DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES & ALTERNATIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Some people use self-injury as a way to cope with negative feelings, often because they haven’t learned how to do that in a healthier way.

Identifying the feelings and thoughts that lead to self-injury, and challenging them, can be important to the recovery process.

STOPPING IS EASIER IF YOU CAN FIND OTHER WAYS OF EXPRESSING AND COPING WITH YOUR FEELINGS

IDENTIFYING FEELINGS AND SITUATIONS
Ask yourself...

What was going on in my life when I first began 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?

How do I feel just before I want to injure myself?

How can I better deal with the situations that trigger me and make me want to injure myself?

Do I always feel the same way when I get the urge to injure myself?

YOU MAY WANT TO KEEP A DIARY OF YOUR FEELINGS AT DIFFERENT TIMES!
**WHAT CAN I DO INSTEAD?**

If you're...

**FEELING SAD**
- Do something slow & soothing
- Take a hot bath
- Give yourself a present
- Play with a pet
- Make a list of things that make you happy
- Visit a friend
- Play with a pet
- Hug a loved one or stuffed animal

**FEELING ANGRY**
- Slash an empty plastic bottle, piece of heavy cardboard, or an old shirt
- Squeeze ice
- Make a soft cloth doll to represent thing you are angry at--cut and tear it instead of yourself
- Hit a punching bag
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow fight style

**FEELING GUILTY OR BAD ABOUT YOURSELF**
- List as many good things about yourself as you can
- Read something good that someone has written about you
- Do something nice for someone else

**FEELING EMPTY OR UNREAL**
- Squeeze ice
- List the many uses for a random object (like, what are all the things you can do with a twist tie?)
- Interact with other people
- Put a finger into frozen food, like ice cream
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger

**WANTING TO FOCUS**
- Do a task that requires focus and concentration
- Eat a raisin mindfully—how does it look, feel, smell? Chew slowly, notice how the texture and taste change as you chew.
- Choose an object in the room, examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description as you can

**Feeling Guilty or Bad About Yourself**
- Remember when you've done something good
- Think about why you feel guilty, and how you might be able to change it

**Feeling Angry**
- Rip up an old newspaper or phone book
- Make clay models and cut or smash them
- Bang pots and pans together
- On a sketch or a photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do--then cut & tear the picture
- Dance, clean, exercise

**Feeling Empty or Unreal**
- Slap a tabletop, hard.
- Take a cold bath
- Stomp your feet on the ground
- Rub liniment under your nose
- Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.

**Feeling Sad**
- Do something nice for someone else
- Call a friend & just talk about things you like
- Baby yourself somehow
- Listen to soothing music
- Light sweet smelling incense
- Curl up with hot cocoa and a good book
Other General Distraction and Substitution Techniques

- Reach out to others
  - Phone a friend
  - Call 1-800-DON'T-CUT
  - Go out and be around others

- Express yourself
  - Write down your feelings in a diary
  - Cry—the healthy & normal way to express your sadness or frustration
  - Draw or color

- Keep busy
  - Play a game
  - Take a shower
  - Do homework
  - Listen to music, read, clean, or cook

- 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 think about how they look, sound, smell, taste, and feel
  - Do yoga or meditate

- Release your frustrations
  - Break old dishes
  - Throw ice cubes at a brick wall
  - Throw eggs in the shower
  - Throw darts
  - Punch or scream into pillows
  - Slam doors
  - Exercise

For More Resources
Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery
http://www.selfinjury.bc.tr.cornell.edu
Youth Risk and Opportunity Lab
https://www.yroccornell.com