensations - and any other phenomena that arises into our awareness through one or more of our senses. Observation is not about acting on what we observe. Since we have already pushed our “stop/pause” button, we are ready to pay attention without reacting. We observe to collect data - to learn something from what is observed. We want to know how we personally respond or react to specific events in our lives. We simply take a step back from our intense feelings and begin observing our circumstances, our thoughts, and our feelings (doing nothing to try to change them).

- Pay attention to the present moment, on purpose.
- Be the director of your attention: control where you focus your attention but not what you see.
- Don’t push anything away; Don’t try to hold onto anything. Just let what is - be.
- Observe both outside yourself and inside yourself.

THE 5 SENSES

Observing through the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) is noticing the direct sensory experience. What physical sensations are coming through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin? What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel? With each additional sense involved in your experience, paying attention to that experience becomes a little easier.

Pay attention to what you are experiencing - both inside yourself (for example: Your breathing) and outside of yourself (for example: Others' expressions and actions).

THOUGHTS

Remain alert to everything that enters your experience. You may notice thoughts drifting into your mind. Allow your thoughts to come and go (as they all will). Compare your thoughts to clouds in the sky. They drift into sight but drift right back out of sight again. Step inside yourself and simply observe. Simply notice the thought you are having. Be aware that it is there before you. Don’t add anything to it. Don’t judge it. Don’t try to change it. Don’t react to it.

Through the observe skill, it becomes clear to us that there is a difference between our thoughts and ourselves. Thoughts come and go, while we (ourselves) can remain fully present in the moment. We are still managers of our attention in those quiet places between thoughts. We are not our thoughts - therefore - we don’t need our thoughts to control our mindset or actions.

EMOTIONS

Remain alert to everything that enters your experience. Observe your emotional state. Observe your Urges. Simply notice what you are feeling. When you are observing emotions, keep a little space between yourself and your emotion. Simply be aware that the emotion is part of your experience, without judging it or attempting to change it.

Don’t attempt to push your emotion away (even if it causes you discomfort or pain). Don’t try to cling to the emotion (even if it is enjoyable or pleasant). Just observe that it is present.

Avoid reacting to the emotion. Just notice what you are experiencing, without getting caught up in it. Simply let your emotions come and go (all emotions will change in intensity, and all will pass). Pay attention to your feeling as it rises and falls like ocean waves.

Observation and awareness helps us to defuse the intensity of our thoughts and feelings - which reduces the power and control they have over us.

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P-PULL BACK

**Take a step back.** It may be adequate to just take a mental step back. Visualize yourself actually moving back a step or two. See yourself putting some space between yourself and the conditions that triggered the reaction.

Sometimes it is more effective to literally step back, since *physical cues* can inform your thoughts and emotions to get a little distance. This distancing can help to *unglue yourself* from the intensity of the urge to react. **Detaching yourself from the situation momentarily can strengthen your will to not act impulsively.**

Looking on from this slight distance, *observe* what is going on in your current conditions. Most of us – at some time or another, have probably heard the expression; “…can’t see the forest for the trees.” When we are right on top of a situation - that is the same thing. **We can be so close that all we can see is “me”, “my wants”, “my needs”, and “my values”.** We could correlate what we see of our circumstances with the saying about the forest and the trees.

**Observe what is going on both inside yourself and around you.** If there are other people involved - what are they doing or saying? What is their facial expressions? What around you are you reacting to?

P-PUT IN SOME PERSPECTIVE

As we step back from a situation the info available *increases*. We get to see more and more of the bigger picture the greater we distance ourselves from it. We are more able to see that there is more to any situation than just “me”.

Let’s go back to the saying, “…can’t see the forest for the trees”. If we are too close to them - all we can see are those trees right in front of us. When we put some distance between ourselves and the front line of those trees, we are more able to see the forest - and possibly the edges of it. BUT - we might also find that there is no forest behind them. It could be that what we thought and believed was a dense forest was nothing but a copse of trees with an open meadow behind them.

This is much the same as stepping back from a situation where our thoughts and feelings are the front line. If we are too close to “me”, we may only be able to see what is right in front of us. What we see and interpret the situation to be, may or may not be accurate. What if we were triggered because we believed something that just doesn’t match the facts? We could have gotten upset because we thought we were facing a “forest” but, were we to back off a bit - we might just see that we are actually facing a “meadow”.

Once we have pulled back a little, we *can pose some questions* to help us see the bigger picture a bit clearer. **We can check the facts of the situation that caused the trigger.**

- Am I reacting to a fact or an opinion?
- Is there another way to see the situation?
- Is there a more reasonable explanation?
- How important is this?
- How important will it be six months from now?
- How would others see this situation?

**Take the Helicopter View to see other possible perspectives.**

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HELICOPTER VIEW
WHAT IS THE BIGGER PICTURE?

Your Perspective
What meaning and
importance are you
placing on this
situation? What are
you reacting to?

Other's Perspective
How important is this
situation to others
involved? What does
this look like to them?

Take A Breath
Pull Back
Put In Some Perspective
What Is The Bigger Picture?

Uninvolved Perspective
How would this
situation look to
someone not
personally involved?
What about this
situation would
appear important to
an outsider?

Wise Mind Perspective
How would Wise Mind
see this situation? What
would be the most
effective thing to do; -
for you - for others, -
and for the situation?

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DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Looking at a situation from the point of view of others can help us to - either validate the strength of our perception - or open our minds to a wider view. We may see from their perceptions a more accurate view of the situation than what we are currently seeing.

1) My Perspective:
- What importance am I placing on this situation?
- What meaning am I giving these circumstances?
- What am I reacting to?
- Will the final actions to resolve the situation require that I sacrifice my own personal values?
- What advice would I give a friend in the same situation?

2) The Other’s Perspective: (anyone else involved in the situation)
- How important is this situation to others involved?
- What does this mean to them?
- What does this situation look like to them?
- Would the final actions to resolve the situation require that they sacrifice their own personal values?

3) Outsider’s Perspective: (someone uninvolved in the situation)
- What would this situation look like to someone who is not personally involved?
- What aspects of the situation would seem most important to them?
- How important would they likely see this?
- What advice would an uninvolved person (or a friend) give me about the situation?
- What advice would an uninvolved person (or a friend) give others involved about the situation?

4) Wise Mind’s Perspective:
- How would Wise Mind see the situation?
- What importance would Wise Mind give the situation?
- What meaning would Wise Mind attach to the situation?
- What advice would Emotion Mind give to Reasonable Mind?
- What advice would Reasonable Mind give to Emotion Mind?
- What action would Wise Mind take to reach a resolution to the distress this situation caused?

EFFECTIVENESS CONSIDERATIONS

To be effective means that we do what is needed. Our actions in a given situation is what is required to achieve our goals - both short and long-term. Effectiveness means: to consider the situation from our personal perspective (our thoughts, feelings, needs, wants, values) - but also to consider the situation from the perspective of others (their thoughts, feelings, needs, wants, values). It also requires that we consider what is best for the situation. If we take our desired action, will we be making things better or possibly worse? Effectiveness requires that we consider the consequences before we act.

- What is BEST for ME - that I could do right now?
- What is BEST for OTHERS - that I could do right now?
- What is the BEST thing that could be done to improve the situation?
- What CAN I do in this situation that will fit with my values?

REMIND MYSELF: No matter what is done or not done - the feeling of distress will pass!
P-PRACTICE WHAT WORKS

Using the STOPP Skills offers us CHOICES. We can continue reacting to distress the way we have in the past. We can choose to react impulsively and be left with the unhelpful consequences, or we can purposely choose to respond with what works. We can choose a helpful and positive response.

Ask yourself if reacting impulsively (with what ever urge you are feeling) will WORK. Will it get you what you want in the long run?

The STOPP Skill offers you CHOICES. Those choices are yours alone, and not dependent on anyone else.
➢ You can “STOPP” in a crisis, even if nobody else involved is stopping.
   ➢ It may be harder to “STOPP” if you alone stop, but it is possible.

The STOPP Skill means STOP - but the conditions of the specific situation could give the word “STOP” different degrees of strength.
➢ STOPP could mean that you are taking a brief mental pause.
➢ It could mean that you are walking away from the situation for a few minutes, or even a few hours.
➢ It could mean that you STOPP that situation entirely.
   ➢ If you are in a situation that is unhealthy for example.
   ➢ If you are able to remove yourself from it.

P-PROCEED MINDFULLY

Using the “STOPP” Skill is essentially building a bridge, step by step, to eventually take you to Wise Mind. It means that you are in touch with both Reasonable Mind and Emotion Mind - taking the needs of balance into consideration.

Proceeding Mindfully, means that you are mindful of all aspects of the situation. It usually would include a plan of action during the present distressing situation - which will help you remain mindful of your goals rather than reacting impulsively to your desire to satisfy your urges.

Ultimately, the Proceed Mindfully step of STOPP is to come up with a simple plan to meet your goal of surviving the current crisis - without making it worse. This may mean reaching a place where you are able to use other skills to further defuse the situation. It means that you will avoid impulsive behavior which can have unhealthy consequences for you, other people, or the situation.

Consider all the facts, perspectives, and feelings - then decide how to act Wisely. Proceed Mindfully - with mindful awareness.

Practice your mindfulness skills to find Wise Mind. Ask your Wise Mind what to do, then “Do what is appropriate and effective”.

It is important to note:
The STOPP Skill can help you get through a distressing situation and help you to get through the moment without reacting in a way that you will regret later. Successfully using the STOPP Skill may not offer immediate relief from your feelings about a given situation.

SUCCESSFUL STOPP USAGE

Did you survive the crisis?
Did you survive the crisis - without doing something that made the situation worse?
Did you survive the crisis - without avoiding doing something - which made the situation worse?

IF YES, YOU KNOW YOU USED THE SKILL SUCCESSFULLY!!!
HOW TO PRACTICE ‘STOPP’

Like all new skills, STOPP requires practice to learn.

❖ Read through the steps of S.T.O.P.P. repeatedly.
❖ Carry (written) reminders with you.
❖ For the first few days, practice the first two steps often - many times each day.
❖ Practice STOPP several times a day. EVERYDAY!! When it is not needed - run through all the steps repeatedly.
❖ Start practicing for needed situations. Use it for minor upsets.
❖ You will find that you can effectively use this skill for increasingly distressing situations as you become gradually more proficient with the skill. Like any new skill you learn, it will become an automatic habit over time.

When distressed:

[S]T-STOP
[T]AKE A BREATH
[O]BSERVE
[P]ULL BACK
P-PUT IN SOME PERSPECTIVE
P-PROCEED MINDFULLY
HELICOPTER VIEW WORKSHEET
DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES (Past Event)
Looking at a situation from the point of view of others can help us to - either validate the strength of our perception or open our minds to a wider view. We may see from their perceptions a more accurate view of the situation than what we are currently seeing.

Think back to a recent situation involving an interaction with another person that resulted in feelings of distress due to viewing that situation from opposing perspectives.
What was the triggering or distressing situation? _______________________________________

1) My Perspective:
What importance did I place on this situation? _______________________________________
What meaning did I give the circumstances? _______________________________________
What was I reacting to? _______________________________________
In the final actions to resolve the situation, did I sacrifice my own personal values? _______________________________________
What advice would I have given a friend in the same situation? _______________________________________

2) The Other’s Perspective: (anyone else involved in the situation)
How important was this situation to others involved? _______________________________________
What did this mean to them? _______________________________________
What did this situation look like to them? _______________________________________
In the final actions to resolve the situation, did they sacrifice their own personal values? _______________________________________

3) Outsider’s Perspective: (someone uninvolved in the situation)
What would this situation have looked like to someone who was not personally involved? _______________________________________
What aspects of the situation would have seemed most important to them? _______________________________________
How important would they have likely seen this? _______________________________________
What advice would an uninvolved person (or a friend) give me about the situation? _______________________________________
What advice would an uninvolved person (or a friend) give others involved about the situation? _______________________________________

4) Wise Mind’s Perspective:
How would Wise Mind have seen the situation? _______________________________________
What importance would Wise Mind have given the situation? _______________________________________
What meaning would Wise Mind have attached to the situation? _______________________________________
What advice would Emotion Mind have given to Reasonable Mind? _______________________________________
What advice would Reasonable Mind have given to Emotion Mind? _______________________________________
What action would Wise Mind have taken to reach a resolution to the distress this situation caused? _______________________________________

What would you have done differently if you had viewed the situation from other point of views? _______________________________________

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HELI_OPTER VIEW WORKSHEET

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES (Current Event)
Looking at a situation from the point of view of others can help us to - either validate the strength of our perception - or open our minds to a wider view. We may see from their perceptions a more accurate view of the situation than what we are currently seeing.

What is the triggering/distressing situation? ____________________________________________________________

My Perspective:
What importance am I placing on this situation? ____________________________________________________________
What meaning am I giving these circumstances? ____________________________________________________________
What am I reacting to? ________________________________________________________________________________
Will the final actions to resolve the situation require that I sacrifice my own personal values? _____________
What advice would I give a friend in the same situation? ____________________________________________________

The Other’s Perspective: (anyone else involved in the situation)
How important is this situation to others involved? __________________________________________________________
What does this mean to them? __________________________________________________________________________
What does this situation look like to them? __________________________________________________________________
Would the final actions to resolve the situation require that they sacrifice their own personal values? _______

Outsider’s Perspective: (someone uninvolved in the situation)
What would this situation look like to someone who is not personally involved? ______________________________
What aspects of the situation would seem most important to them? __________________________________________
How important would they likely see this? __________________________________________________________________
What advice would an uninvolved person (or a friend) give me about the situation? __________________________
What advice would an uninvolved person (or a friend) give others involved about the situation? ____________

Wise Mind’s Perspective:
How would Wise Mind see the situation? __________________________________________________________________
What importance would Wise Mind give the situation? __________________________________________________________________
What meaning would Wise Mind attach to the situation? __________________________________________________________________
What advice would Emotion Mind give to Reasonable Mind? __________________________________________________________________
What advice would Reasonable Mind give to Emotion Mind? __________________________________________________________________
What action would Wise Mind take to reach a resolution to the distress this situation caused? ______________

What was my final decision? ____________________________________________________________________________

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PRACTICING ‘STO’PP’

Like all new skills, STOPP requires practice to learn.

❖ Read through the steps of S.T.O.P.P. repeatedly.
1) Approximately how many times did you read through all the steps of STOPP this week? ____

❖ Carry (written) reminders with you.
2) What form of written reminders are you carrying? _________________________________
3) Are you reading over them from those reminders? ___________

❖ For the first few days, practice the first two steps often - many times each day.
4) How difficult was it to remember to practice these steps the first couple of days? ________
____________________________________________________________
5) If you found this hard to remember, can you think of something you can do to remind yourself? What? _________________________________
____________________________________________________________

❖ Practice STOPP several times a day. EVERYDAY!! When it is not needed, run through all the steps repeatedly.
6) On average how many times a day did you practice ALL the steps of STOPP in the last couple of days this week?

❖ Start practicing for needed situations. Use it for minor upsets.
7) Were you able to put this skill into effective practice this week? ________
For what situation? _________________________________
What were the results? _________________________________

You will find that you can effectively use this skill for increasingly distressing situations as you become gradually more proficient with the skill. Like any new skill you learn, it will become an automatic habit over time.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
FOR DISTRESS TOLERANCE “STOPP”


