
Improve the
Moment to
Regulate
Emotions

Improve the Moment

✓ A. What Is Improving the Moment?

Improving the moment is replacing immediate negative events with more positive ones by making the moment more positive and easier to tolerate. Some strategies involve changing appraisals of oneself (encouragement) or the situation (creating meaning in the situation, imagining changes in the situation). Some involve changing body responses to events (relaxing). Prayer and focusing on one thing in the moment have to do with acceptance and letting go.

✓ B. When to Practice Improving the Moment

Explain to participants: "Improving the moment is particularly useful when you are feeling overwhelmed in a stressful situation that may be long-lasting, or when distracting activities and self-soothing are not working."

✓ C. How to Improve the Moment

Tell participants: "A way to remember these skills is the word IMPROVE: Imagery, Meaning, Prayer, Relaxing actions, One thing in the moment, Vacation, Encouragement."

✓  **Practice Exercise:** Ask participants to read through all the items on Handout 9 and check those they think might work for them. Ask people what they checked. (This exercise can be done at the beginning or at the end of reviewing the handout.)

1. Imagery

Mental visualization—imagery—can be used to distract, soothe, bolster courage and confidence, and make future rewards more salient.

Say to participants: "Using imagery, you can create a situation different from the actual one; in this sense, it is like leaving the current situation. With imagery, however, you can be sure that the place you go to is safe and secure. Going to an imaginary safe place or room within yourself can be very helpful during flashbacks. For this strategy to be useful, however, you have to practice it enough times when you are not in a crisis to get it firmly down as a skill."

 **Practice Exercise:** Ask participants to breathe deeply and go within themselves to wise mind. Suggest that while there, they begin building a safe room inside themselves. Have them imagine the furniture in the room, the locks on the doors, the things they would put in the room to feel safe. Ask them also to imagine what they would put in the room to protect themselves from destructive urges. What would they keep out of the room? Ask participants to share how they built their room.

Imagery can also be used to cope more effectively with crises. Practicing effective coping in imagination can actually increase one's chances of coping effectively in real life. It can be helpful first to write out a script outlining how one would cope effectively with a crisis without making it worse, and then practice it in imagination. Used in this way, imagery is very similar to the emotion regulation skill of cope ahead (see Emotion Regulation Handout 19).

Example: "Imagine yourself tolerating a very painful emotion or powerful urge to do some-

thing destructive by visualizing yourself flying away into the clouds, looking down on the pain and intense urges."

2. *Meaning*

Finding or creating meaning helps many people in crises. Victor Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, an important book about surviving Nazi concentration camps.[29] It is based on the premise that people need to find or create meaning in their lives to survive terrible suffering. Finding or creating meaning is similar to the dialectical strategy of making lemonade out of lemons. (See Chapter 7 of the main DBT text.)

Discussion Point: It is important to note that life is at times unfair for reasons that no one can understand. People do not have to assume that there is a purpose to their suffering, although those who are religious or spiritual may see it this way. Those who do not believe in a higher purpose can still create meaning or purpose, however. Get feedback about participants' views on the meaning or purpose of suffering.

3. *Prayer*

The essence of prayer is the complete opening of oneself to the moment. This practice is very similar to the notion of radical acceptance, discussed later in this module. Note that the suggested prayer is not one of begging to have the suffering or crisis taken away. Nor is it a "Why me?" prayer.

Practice Exercise: During the skills training session, have all participants close their eyes, imagine or "get in touch with" current pain or suffering, and then silently try different types of prayer. These might include an acceptance prayer (e.g., "Thy will be done"), a "Deliver me" prayer, or a "Why me?" prayer. Have participants refocus on current suffering (for only a moment) before each attempt at prayer. Discuss afterward. Or suggest that people who are comfortable with praying try each type of prayer during the next crisis, and keep track of which type actually helps.

4. *Relaxing Actions*

Relaxing actions as part of improving the moment are different from paired muscle relaxation as taught in the TIP skills. In paired relaxation, the emphasis is on directly modifying how the body is reacting to stress. In relaxing actions, the emphasis is on widening activities to include a wider variety of relaxing things to do. Explain to participants: "The key here is to select activities that ordinarily have the effect of calming you down. When you are relaxed, it is usually far easier to resist temptations to engage in crisis behaviors. Being relaxed gives you time to think and review your pros and cons."

Discussion Point: Many of the skills taught in this module or in the Mindfulness module can be very relaxing. It can be useful to have each participant make a list of activities that are especially relaxing. Elicit from participants types of activities they find relaxing. Discuss types of activities that are relaxing to some but that cause tension, anxiety, or irritation for other people.

Practice Exercise: It can be very relaxing to listen to mindfulness or relaxation exercises recordings. As noted earlier, a wide range of these is available from various sources; as also noted earlier, these are often most useful if a skills trainer or therapist provides the recording. A script that can be used for such a recording is provided in Distress Tolerance Handout 9a and described below.

5. *One Thing in the Moment*

"One thing in the moment" is another way of describing "one-mindfully," the second mindfulness "how" skill discussed in Chapter 7 of this manual. Although it can be very difficult to do, focusing on one thing in the moment can be very helpful in the middle of a crisis; it can provide

time to settle down. The secret of this skill is to remember that the only pain one has to survive is "just this moment." We all often suffer much more than is required by calling to mind past suffering and ruminating about future suffering we may have to endure. But, in reality, there is only "just this moment." This skill is important in reality acceptance, and a number of specific exercises for improving focus and increasing awareness are taught in the next segment of this module.

Practice Exercise: During the session, have all participants close their eyes and imagine or "get in touch with" some current discomfort, irritation, or anxiety right now, at this moment in the session. Instruct participants to raise a hand slightly when they have the focus. Instruct them to notice their level of current discomfort. Now instruct them to start ruminating about all the past times when they have had to endure such feelings in sessions. Have them also bring to mind and ruminate about how much more these feelings have to be endured in this skills training session and all future sessions. Instruct them to notice now their level of discomfort. Then have them refocus the mind on "just this moment." Explain: "Say in your mind, 'Just this moment'; let go of thoughts of the future and the past." Now have them notice their level of discomfort after doing this. Discuss the exercise.

6. Vacation

Continue: "Taking a 'vacation from adulthood' is coping by retreating into yourself or allowing yourself to be taken care of for the moment. Everyone needs a vacation from adulthood once in a while. The trick is to take it in a way that does not harm you, and also to make sure the vacation is brief. It should only last from a few moments to no longer than a day. When you have responsibilities, taking a vacation depends on getting someone else to take over your duties for a while. The idea is similar to the notion of taking a time out to regroup."

Discussion Point: Some individuals are experts at taking vacations. The problem is that they are not in control of their vacations; that is, they take them at inappropriate times and stay on them too long. When vacation taking becomes a skill to be practiced, this gives them the potential for getting in control. Elicit from participants times when they have taken vacations in an out-of-control fashion. Discuss ways to get in control of vacations and use them effectively.

7. Encouragement

"Encouragement is cheer leading yourself and rethinking situations. The idea is to talk to your-self as you would talk to someone you care about who is in a crisis—or to talk to yourself as you would like someone else to talk to you. In couples, having a higher ratio of positive comments to negative comments predicts the partners' staying in the relationship.30–32 You are in a relationship with yourself, so to increase well-being, you have to say more positive and encouraging things than negatives and put-downs. The idea here is to rethink situations when you start tell-ing yourself they are hopeless, that they won't ever end, or that you cannot do what is needed."

Note to Leaders: You may at first need to do quite a bit of modeling of self- encouragement here, as well as cheer leading.

Discussion Point: Mention that it is important to balance improving the moment with staying in the present. Discuss with participants how when this balance is not achieved, the strategies for improving the moment can be overused, particularly in invalidating environments. However, point out that just because they can be overused, this does not mean they have no value at all. Elicit and problem-solve resistance to using these skills.

D. Improving the Moment with Sensory Awareness

Sensory awareness (as described in the optional Distress Tolerance Handout 9a) is aimed at centering oneself to enhance a sense of calmness and peace. It involves focusing attention on various sensations that one might have. Although the procedure is given in the form of questions, the goal is to direct participants' attention to the presence or absence of sensations asked about, and to encourage participants to focus on their experiences. Like body scan meditation, this skill is much easier for participants to learn if they can listen to a recording of the questions or a live reader. You can make a recording yourself and put it on a CD or thumb drive to give to participants, or you can have participants record (on smartphones if they have them) your reciting the questions in the session.

Note to Leaders: How you teach this depends on how much time you have. If time is short, you can quickly demonstrate (with all participating) by asking just ten questions. If you do not have a recording of the questions, give participants Distress Tolerance Handout 9a to use as a guide for asking themselves questions. It can be particularly helpful to have participants mentally rate their distress before and after the practice, and then share any changes. It is important to point out that relaxing is a skill that takes lots of practice. Practiced on a daily basis, however, it can prepare clients for engaging in more functional behaviors during crises.

The steps for teaching sensory awareness are as follows:



✓ **1. *Orient Participants to the Procedure***

Tell participants: "This procedure asks a series of questions about your body sensations. Focusing your mind on body sensations can bring you back into the present. This helps many people feel 'grounded' and more at peace, calming emotions that feel out of control."

The entire procedure, practiced at home or in an individual session, ordinarily takes about 10 minutes, but it can also be done quickly in 5 minutes (by skipping questions).

✓ **2. *Demonstrate Noticing the Sensations***

16. *"Can you feel a change in the temperature in the air around you?"*
17. *"Can you feel how your left arm is warmer than the right?"*
18. *"Can you imagine how it would feel to be a rag doll?"*
19. *"Can you notice any tightness in your left forearm?"*
20. *"Can you imagine something very pleasant?"*
21. *"Can you imagine what it would feel like to float on a cloud?"*
22. *"Can you imagine what it would feel like to be stuck in molasses?"*
23. *"Can you picture something far away?"*
24. *"Can you feel a heaviness in your legs?"*
25. *"Can you imagine floating in warm water?"*
26. *"Can you notice your body hanging on your bones?"*
27. *"Can you allow yourself to drift lazily?"*
28. *"Can you feel your face getting soft?"*
29. *"Can you imagine a beautiful flower?"*[33]*
30. *"Can you feel how one arm and leg are heavier than the other?"*[33]

3. *Give Suggestions for Brief Sensory Awareness*

Say to participants: "In a crisis or when you have very little time, ask yourself two or three of these questions."

Discussion Point: Ask participants after the practice whether their arousal and distress tolerance went down, stayed the same, or went up. Although my colleagues and I often spend only 5 minutes on this exercise in session, we have found that many participants have a noticeable reduction in arousal, which often makes tolerating distress much easier.

Sensory Awareness, Step by Step

Find a comfortable position. Staying in this position, listen to the questions below, listening for your response after each question. If you do not have a recording of these questions, you can make one for yourself (or ask a friend to make one), recording each question with about 5 seconds between each question.

1. Can you feel your hair touching your head?
2. Can you feel your belly rising and falling as you breathe?
3. Can you feel the space between your eyes?
4. Can you feel the distance between your ears?
5. Can you feel your breath touching the back of your eyes while you inhale?
6. Can you picture something far away?
7. Can you notice your arms touching your body?
8. Can you feel the bottoms of your feet?
9. Can you imagine a beautiful day at the beach?
10. Can you notice the space within your mouth?
11. Can you notice the position of your tongue in your mouth?
12. Can you feel a breeze against your cheek?
13. Can you feel how one arm is heavier than the other?
14. Can you feel a tingling or numbness in one hand?
15. Can you feel how one arm is more relaxed than the other?
16. Can you feel a change in the temperature in the air around you?
17. Can you feel how your left arm is warmer than the right?
18. Can you imagine how it would feel to be a rag doll?
19. Can you notice any tightness in your left forearm?
20. Can you imagine something very pleasant?
21. Can you imagine what it would feel like to float on a cloud?
22. Can you imagine what it would feel like to be stuck in molasses?
23. Can you picture something far away?
24. Can you feel a heaviness in your legs?
25. Can you imagine floating in warm water?
26. Can you notice your body hanging on your bones?
27. Can you allow yourself to drift lazily?
28. Can you feel your face getting soft?
29. Can you imagine a beautiful flower?
30. Can you feel how one arm and leg are heavier than the other?

Improving the Moment

A way to remember these skills is the word **IMPROVE.**

With **I**magery:

- ❑ Imagine very relaxing scenes.
- ❑ Imagine a secret room within yourself. Furnish it the way you like. Close and lock the door on anything that can hurt you.
- ❑ Imagine everything going well.
- ❑ Make up a calming fantasy world.
- ❑ Imagine hurtful emotions draining out of you like water out of a pipe.
- ❑ Remember a happy time and imagine yourself in it again; play out the time in your mind again.
- ❑ Other: _____

With **M**eaning:

- ❑ Find purpose or meaning in a painful situation.
- ❑ Focus on whatever positive aspects of a painful situation you can find.
- ❑ Repeat these positive aspects in your mind.
- ❑ Remember, listen to, or read about spiritual values.
- ❑ Other: _____

With **P**rayer:

- ❑ Open your heart to a supreme being, God, or your own Wise Mind.
- ❑ Ask for strength to bear the pain.
- ❑ Turn things over to God or a higher being.
- ❑ Other: _____

With **R**elaxing actions:

- ❑ Take a hot bath or sit in a hot tub.
- ❑ Drink hot milk.
- ❑ Massage your neck and scalp.
- ❑ Practice yoga or other stretching.
- ❑ Breathe deeply.
- ❑ Change your facial expression.
- ❑ Other: _____

With **O**ne thing in the moment:

- ❑ Focus your entire attention on just what you are doing.
- ❑ Keep yourself in the moment.
- ❑ Put your mind in the present.
- ❑ Focus your entire attention on the physical
- ❑ Listen to a sensory awareness recording (or use Distress Tolerance Handout 9a)
- ❑ Other: _____

With a brief **V**acation:

- ❑ Give yourself a brief vacation.
- ❑ Get in bed; pull the covers up over your head.
- ❑ Go to the beach or the woods for the day.
- ❑ Get a magazine and read it with chocolates.
- ❑ Turn off your phone for a day.
- ❑ Take a blanket to the park and sit on it for a whole afternoon.
- ❑ Take a 1-hour breather from hard work.
- ❑ Take a brief vacation from responsibility.
- ❑ Other: _____

With self-**E**ncouragement and rethinking the situation:

- ❑ Cheerlead yourself: “You go, girl!” “You da man!”
- ❑ “I will make it out of this.”
- ❑ “I’m doing the best I can.”
- ❑ Repeat over and over: “I can stand it.”
- ❑ “This too shall pass.”
- ❑ “I will be OK.”
- ❑ “It won’t last forever.”
- ❑ Other: _____

List (and then practice) rethoughts that are particularly important in your crisis situations (e.g., “The fact that he did not pick me up doesn’t mean he doesn’t love me”):

❑ _____ ❑ _____

IMPROVE the Moment

Due Date: _____ Name: _____ Week Starting: _____

Practice each IMPROVE skill twice, and describe your experience as follows:

When did you practice this skill, and what did you do to practice?	What was going on that was painful or stressful (if anything)?	How much time passed in doing this skill?	Rate before/after skill use			Conclusions or questions about this skills practice
			Distress tolerance (0 = I can't stand it; 5 = I can definitely survive)	Emotion		
				Negative emotion intensity (0–100)	Positive emotion intensity (0–100)	
Imagery:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	
Meaning:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	
Prayer:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	
Relaxation:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	
One thing:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	
Vacation:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	
Encouragement:			/	/	/	
			/	/	/	

Adapted from an unpublished worksheet by Seth Axelrod, with his permission.



IMPROVE the Moment

Due Date: _____ Name: _____ Week Starting: _____

For each IMPROVE skill, write down what you did during the week, and write down a number to indicate how effective the skill was in helping you tolerate the distress and cope with the situation (keeping you from doing something to make the situation worse). Use the following scale:

I still couldn't stand the situation, even for one more minute. **1** **2** *I was able to cope somewhat, at least for a little while. It helped somewhat.* **3** **4** *I could use skills, tolerated distress, and resisted problem urges.* **5**

Day: **IMAGERY**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____

Day: **MEANING**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____

Day: **PRAYER**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____

Day: **RELAXATION**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____

Day: **ONE THING IN THE MOMENT**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____

Day: **VACATION**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____

Day: **ENCOURAGEMENT**

_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____
_____ /_____ Effectiveness: _____