



# Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery

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## Who is this for?

Those who struggle  
with self-injury

## What is included?

Identifying negative  
feelings and  
situations related  
to self-injury

Distraction and  
substitution  
techniques

## Distraction Techniques and Alternative Coping Strategies

**Self-injury is sometimes used** as a way of coping with negative events and feelings. It is often used as a result of not having learned how to identify or express difficult feelings in a more healthy way. Finding new ways of coping with difficult feelings can help to suppress the urges that lead to self-injury and may help in the recovery process. Focusing on identifying feelings and challenging the thoughts that lead to self-injury can be helpful. Seeking outside professional assistance or engaging in individual therapy may be a good idea as well. Stopping is easier if you can find other ways of expressing or coping with your feelings.

### **You can ask yourself the following questions which may help you to identify the negative feelings or situations that lead to self-injury:**

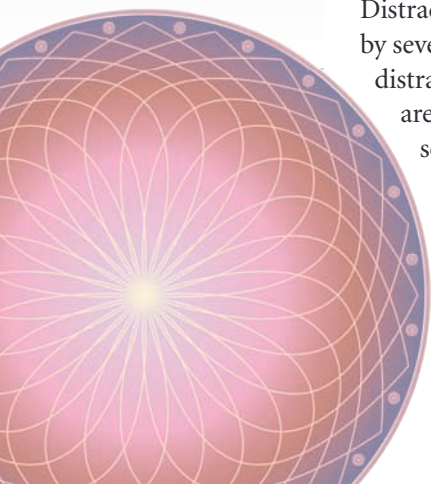
- What was going on in my life when I first began to injure myself?
- How do I feel just before I want to injure myself?
- What are my habits and routines? Am I always in the same place or with a particular person when I get the urge to injure myself?
- Do I always feel the same emotion when I get the urge to injure myself?
- How can I better deal with the situations that trigger me?

You may want to keep a diary in which you write down your feelings at different times so that you can better answer these questions.

### **I want to stop self-injuring but I still have urges. What do I do instead?**

Distract yourself or use a substitution behavior. Many report that just delaying an urge to self-injure by several minutes can be enough to make the urge fade away. One way to increase the chances of a distraction or substitution helping calm the urge to self-injure is to match what you do to how you are feeling at the moment. It may be helpful to keep a list on hand so that when you get the urge to self-injure you can go down the list and find something that feels right to you in the moment.

See examples of alternatives on the next page.



## Feeling angry:

- Slash an empty plastic soda bottle or a piece of heavy cardboard or an old shirt or sock.
- Squeeze ice.
- Do something that will give you a sharp sensation, like eating lemon.
- Make a soft cloth doll to represent the things you are angry at. Cut and tear it instead of yourself.
- Flatten aluminum cans for recycling, seeing how fast you can go.
- Hit a punching bag.
- Pick up a stick and hit a tree.
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow-fight style.
- Rip up an old newspaper or phone book.
- On a sketch or photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do. Cut and tear the picture.
- Make clay models and cut or smash them.
- Throw ice into the bathtub or against a brick wall hard enough to shatter it.
- Dance.
- Clean.
- Exercise.
- Bang pots and pans.
- Stomp around in heavy shoes.
- Play handball or tennis.

## Feeling sad or depressed:

- Do something slow and soothing.
- Take a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles.
- Curl up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book.
- Baby yourself somehow.
- Give yourself a present.
- Hug a loved one or stuffed animal.
- Play with a pet.
- Make a list of things that make you happy.
- Do something nice for someone else.
- Light sweet-smelling incense.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt.
- Call a friend and just talk about things that you like.
- Make a tray of special treats.
- Watch TV or read.
- Visit a friend.

## Craving sensation/Feeling empty or unreal:

- Squeeze ice.
- List the many uses for a random object. (For example, what are all the things you can do with a twist-tie?)
- Interact with other people.
- Put a finger into a frozen food (like ice cream).
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root.
- Rub liniment under your nose.
- Slap a tabletop hard.
- Take a cold bath.
- Stomp your feet on the ground.
- Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.

*“... I made a mix of 10 happy songs I would listen to sometimes when I was rollerblading to put myself in a good mood... It was uplifting music. It was good. It was like ‘Walking on Sunshine’ and ‘It’s Raining Men’ and stuff like that. I was like, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t listen to depressing, abusive music when I’m feeling like this. Maybe I should try to get in a better mood.’”*

— Interviewee

## Wanting focus:

- Do a task that is exacting and requires focus and concentration.
- Eat a raisin mindfully. Notice how it looks and feels. Try to describe the texture. How does a raisin smell? Chew slowly, noticing how the texture and even the taste of the raisin change as you chew it.
- Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can.
- Choose a random object, like a twist-tie, and try to list 30 different uses for it.
- Pick a subject and research it on the web.

## Feeling guilty or like a bad person:

- List as many good things about yourself as you can.
- Read something good that someone has written about you.
- Talk to someone that cares about you.
- Do something nice for someone else.
- Remember when you’ve done something good.
- Think about why you feel guilty and how you might be able to change it.



## Other General Distraction and Substitution Techniques:

### Reach Out to Others

- Phone a friend.
- Call 1-800-DONT-CUT.
- Go out and be around people.

### Express Yourself

- Write down your feelings in a diary.
- Cry – crying is a healthy and normal way to express your sadness or frustration.
- Draw or color.

### Keep Busy

- Play a game.
- Listen to music.
- Read.
- Take a shower.
- Open a dictionary and learn new words.
- Do homework.
- Cook.
- Dig in the garden.
- Clean.
- Watch a feel-good movie.

### Do Something Mindful

- Count down slowly from 10 to 0.
- Breathe slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Focus on objects around you and thinking about how they look, sound, smell, taste and feel.
- Do yoga.
- Meditate.
- Learn some breathing exercises to aid relaxation.
- Concentrate on something that makes you happy: good friends, good times, laughter, etc.

### Release Your Frustrations

- Break old dishes.
- Rip apart an old cassette tape, smash the casing.
- Throw ice cubes at a brick wall.
- Throw eggs in the shower.
- Rip apart an old phone book.
- Smash fruit with a bat or hammer.
- Throw darts.
- Punch pillows.
- Scream into a pillow.
- Slam doors.
- Yell or sing at the top of your lungs.
- Exercise.

### If you STILL feel the urge to injure you might try:

- Putting stickers on the parts of your body you want to injure.
- Drawing slashing lines on paper.
- Drawing on yourself with a red felt-tip pen.
- Taking a small bottle of liquid red food coloring and warm it slightly by dropping it into a cup of hot water for a few minutes. Uncap the bottle and press its tip against the place you want to cut. Draw the bottle in a cutting motion while squeezing it slightly to let the food color trickle out.
- Drawing on the areas you want to cut using ice that you've made by dropping six or seven drops of red food color into each of the ice-cube tray wells.
- Painting yourself with red tempera paint.

FYI

#### USEFUL LINKS:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental\\_health/coping\\_skills.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/coping_skills.shtml)

[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self\\_injury.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm)

<http://www.selfinjury.com>

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE: [www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu](http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu)

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