



Anchor in the moment

Learning to tolerate distress during tough times

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Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing

Helpful ways to cope with difficult emotions?

People tell us they have lots of ways they cope with distress. But many wonder: ***what strategies are actually helpful, or unhelpful for dealing with negative emotions?***

In **Part 1 – Learn** of this chapter, you'll learn what research says about the brain and ways of coping with difficult emotions.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll be asked to identify the roadblocks that might get in the way of coping with difficult emotions and create a plan for overcoming these roadblocks to coping.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.



Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, the more we can help others in distress.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have more insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

Please complete this exercise thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

Part 1 – Learn!

What does it mean to “cope with negative emotions”?

Coping with tough emotions can look like lots of different things for different people. When we ask people with an eating disorder what “coping” means to them, most of them mention **two** things:

1. Staying **physically healthy** - including feeding our brains a range of carbohydrates and getting good sleep.

Have a look at some examples of how you might look after your physical health:



Eating an adequate amount of **carbohydrates** like pasta, rice, oats, cereal and bread¹



Eating **balanced meals and snacks**, including a mix of carbohydrates, proteins, healthy fats (like nuts and fish), and fun foods



Staying hydrated by drinking plenty of water throughout the day



Getting **regular sleep** by aiming for 7-9 hours of sleep each night



Engaging in **regular physical activity** that you enjoy, such as walking, cycling, dancing or yoga

¹ This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>

2. Staying **mentally healthy** or taking care of our emotions, like asking friends or family for support when feeling sad.

Have a look at some examples of how you might look after your mental health:



Reaching out for support by talking to friends or family when feeling down or alone



Engaging in activities that you enjoy like **hobbies and interests**



Expressing your feelings by journaling and using other creative outlets like art or music

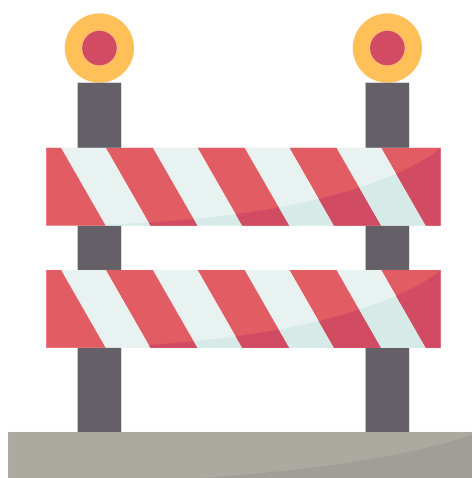


Maintaining a **daily routine** that can provide structure and help manage daily stressors

Physical and mental health are both important for coping well when things are hard.

What are some ways that you cope with negative emotions? This could be some coping strategies you've used in the past, some you'd like to use, some you have heard of others using, or some from the lists we just looked at.

But sometimes there are roadblocks to coping.



Sure, “coping with negative emotions” sounds nice. But some things can make it harder to cope in real life.

People we have spoken to have shared some of their own **roadblocks** to coping (like *feeling out of control of their emotions, pressures to do well in studies, or having trouble with friends or family*).

These are all things that can **get in the way** of us taking care of our physical and mental health.

What may be some other roadblocks to coping with negative emotions that people with eating disorders may experience?

One **roadblock** that is common for young people is:

1. Feeling like they dislike themselves, are fundamentally flawed, or even deserve to feel badly.

Take Sam's story for an example...

Sam's story:

Any time I did anything wrong, or made the tiniest mistake, it felt like my brain automatically jumped straight to thinking I'm a horrible person or some sort of monster. Once I had these thoughts it was really hard to make them go away. When it would get really bad, I felt like I should hurt myself. Sometimes I'd self-harm because it felt like the only thing that helped calm me down when I had these thoughts. But a lot of other times, I'd self-harm because I felt like I deserved to suffer and be in pain.



Here is an example from Gracie...

Gracie's story:



When Tom and I broke up, it felt like my whole world shattered. I thought we'd be together forever, and suddenly, I didn't know who I was without him. Everything felt out of control—my emotions, my future, my life.

The only thing I could control was what I ate. At first, skipping meals made me feel like I was taking charge of something, but soon it turned into this way of punishing myself. Whenever the pain and sadness felt too big, I'd restrict my food more, almost like I didn't deserve to feel okay, like I didn't deserve to eat. I didn't know how to deal with all the hurt and anger inside me, and it just kept piling up.

Sam and Gracie aren't alone.

When we have negative feelings about ourselves, it is harder than normal to choose good coping strategies. Many people who experience self-dislike or self-hate end up **harming themselves** in ways that make their physical or mental health **worse**.



Research highlight

Research has shown that **68% of young people** have previously reported feeling like they deserved pain or punishment.

When other researchers asked a large number of people around the world, **18% of them** reported *purposely hurting themselves*.

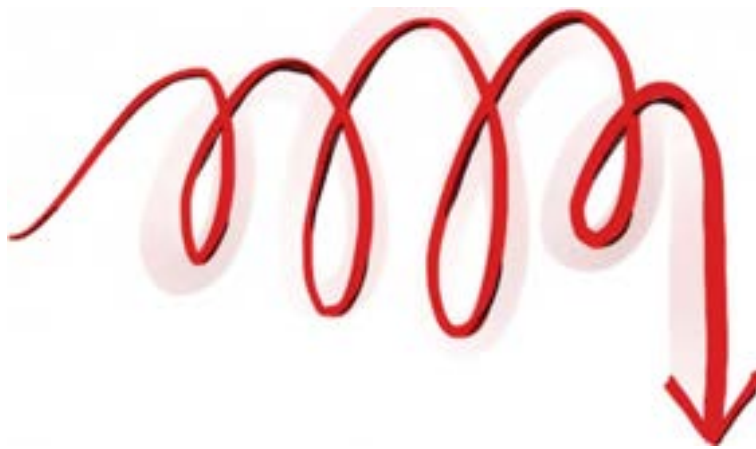
Hurting yourself just makes things worse.

Sometimes, people hurt themselves, to help calm distressing feelings of self-dislike or self-hatred. However, even if hurting ourselves makes things seem to feel a bit better for just a moment, science shows it actually makes us feel **worse and worse over time**.

In other words, even though it might feel like hurting ourselves will help us feel better, it actually **makes us feel worse in the short and long-run**.

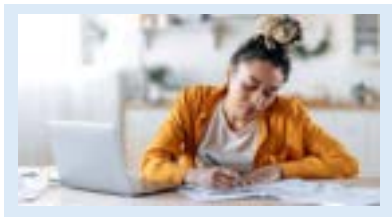


In fact, self-harming often leads to a **negative spiral** of feeling bad, hurting yourself, feeling some temporary relief – before feeling guilty or ashamed for hurting yourself, hurting yourself again, and feeling worse and worse.



feel bad → hurt self → feel worse → hurt self → feel even worse

Hurting ourselves doesn't help us feel better overtime, and science says it actually makes us feel worse.



Remember Gracie's story? Based on what you've learnt so far, what is something you could say to her to support her in coping with her negative emotions?

Thanks for giving Gracie advice! Now, let's look at different ways of coping.

Can you stop the negative cycle?

You might be asking yourself: *if hurting doesn't help with coping, is it possible to stop the spiral once it's already started?*

Science says: yes, you can stop the spiral!

Stopping the spiral can happen if feelings of self-dislike or self-hatred start to get better or go away (if this happens for you, that is great news, and we're glad you're feeling better about yourself!)



But, for many people, those feelings of self-dislike or self-hatred can persist. Even if these negative feelings about yourself **don't go away** you can still stop the negative spiral.

You never have to hurt yourself. Even when your brain tells you otherwise.

Want to boost your brain's ability to stop the negative spiral?

To boost our brain's ability to stop the negative spiral it is important to ensure we are feeding and nourishing our brain.



Ever wonder why some days you feel totally “meh” and other days you’re on fire? Here’s a secret: your brain runs on fuel from food, especially **carbohydrates**! Carbohydrates give your brain the power it needs to build new connections—super helpful when you’re trying to form healthy habits.



So, if you’re feeling down, drained, or unmotivated, a simple fix might be making sure you’re getting enough carbohydrates in your meals. Fuel up, and you might just feel the difference!

But how much carbohydrates do I need?



Try to eat a mix of wholegrain and other healthy carbohydrates like rice, pasta, bread, and cereals. These foods give you important nutrients your body needs, like fibre and vitamins.

Carbohydrates are your body's main source of energy—they help your brain think clearly and give your muscles the power to move. If you don't eat enough carbs, you might feel tired, dizzy, grumpy, or even a bit down. You're also more likely to get strong cravings or overeat later in the day—especially around 3 or 4 in the afternoon—when your energy naturally dips and your body looks for a quick boost.

It is recommended that approximately 50% or more of total energy of your diet should come from carbohydrate. **Select at least 4 servings over the day** – examples of servings are below.²

<input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup muesli	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ Corn Flakes	<input type="checkbox"/> ¾ cup cooked cous cous
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sustain	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 roll	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked barley
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup All Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 pita bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup sweet corn
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sultana Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 slices bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked quinoa
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Just Right	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 fruit toast	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup mashed potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked porridge	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 tortillas	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium baked potatoes
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Special K	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked pasta	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 large sweet potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Rice Bubbles	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked rice	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 cups cooked noodles

² This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>

What if you feel like you deserve to feel badly?



Sometimes, people hurt themselves because they feel like they deserve to be punished or to feel pain. These urges to self-harm may feel extra hard to ignore.

While this is a difficult situation to be in, science says it is **still possible** to stop the negative spiral if this is how you are feeling.

The most important thing to remember is: no matter the reason you **feel** like you need to self-harm, **you don't have to act on these feelings.**

You are the boss of your response

You have a secret superpower... and it's **being in charge of** *how you respond* to things. Even when you can't control the **situation** (what's happening around you), you're always in charge of your **response** (how you cope with it).



Lots of things can be hard to control or deal with, including stressful things in your life like study or work, trouble with family, or how you're feeling in any moment. But you alone have the power to control your responses to these challenges around you.

This means you don't have to hurt yourself when you experience feeling of self-hatred.

When you take control of your urge to self-harm, **you** can stop the negative spiral. In fact, lots of young people have **changed how they respond** to urges to self-harm - and it helped more than they thought it would.

Remember Sam's story? This is how Sam stopped his negative spiral...

After I read all this stuff about how hurting myself was making me feel worse, it made me think about things differently. I can feel like I'm a horrible person, or even a monster, and still not harm myself for it. Just because I'm having these feelings doesn't mean I have to act on them.



When I realised this, things started getting better. At first, it was really hard to ignore my thoughts and feelings and to stop hurting myself. I didn't think it was possible to change, but I was wrong. I just took it one day at a time. I started focusing all of my energy on breathing through my urges to self-harm, and I looked for literally anything else to do until the moment passed. I kept at it, even when I didn't always think I deserved it. It made me feel stronger when I realised, I could control how I responded to my urges to self-harm. I began to understand I was not a flawed person.

Sam used brain science to stop his negative spiral, and you can too!

When we experience strong emotions (like feelings of sadness, anxiety or self-hate), different parts of the brain become activated, or “light up”.

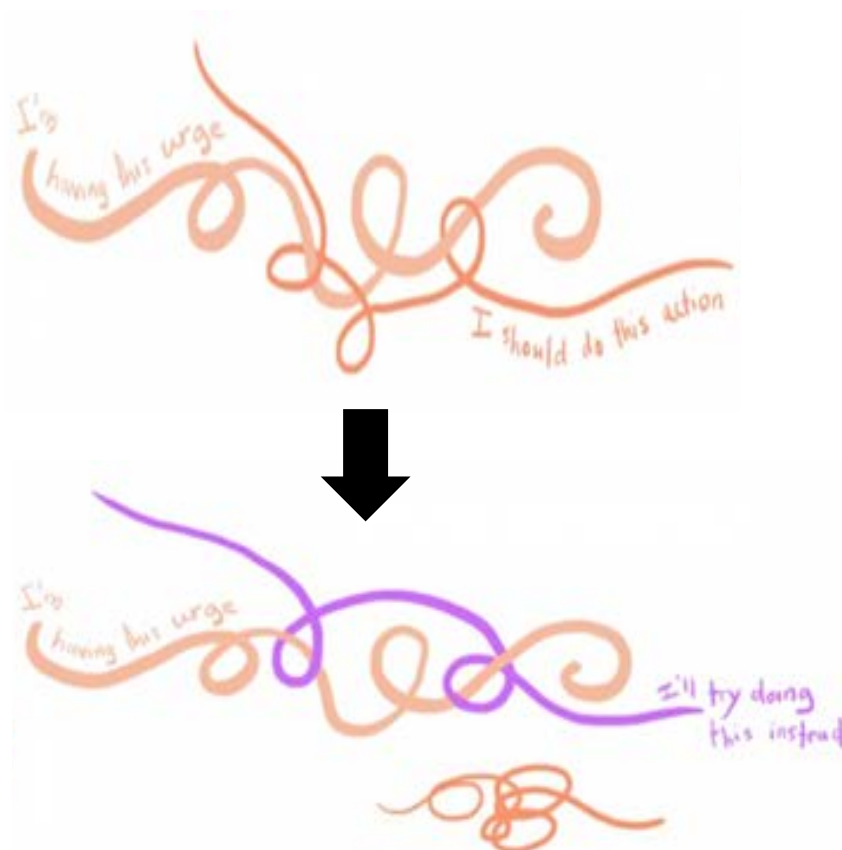


Neurons are the **building blocks** of our brains, and they are what makes things “light up”. They take in *tons* of information and send signals to each other to try to make sense of what's going on. Over time, these signals form **connections between neurons** in our brain.

These connections link our **emotions** (like, the feeling of self-hate) and **thoughts** (like, “*I should hurt myself*”) to our **actions** (like, when we self-harm). When we have an “urge” to hurt ourselves, it’s our neurons trying to form a link between having these negative thoughts and feelings and hurting ourselves.



This means that when we choose to hurt ourselves, it creates a link in the brain between the **urge** to *self-harm* and **actually** *self-harming*. This **urge-action link** makes it easier for the brain to send signals to hurt ourselves the next time we feel self-hate.

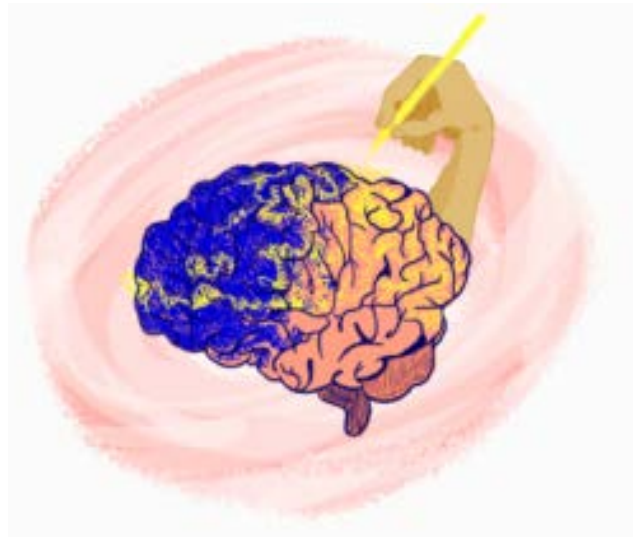


The good news is: **this link in the brain can be erased**. Your brain is constantly forming new links between emotions, thoughts, and actions. All It takes is **changing our actions**, or what we do, in response to what we think and feel.

Changing our actions creates a new link in the brain.

When we change our actions, or how we respond to urges to self-harm, **this creates a new urge-action link** in the brain!

This means **every single time** we don't hurt ourselves (even when we want to), we make progress toward creating a new link in the brain. New links make it easier for the brain to choose other, more helpful ways of coping with negative emotions.

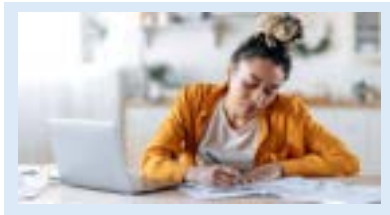


They make it easier to stop the negative spiral of feeling badly, hurting ourselves, and feeling worse.

In fact, this is how Sam stopped his negative spiral! By acting differently (deciding not to hurt himself), Sam was able to build a new link in his brain.

Over time, building this new link helped him to make better decisions about coping – and helped him **feel better overall**.

SMALL ACTIONS
BIG IMPACT



Remember Gracie's story? Based on what you've learnt so far, what advice would you give to Gracie on how to stop her negative spiral?

Thanks for giving Gracie advice! Here is what she ended up doing...











After learning about how looking after our physical health is such an important part of coping with negative emotions, like fueling our brains with carbohydrates, I started to see things differently. I realised that by skipping meals and restricting my food, I was actually making myself feel worse – more out of control and it was making it harder for my brain to make new urge-action links.

At first, it was really hard to eat regularly, especially carbohydrates like toast or pasta, because I had convinced myself I didn't need them. But I decided to take it one step at a time. I started by making sure I had 2 pieces of toast for breakfast every morning, even when I felt like I needed to hurt myself by not eating. Then, I added either rice or pasta to my meals throughout the day.

It wasn't easy at first, but over time, I noticed that when I ate a good amount of carbs throughout the day, my emotions felt less overwhelming. I didn't feel so stuck inside my head. It felt so empowering to know I could change the way I felt by fueling my body properly.



Now, on a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 10 (the most confident I can feel) how confident are you that you can take new actions to stop your negative spiral?

Not at all confident											The most confident I can feel
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Have a look at what your confidence rating shows...

[If you rated < 5]:

It sounds like you might be feeling quite unsure about your ability to stop your negative spiral, and that's okay. Change can feel really hard, especially if these patterns have been around for a while. Remember, you don't have to tackle everything at once—small, manageable steps can lead to meaningful progress. Later in **Part 2 – Do**, we'll focus on taking one step at a time to break the cycle. Every effort, no matter how small, is a step forward.

[If you rated 5 – 8]:

You seem to have a moderate level of confidence in your ability to stop your negative spiral, which is a great starting point! It shows that you're beginning to see the possibility of change and are open to trying new strategies. Think about the small, practical steps you can take to challenge the spiral—whether it's practicing self-compassion, reaching out for support, or focusing on healthy coping strategies like eating regular, nourishing meals. Each step will build your confidence and help you regain control.

[If you rated > 8]:

Wow, it's fantastic to see such high confidence in your ability to stop your negative spiral! With this level of determination, you're ready to take proactive steps toward healthier habits and breaking free from harmful patterns. Use that confidence to commit to strategies that help you feel stronger and more in control, like practicing distress tolerance skills or ensuring you fuel your body with regular, balanced meals. With this mindset, you're well on your way to creating a positive, lasting change!

Part 2 – Do!

There may be barriers to changing your actions.



As we learnt from Sam and Gracie, changing our actions isn't an easy task and it is important to remember that changing our actions can be hard!

This is especially true when we have acted a certain way for a long time.

But the good news is knowing what might get in the way, or what barriers you may face, can make the process easier.

Which of these barriers do you think you might face if you stop hurting yourself? You can pick as many choices as you want and we will look at each one in turn:

- ☐ Nothing else helps me feel better in the moment
- ☐ I deserve and/or want to feel badly
- ☐ Neither of these barriers seem relevant to me

Let's look at each roadblock in turn.

1. Nothing else helps me feel better in the moment

Feelings of self-hate can be really tough to deal with, and it is completely understandable to want to feel better quickly. Luckily, science says **there are other ways to help cope with tough emotions** in the moment.

Everyone has something in their body called the **parasympathetic nervous system**, or **PNS** for short. It's like your body's built-in 'chill mode.' This system helps you calm down after moments of high stress by slowing our heart rate and lowering blood pressure quickly. It works kind of like the opposite of the "fight or flight" response.

Once it kicks in, it can help you feel more relaxed in just a **few minutes or even seconds**.



The good news is you can **activate your PNS** very quickly by using one of many strategies. Here are some examples:



Changing your body **temperature** (like putting your hands in a bowl of ice or very cold water)



Pacing your **breathing** (breathing in for 4 seconds and breathing out for 8 seconds)



Relaxing your **muscles** (tensing your muscles while breathing in, and relaxing muscles while breathing out)

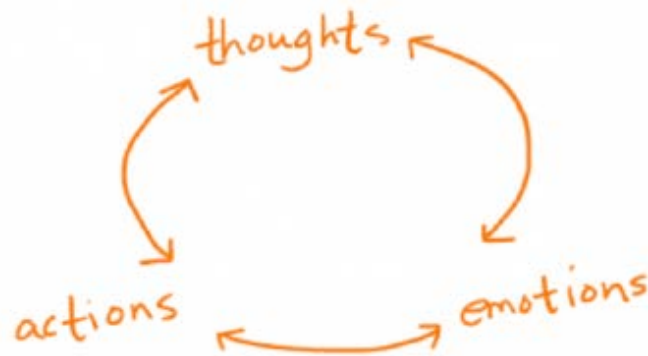
Which strategy would you like to use to create a goal for breaking your negative spiral?

- ☐ Putting hands/splashing face with cold water
- ☐ Squeezing ice cubes
- ☐ Having a cold drink
- ☐ Ice pack hold
- ☐ Paced breathing (Box breathing)³
- ☐ Paced breathing (Hot air balloon)⁴
- ☐ Relaxing muscles

2. I deserve and/or want to feel badly

First, that's a tough spot to be in at any point, and we're sorry to hear that's where you're at. Luckily, science can help us figure out what to do next.

We've already talked about how our **actions** (what we do) can change our **emotions** (how we feel). For example, hurting ourselves less and less can help us feel better over time.



But changing our actions can also change our **thoughts** (our inner voice). For example, if you try doing something new (like, learning the guitar), science shows that it may change how you think (like, thinking “this is fun, I didn’t expect to enjoy this”).



Even if your *thoughts* or *emotions* seem impossible to change, you can *always* change how you **act**... which makes other types of change possible too.

³ Box breathing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6RbW2LtdFs>

⁴ Hot air balloon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLThHhzA9hQ>



The same happens to the thoughts we have after hurting ourselves. If we change our *actions* (like, when we stop hurting ourselves), we can end up *thinking more* and more that we deserve to feel better.

Sometimes, **our actions change much faster than our thoughts** – because our brain need time to create new, helpful links! By changing what we **do**, what we **think** can ‘catch up’ to how we act more and more with time.

Let’s brainstorm some ideas on how you can change what you do to cope with negative emotions, to help you stop your negative spiral. Using the list below, select the actions you could try.

- ☐ Regular sleep routine
- ☐ Gentle movement (e.g., walking, yoga)
- ☐ Eating nourishing meals including carbohydrates
- ☐ Staying hydrated
- ☐ Catching up with family or friends
- ☐ Engaging in hobbies
- ☐ Breathing exercises

3. Neither of these barriers seem relevant to me

You don’t think either of these two top barriers may be a problem for you. That’s great!

Let’s brainstorm one barrier that may make it harder for you to stop hurting yourself. Describe it below.

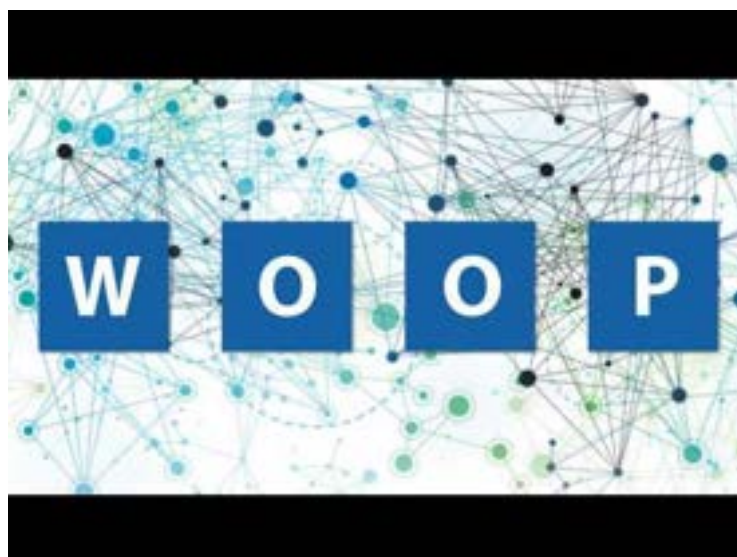
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- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular sleep routine | <input type="checkbox"/> Reading a book |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gentle movement (e.g., walking, yoga) | <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxing muscles |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eating nourishing meals including carbohydrates | <input type="checkbox"/> Having a hot bath |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Staying hydrated | <input type="checkbox"/> Calling a friend |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Catching up with family or friends | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing in a journal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engaging in hobbies | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing online games or apps |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing exercises | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing a sport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watching TV/Netflix | Other ideas: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listening to music | _____ |
| | _____ |
| | _____ |

Make a plan

Let's do a **Wish Outcome Obstacle Plan (WOOP)** for how you might use your selected strategy to stop your negative spiral.

Watch the video⁵ below:



⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/yBaVSJ6zq4c?feature=oembed>

Create your WOOP for one of the strategies you selected above.

The strategy I chose is: _____

My WOOP:

<p>What is your <u>wish</u> for the next 4 weeks that seems challenging but achievable?</p> <p><i>As you name your wish in 3-6 words, imagine writing it in glowing letters on a sign at the end of your path. Keep it in the front of your mind as you move forward in this exercise.</i></p>	<p>Wish:</p>
<p>What is the best <u>outcome</u> that you can imagine, the best outcome about fulfilling your wish?</p> <p><i>Picture the scene in vivid detail—where are you, what are you doing, and how do you feel?</i></p>	<p>Outcome:</p>
<p>What is the one main <u>obstacle</u> in you that stands in the way of realising this wish.</p> <p><i>Picture a wall or barrier that appears on the path towards your wish, a habit, a fear, or a thought that makes it harder to move forward.</i></p>	<p>Obstacle:</p>
<p>What is your <u>plan</u> to overcome your obstacle?</p> <p><i>Imagine you have a tool in your hand that represents your power to overcome the wall. It could be a key, a ladder, or a burst of energy to break through. What action or thought is your tool? Picture yourself using it and watching the wall disappear. Write your action or thought in one sentence.</i></p>	<p>Plan (action/thought):</p>
<p>If/then plan:</p> <p>If [write obstacle here]: _____</p> <p>Then [write action/thought here]: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Great work. Now slowly repeat this plan.</p>	

Congratulations! You have completed a WOOP that will help you cope better with strong emotions without hurting yourself and keeping in a negative spiral.

Now we need your help...

Now that you've heard the science and heard from other people, we'd like you to share your own story and advice.

We would like to use your story and advice to help other people like you to deal with some of the challenges they may be experiencing.



Share your story...

Imagine you are having a really tough day. For example, you got into an argument with a close friend this morning, and you find yourself feeling an overwhelming wave of really intense self-hatred.

What kinds of thoughts do you think you may have? How do you think you may act in response to these thoughts and feelings?

Use the information you have just learned to help you.

Share your advice...

Now, imagine that the same event you just talked about happened to another person just like you. Imagine another person was feeling a lot of self-hatred after an argument with a close friend for example.

Now, imagine they are thinking about hurting themselves to cope with that self-hatred.

What would you say to help them understand they don't have to hurt themselves, even though they may have these thoughts and feelings?

When deciding what to say, think about what you learned today about the brain and changing your actions in response to self-hate.

HELPFUL TIP: Sometimes when you find it hard to give yourself good advice, it is easier to think about what you would say to a good friend and then apply it to yourself.





Thank you for helping us today!

**And well done – you’ve completed the Anchor in
the Moment chapter!**

*Keep Up the
Good Work!*

Remember...

LIFE
IS WAY
TOO SHORT
TO SPEND
ANOTHER DAY
AT WAR
WITH YOURSELF.