

Mental Health Tip Sheet: Building Resilience

As we work together to understand what happened on and leading up to April 18 and 19, 2020, why and how, we recognize that sometimes reading or hearing about a distressing or emotionally overwhelming experience can be upsetting and disturbing.

This tip sheet includes steps you can follow to build your resilience, including if you are feeling overwhelmed, distressed or anxious.

Remember, if you need help at any point in the Commission's process, our Mental Health team can support you with the following:

- Connecting you directly with mental health services and other support providers, or listening to feedback on the resources currently available
- Sharing information on ways you can continue building resilience
- Discussing specific ways to participate in our work that will not cause further harm or can reduce harms

Contact info@MassCasualtyCommission.ca to learn more or visit MassCasualtyCommission.ca/support for more mental health and wellness resources.

WHAT CAUSES MENTAL DISTRESS?

The amygdala (a part of the limbic system in the brain) gets over-stimulated when we experience long-term or severe stress. This part of the brain is thought to be responsible for processing memories as well as conditioned responses to fear. Studies have found that distraction is able to decrease the activation of the amygdala.

WHAT IS DISTRACTION?

Distraction is anything you do to temporarily take your attention away from strong emotion. A key part of a distraction is that it is temporary. Distraction is not about trying to escape or avoid a feeling. It is implied you eventually will return to the feeling you were having. Then, once the intensity of the feeling has reduced, we can use another skill to manage the emotion.

Tip: Distract Yourself

Sometimes focusing on a strong emotion can make it feel even stronger and more out of control. Therefore, by temporarily distracting yourself, you may give the emotion some time to decrease in intensity, making it easier to manage.

Distraction can keep you safe in the moment by preventing unhealthy behaviors (such as substance use or emotional eating) that can occur in response to a strong feeling, as well as making a feeling easier to cope with in the long run. Some possible options for distractions for you to try if you are feeling overwhelmed or distressed are below.

- **Calling a good friend and talking about ordinary things**
- **Counting backwards from a large number by sevens or another number (e.g. 958, 951, 944, 937, etc.)**
- **Do a chore—wash some dishes, clean out a drawer**
- **Exercise—go for a walk, run, or swim**
- **Do some yoga or meditation and focus on breathing**
- **Read a book, watch a funny movie or show**
- **Try a crossword puzzle or paint a picture**

Keep in mind these can be brief distractions as well as a break from an intense feeling. If you do this often you may notice some distractions work better for you than others. Everyone is unique and should do what works best for them.

Tip: Self-Sooth

Another helpful tip for managing an intense stress response is self-soothing. Self-soothing can be helpful when you involve one or more of your five senses. When engaging in self-soothing, it helps to focus completely on the task in the moment. That means you should try to be mindful of your senses and what you are experiencing. Anytime you are distracted, simply bring your attention back to what you are doing.

Remember, you can come up with your own self-soothing tips. Try to write down as many as you can and put it in a safe place for when you may experience distress.

The following page provides some examples of self-soothing activities and space to write down your own tactics.

TOUCH

Your skin is the largest organ in your body and is very sensitive to external stimulus. This makes it a powerful tool in your ability to relax.

- Soak in a warm bath or go for a swim
- Feel warmth on your skin by sitting in the sun or in front of a sunny window
- Change into your most comfortable clothes or wrap up in your favorite blanket

SMELL

Research shows positive benefits of aromatherapy and it is often a recommended natural treatment for people dealing with stress, anxiety, depression or problems with sleep.

- Spend time literally “smelling the roses” in a garden
- Simply step outside and take a deep breath of fresh air
- Lavender, vanilla, and a number of other fragrances have proven to reduce stress

TASTE

While it's best to try not to turn to food for comfort all the time, it can have positive effects on mood. Many of us have learned that hunger can lead to irritability and this can impact stress levels as well.

- Rather than turning to junk food, try sucking on hard candy or sipping a cup of herbal tea
- Have a comforting meal of a favorite food and try to include healthy foods too

SOUND

Your sense of sound can be important for a positive emotional state. Music therapy has become a recommended treatment for people with depression, anxiety and stress.

- Listen to relaxing music or recordings of soothing sounds
- Try saying positive statements of encouragement out loud to yourself or send yourself a voice message to listen to later
- Listen for all the sounds you hear while sitting outside

MY SELF-SOOTHING TIPS

This mental health resource is largely based on www.verywellmind.com.