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Overcoming Disordered Eating

Information Pack A

Take Charge ... Initiate Change

Module 7

Moods & Disordered Eating

Introduction	2
What is Mood Intolerance?	2
Do I Have Difficulty Managing my Moods?	3
Learning to Manage Moods	3
Mindfulness	3
Worksheet: Mindfulness Skills Practice	6
Learning to Tolerate Distress	7
Worksheet: Distress Tolerance Skills	8
Worksheet: Distress Tolerance: Benefits & Costs	9
Emotion Regulation	10
Worksheet: Identifying & Labelling Emotions	11
Module Summary	13
About This Module	14

This is the seventh module of Information Pack A, which provides information about disordered eating and offers strategies to help you start changing the *behaviours* associated with your disordered eating and weight control habits. We suggest you read through all the modules of this Information Pack, in order, before embarking on change.

If you do think you might suffer from an eating disorder, it is important that you talk to your General Practitioner, as there are many physical complications that can arise from being at an unhealthy low weight or from losing weight very quickly, or from purging. We advise you to seek professional help with working on an eating disorder.

If you use any extreme weight control behaviours – even rarely – you should also see your General Practitioner for a full medical check-up, as your health might be compromised. Such extreme measures include:

- extreme food restriction/fasting (and/or rapid weight loss)
- purging (self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives or diuretics)
- extreme exercise



Introduction

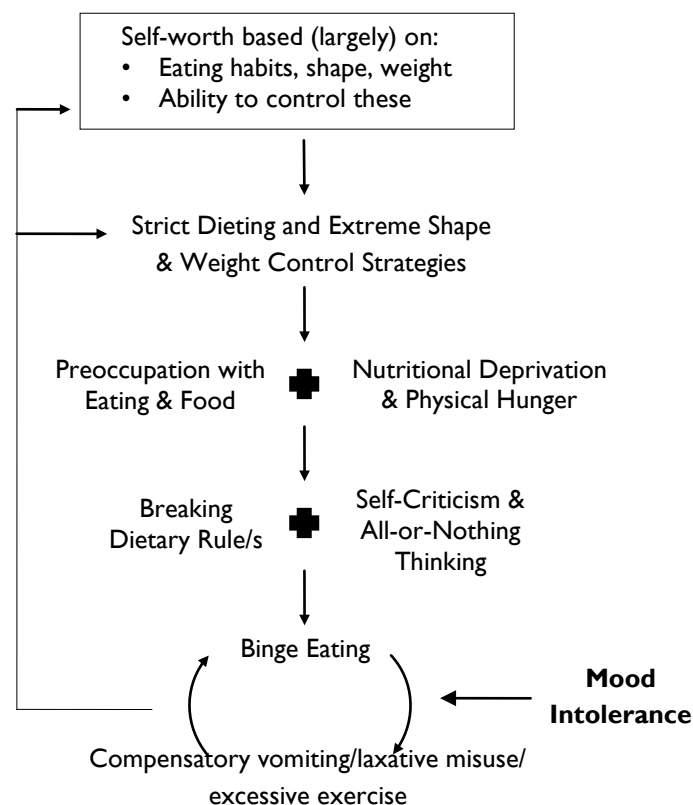
In the last module we described binge eating, purging and excessive exercise as part of a vicious cycle that involves concern over weight and shape, and dietary restriction. In this module we will talk about another aspect of the vicious cycle: the role of moods in eating disorders. We will discuss how some people have difficulty tolerating moods and managing them. As a result, they resort to unhelpful behaviours in an effort to cope with, and overcome, intense mood states. We will explore more helpful strategies for managing your moods. Even if you don't think you have problems with tolerating moods, you might find the information and coping strategies provided here interesting or useful.

What is Mood Intolerance?

Some people have great difficulty tolerating negative moods. What do we mean by that? These people don't know how to deal with intense feelings and they are very sensitive to intense negative emotions (e.g., disappointment, depression, hurt, fear, guilt, anger). So they use particular ways and means to manage their moods, and achieve short-term relief by avoiding or getting rid of those intense negative feelings. These ways and means come at a personal cost because they usually take the form of drinking alcohol, taking drugs, self-harm (e.g., cutting or burning), binge eating, vomiting, or excessive exercising. In the long-term, these actions do not prevent the unwanted negative experience, and they can, in turn, cause additional problems.

Therefore, mood intolerance can be understood as: *sensitivity to, and difficulty tolerating, intense negative feelings to the extent that personally costly measures are used to try to avoid these feelings.*

Mood intolerance can get in the way of overcoming eating problems. This is because people with disturbed eating AND mood intolerance often resort to binge eating, vomiting, or excessive exercising to get relief from intense feelings. Coping in this way only keeps the eating disorder going. Below is a diagram that was also shown in Module 3. This diagram shows how an eating disorder such as Bulimia Nervosa might develop and be maintained. We have also added mood intolerance to the diagram, showing that it can trigger binge eating, vomiting, or excessive exercising and is one of the mechanisms that keep the eating disorder going.





Do I Have Difficulty Tolerating & Managing Moods?

Many people with eating disorders resort to binge eating (and, less often, purging, exercising or restricting food) when they are overcome with emotion and feel unable to cope. For some people it can have a numbing effect, for others it has a calming effect, and for some it can help take the edge off anger. To overcome eating problems fully, you may also need to learn to overcome mood intolerance – in other words, learn to deal with intense moods. First, let’s find out if this is something you have difficulties with.

Here are a few questions for you to think about:

	Never	Rarely	Some times	Often	Very Often
How often do you use alcohol and/or drugs when you feel upset?					
How often are you prone to outbursts of anger or rage?					
How often do you experience major changes in your mood?					
How often do you feel like you have to hurt yourself or others?					
How often do people say that you are emotionally unstable?					
How often do you eat to calm yourself down when you are feeling worried, anxious, or tense?					
How often do you eat to deal with angry feelings?					
How often do you eat to comfort yourself when things have gone wrong?					
How often do you eat when you are bored?					
How often do you eat to distract you from your problems?					
How often do you eat to help you block out negative feelings?					

If you have answered many of the above questions with Often or Very Often, then you might have difficulties with handling moods. If you haven’t answered Often or Very Often, you may still want to stay with us as we discuss various ways of managing your moods. You might learn some skills that could be useful in the future.

Learning to Manage Moods



It is common for people with eating disorders to report that, when the going gets tough, they feel they have no alternative but to resort to, say, binge eating. Binge eating has become their way of coping and they see no alternative. It is really important to realise that there ARE other ways of coping with distress.

There are various skills to be learned for overcoming mood intolerance effectively and learning to deal with intense mood states. As with all new things, it will take time and energy to learn these new skills.

Mindfulness Skills

Mindfulness is about living with awareness. It helps to be aware of what you are doing so that you can change your behaviours. It is impossible to change a behaviour when you aren’t aware of even doing it! How many times have you been half-way into a binge before you ‘catch’ yourself? When you become more aware of your actions, you will find it easier to change. Mindfulness skills involve taking a step back and observing yourself neutrally. In the last module we discussed Mindful Eating as one strategy to gain control over your binges.

Mindfulness skills can be divided into the “What” skills and the “How” skills. It is about observing, describing, and participating (the “What”) in a way that is non-judgemental, focusing on one thing at a time, and doing what is effective (the “How”). These are described in more detail below.



The “What” skills of mindfulness:

- **Observing.** Notice what you are experiencing, without getting caught up in the experience. Just observe and be aware of your feelings and any physical sensations. Imagine your mind as a non-stick pan, and allow the feelings and thoughts to come (be observed) and go (slip away), like clouds in the sky or leaves floating away in a stream.
- **Describing.** As you observe your experiences, you need to put words to them. For example, you might say in your mind, “I notice a tightness in my chest as I breathe. The thought ‘I’m very tense’ comes to my mind”. Just notice and describe what is in your thoughts – don’t get involved in the content of your thoughts.
- **Participating.** When you do something, do it with all your attention. Don’t do things on ‘automatic pilot’ – participate in the activity with awareness. For example, when you are vacuuming the carpet, don’t start thinking about cooking dinner. Notice the sound of the vacuum cleaner, which muscles you are using. Notice your feelings and any thoughts that come to mind. Notice if attention strays, then gently bring it back to the task.

The “How” skills of mindfulness:

- **Being non-judgemental.** This means accepting each moment as it is, not how you think it ‘should be’. It is focusing only on the facts and not assigning a ‘value’ or any ‘worth’, not saying something is “good” or “bad”. This is hard, because we all tend to judge rather than describe things. We might say “The sun is shining, that’s lovely!” Being non-judgemental would be: “The sun is shining; I can feel its warmth on my face”. Notice what is helpful and balanced, as well as what might be unhelpful or unbalanced, but don’t judge it. If you find yourself judging, don’t judge yourself for it! Just gently remind yourself to let go of judging and return to being non-judgemental.
- **Focusing on one thing at a time.** Work on doing one thing at a time! Focusing on one thing at a time means that we can give ourselves and our attention fully to that action. So, when you are walking, walk. When you are eating, eat. When you are watching TV, focus on what you are watching. Do each thing with ALL of your attention. If feelings or thoughts (e.g., remembering what you have to do later) distract you, do your best to let go of those distractions and bring your attention back to what you are doing. You may find that you have to do this again and again. This is because your mind has a habit of taking a little ‘journey’ of its own and wandering. Just notice that your mind has wandered and gently bring your focus back to what you are doing. If you find yourself doing more than one thing at once, gently direct yourself to doing only one thing at a time.
- **Doing what is effective.** This means doing only what needs to be done in whatever situation you are in. Sometimes we get caught up with doing what we “should” do or what is “right”. Focus on your goals in the situation and do what is necessary to achieve them. For example, a soccer player might believe that the referee ruled unfairly against him in a match, but decides to let go of his anger and focus on scoring a goal. If you notice yourself getting annoyed and find yourself having thoughts such as, “This is unfair” or “That’s not right”, identify these as thoughts, let them go, and bring your attention back to the task at hand.

Let’s review again how mindfulness skills help in addressing problems with managing moods, and how this can help with your disordered eating. Intense negative feelings build up over time but many people think that they come out of the blue. This is because people are not aware of the thoughts, feelings and sensations they are experiencing and get caught up in them. By being more mindful of your experiences, feelings, sensations, thoughts, and behaviour, you will be more in control of your eating and less reactive and impulsive.

On Page 6 is a worksheet for you to practice the six mindfulness skills. Read through these skills again and the basic instructions overleaf, and then choose a particular day, time and meal for you to practice “Mindful Eating.” After the practice, use the worksheet to describe how you were **observing**, **describing**, and **participating** in eating this meal in a way that is **non-judgemental**, **focused on one thing at a time**, and **effective**. We encourage you to practice doing other things mindfully as well, such as going for a walk, having a bath, cooking, watching TV, doing housework, dressing, having coffee with a friend, etc. Keep practicing and use the worksheet to record your experiences.





Don't be disheartened if these skills don't work perfectly the first time you try them. It is best to approach the practice with a gentle curiosity and without too many expectations. Set-backs and slip-ups are to be expected, and can be used as part of your practice to cultivate greater mindfulness and understanding of the obstacles of being mindful. There are many ways to practice mindfulness, so be flexible and keep practicing regularly to help build your skill.

Basic Instructions for Mindful Eating Practice

1. Practice doing mindful eating for about 5 minutes at a time at first, and then gradually increase to longer periods. It is important to adopt a posture that is relaxed, alert, attentive, and interested. If possible, do the exercise in a room where there are few distractions. Proceed through the practice in a slow, careful, and gentle manner. Start by just spending a little time bringing your awareness to your posture and your relationship to the food you intend to eat.
2. After a little time of being aware of your posture, start moving your focus of attention to *observing* the food. Observe the visual sensations for about a minute or so. Noticing the detailed shapes, colours, and textures. Move your focus to particular aspects of the food.
3. Then move your focus of attention to the qualities of the particular smells. Allow yourself time to be fully aware of the smells that may be there and the detailed sensations in your nose (you may need to move a little closer to the food).
4. If thoughts or particular emotions enter your mind, acknowledge that they are there and then, as best you can, let them go and return your attention to observing the food and to the experience of smelling the food.
5. After a while you may wish to begin *describing* to yourself some of the more prominent aspects of your experience. For example, if there is some feeling of hunger, you might say to yourself "hunger is here" or "tummy grumbling". See if you can notice these feelings with a gentle curiosity. If you feel a little tense or bored, you might say "tension is here" or "boredom is here". Or if your mind is wandering into thinking about your experience or something else, try to see if you can notice the type of thoughts they are. If they are judging or fantasy thoughts, you might say to yourself "judging" or "fantasising". Then returning back to *observing* mode.
6. When you are ready to start eating the food, becoming aware of your intention to eat the food, the movements for eating, and the tastes and textures in your mouth as you eat. Observing the movements and feelings as you chew and swallow the food, from moment to moment.
7. Again, if any thoughts or emotions arise while you are eating, you may wish to give them a descriptive name. If there are thoughts, see the thoughts as just thoughts, notice how they will come and go, and then as best you can return your awareness to the process of eating.
8. When you have spent some time observing and then describing, you can become aware of *fully participating* in the task of eating. Expand your awareness to experience all the sensations, smells, and movements together as you eat.
9. During the previous aspects of mindfulness, it is important to adopt a *non-judgmental* stance, and bring all of your attention to the particular experience you are *focusing on, from moment to moment*. Lastly, try to adopt the view that you're doing the practice because it needs to be done and mindfulness is a skill that works, rather than doing it because of more lofty thoughts like "it should" be done, or "it is the right thing to do".



Mindfulness Skills Practice

Instructions: Refer to the descriptions of the Mindfulness “What” and “How” skills provided in this module. In the spaces provided below, describe your practice of each of these skills, immediately after a particular meal, with as much detail as possible. Remember to also record the day, date, time, and the meal that you are practising being mindful of.

Day/Date: _____ Time: _____

Activity: _____

Observing: (What did I notice? How easy was it to remain focused on sensations? What physical sensations were prominent? Did I notice any distractions or mind wandering, and what were they?)

Being Non-Judgemental: (Did I go to the practice with an open mind? Did I allow myself to accept my experience, or did I try to control my experience? In what way was I non-judgmental and in relation to what?)

Describing: (What things did I describe? Particular types of thoughts, body sensations, emotions?)

Focusing on One Thing at a Time:

(How easy was it to remain focused on one thing? What happened when I was not focused? Did I have any reactions to my mind wandering?)

Participating: (Did I participate fully in the task? Or, did I go into automatic pilot, become very self-conscious, or wish I was doing something else?)

Doing What is Effective: (Did I just get on with the activity in a practical way because it is effective? Or did I get pre-occupied with thoughts that “I must do it right” or “perfectly”?)



Learning to Tolerate Distress

Distress is part of life and you cannot avoid experiencing it. In fact, the more you make efforts to avoid pain and distress, the more distressed you are likely to be. When you try to get away from feeling pain – be it emotional or physical – you are adding an extra layer of distress on top of what you are already feeling. It is helpful to learn to bear up under distress skilfully and as best you can.

Tolerating or bearing up under pain and distress means that you are aware of, and accept, yourself and your current situation in a non-judgemental way. You may not be able to change certain things then and there, or it may not be an appropriate time to make changes. You may not be sure of how to respond, and need time to calm down and think things through. Sometimes you just need to get through the crisis. This is when distress tolerance skills are needed.

Distracting. While we are not suggesting that you work at avoiding your feelings altogether, we recognise that sometimes those emotions seem overwhelming and there are times where it may be helpful to immerse yourself in an activity to take your mind off your feelings.

- **Activities:** call or go out with a friend, do some gardening, take a bath, go for a walk.
- **Contributing:** make or do something thoughtful for someone, do volunteer work.
- **Comparisons:** compare yourself favourably, with someone who might be less fortunate than you
- **Opposite Emotions:** read a joke book, watch a ‘chick-flick’ or a comedy, listen to dance music.
- **Pushing away:** leave the situation for a while – both physically and mentally. Imagine a wall between yourself and the situation. Postpone thinking about it, i.e., tell yourself that you will think about it later. Imagine putting any distressing bits of the situation in a box and tucking it out of sight.
- **Other Thoughts:** find something to occupy your mind, such as playing computer games, doing a crossword puzzle. Try counting backwards from 100!
- **Sensations:** Do something physical such as: squeeze a ball or something squishy in your hand, hug a pillow tightly, have a hot or cold shower, switch on a fan or air-conditioner and sit in front it.

Self-soothing. There are times that we need to help ourselves feel calmer. These strategies are aimed at bringing you comfort and relief. Think of satisfying and stimulating your five senses.

- **Vision:** Find a beautiful flower, go to the beach and watch the waves
- **Hearing:** Listen to music, the sounds of nature (e.g., sounds of insects, birds, water, breeze). Sing a song, hum a tune, play an instrument.
- **Smell:** Use your favourite shampoo, lotions, or perfume. Try on different scents at the store. Spray some air freshener. Light some scented candles or incense.
- **Taste:** Make a soothing drink like herbal tea or hot chocolate. Suck on a peppermint or chew some gum. Remember to taste your food and drink mindfully.
- **Touch:** Have a bubble bath. Put clean sheets on your bed. Stroke your pet. Have a massage or soak your feet. Put some skin lotion on. Put on some comfortable clothes or a silky shirt, dress. Hug someone.



Improving the moment. This is replacing the immediate negative events with more positive ones.

- **Imagery:** Imagine you are in a safe place, or lying on a beach, or coping well
- **Meaning:** Look for some meaning in your pain. Reflect on your spiritual values.
- **Pray** to God if you believe, or reach out to the universe. Ask for strength to bear the distress and get through this.
- **Relaxation:** Practice a technique that works for you (yoga, deep breathing, muscle relaxation)
- **One thing in the moment:** focus on the here-and-now in detail. Bring all your attention to focus on what you are doing right now – drinking tea, doing some gardening, or walking, etc.
- **Vacation:** give yourself a break – stop actively coping
- **Encouragement:** Be your own cheerleader. Say: “I can stand this,” or “This won’t last forever.” You can make up your own cheerleading rhymes, such as: “I’ll be ok, I’ll be fine. This too will pass in time!”



Distress Tolerance Skills

Instructions: There are three types of skills listed here and a number of strategies for each type of skill. For each strategy, write down what specific things you will do to help you tolerate and bear with any distress you might experience. Then, practise each of the strategies you have chosen and write down how you felt before and after you used that strategy. Rate your distress levels between 0 (no distress at all) and 100 (the distress can't feel worse than this).

PRACTICE

Distress Levels
Before After

Distracting

Activities			
Contributions			
Comparisons			
Emotions			
Pushing Away			
Thoughts			
Sensations			

Self-Soothing

Vision			
Hearing			
Smell			
Taste			
Touch			

Improving the Moment

Imagery			
Meaning			
Prayer			
Relaxation			
One Focus			
Vacation			
Encouragement			



Distress Tolerance: Benefits & Costs

Considering the pros and cons. Another strategy for tolerating distress involves evaluating the benefits and costs of: a) using extreme measures such as cutting, drinking, binge eating, vomiting or unhealthy behaviour to get rid of distress; versus: b) tolerating the distress.

Ask yourself: What are the short-term and long-term benefits and costs of not tolerating the distress to get rid of the emotional pain? What are the short-term and long-term benefits and costs of tolerating the distress and not using extreme measures?

NOT Tolerating Distress Engaging in unhealthy behaviours to deal with difficult emotions (e.g., cutting, drinking, binge eating, vomiting)		
	BENEFITS	COSTS
Short-Term	A	B
Long-Term	C	D
Tolerating Distress NOT engaging in unhealthy behaviours		
	BENEFITS	COSTS
Short-Term	E	F
Long-Term	G	H

Ask yourself: Are the short-term benefits in column “A” worth the long-term costs of column “D”? Are you willing to tolerate the short-term discomfort of “F” to reap the long-term benefits of “G”?



Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation also uses mindfulness skills – observing and describing one’s thoughts, emotions and behaviour in a non-judgemental way. You can feel more distressed if you beat yourself up for feeling, say, angry, or if you tell yourself: “I shouldn’t feel this way.” When you do this, you are experiencing a secondary emotion in response to your primary emotion. Actually, in many instances, the primary emotion (e.g., anger) might be quite healthy and appropriate. Therefore, being mindful and non-judgemental about how you feel can help you better manage your mood and regulate your emotions.

Identifying & Labelling Emotions. This involves:

- Observing and describing the event in which you experience particular emotions and sensations
- Your thoughts and interpretations of the event
- How you are feeling (put words to feelings, describe physical sensations, put a name to emotions)
- How you might have expressed or want to express those emotions; any actions you might have carried out or wanted to carry out
- The after-effects of those emotions on your functioning

Let’s use an example to illustrate this emotion regulation strategy:

Event: *Father is unable to attend my uni graduation ceremony*
Thoughts & Interpretations: *“I wish Father could leave work to be with me. He’s hardly ever attended significant events in my life. His work is probably more important to him than I am.”*
Feelings: *I feel disappointed & sad. There’s a lump in my throat & my eyes are filling with tears.*
Expression & Action: *Not talking much - only saying what I have to, not smiling, not wanting to talk to people or smile, slumping my shoulders; wanting to cry*
After-Effects: *Feeling irritable, remembering other times my father wasn’t there for me, no appetite*

Emotions communicate to (and influence) others. One of the functions of our emotions is to carry a message to other people. This communication is expressed through our facial expressions and body language. In primitive societies and among animals, facial expressions communicate like words. Even in today’s modern societies, facial expressions can get a message across faster than words. Because our emotions communicate to others, they can also be used consciously and unconsciously to influence and control others’ behaviour. For example, a woman who feels sad and disappointed may need comforting. Her sadness (expressed through drooping of shoulders, screwing up eyes and crying) may result in her partner putting an arm around her and giving her a hug. Understanding the functions of emotions is important because you can then ask yourself, “When I feel this emotion, what do I actually want to say – what message do I want to get across?”

Emotions organise and motivate action. Emotions motivate our behaviour, they prepare us for action, and they get us to act in important situations so we don’t have to think everything through. Strong emotions help us overcome obstacles – in our minds and in the environment. For example, feeling frustrated when something isn’t working out can help organise problem solving abilities and creative thinking skills.

Emotions can be self-validating. Our emotional reactions to other people and to events can give us information. Emotions can be a signal or an indication that something is happening. For example, when we feel happy about being with someone, our emotions could be telling us that this person may be enjoying our time together. But emotions should not necessarily be treated as facts. For example, “If I feel incompetent, I am incompetent”, “If I feel right about something, then it is right”, “If I’m afraid, this situation is threatening”, “I love him, so he must be OK.” Remember, emotions may be signals, but they may not be the truth.

Being mindful in observing and describing your emotions is very important in learning and practising to overcome mood intolerance. Use the worksheet on the next page to practise identifying and labelling your various emotions, be they positive (e.g., love, joy, excitement) or negative (e.g., sadness, anger, fear).





Identifying & Labelling Emotions

Instructions: Choose a current or recent emotional reaction and fill out this worksheet in as much detail as possible.

Emotion/s Experienced: _____ Intensity (0 to 100%): _____

Activating Event for Emotion/s (What prompted the emotion?)
Interpretations of the Situation (Beliefs, assumptions, thoughts, expectations)
Body Sensations (The feelings in my body)
Body Language (Facial expressions, posture, gestures)
Actions Taken (What I said or did)
Action Urges (What I felt like doing, what I wanted to say)
After-Effects (The after-effect that the emotion had on my state of mind, other feelings, behaviours, thoughts, memory, body)
Function of Emotion/s



Overcoming Disordered Eating



Increasing positive emotional experiences. Managing moods is not only about learning skills to deal with intense negative emotions. One very important strategy, both for the short-term and the long-term, is increasing the number of positive emotional experiences in your life. Here are some suggestions for doing this.

In the Short-Term...

Do pleasant things that are possible now:



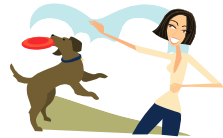
- Engage in pleasurable activities that bring out positive emotions (e.g., listen to my favourite CD, meet a friend for coffee)
- Do something simple and pleasant for yourself once a day or at least three times a week (e.g., have a bubble bath, rent that DVD I've been longing to see)

Make a list of activities that may be pleasant and fun for you, as well as positive things you can do for yourself.

In the Long-Term...

Make changes in your life so that positive events will occur more often:

- Go for positive events. Make a list of positive events you want to experience, identify the steps you need to take toward these goals, and then take the first step towards achieving them



Positive events I want to experience	Steps I need to take towards these goals

- Take care of relationships. As best you can, mend old friendships and relationships. Work on current ones, and reach out for new friendships and relationships

Summary

We have discussed the idea that sensitivity to, and difficulty tolerating, intense negative emotions can get in the way of overcoming eating disorders because it can trigger unhelpful behaviours like binge eating, vomiting, and excessive exercising. Three main types of skills are helpful in managing your moods, and they are: mindfulness skills, distress tolerance skills, and emotion regulation skills.

These are important skills to learn and work through and this will need practice and persistence. There are a lot of important things discussed in this module and we encourage you to take your time to read it through (perhaps even more than once). Do use the worksheets, again and again, to help you practise the skills - and then remember to apply them when the situation calls for it. With practice and persistence, you will certainly make progress!



Module Summary

- Mood Intolerance can be understood as sensitivity to, and difficulty tolerating, intense negative feelings to the extent that personally costly measures are used to try to avoid these feelings.
- Difficulty tolerating intense moods can play a role in maintaining disturbed eating habits and weight control behaviours. This is because people with disordered eating who are also sensitive to and have difficulty dealing with intense negative feelings often resort to binge eating, vomiting, or excessive exercising to get relief from those feelings.
- There are three types of skills to be learned for effectively overcoming mood intolerance and learning to deal with intense mood states. These three types of skills are: mindfulness skills, distress tolerance skills, and emotion regulation skills.
- Mindfulness involves living with awareness. Mindfulness skills include learning to observe, describe, and participate in a way that is non-judgemental, focusing on one thing at a time, and effective (doing what works).
- Distress tolerance skills help you to learn to bear up under pain and distress skilfully and as best you can. The main skills to help you tolerate distress are: distracting, self-soothing, improving the moment, and thinking of pros and cons.
- Regulating emotions is helped by being mindful and non-judgemental about how you feel. The emotion regulation strategies are: identifying and labelling emotions, and increasing positive emotional experiences

What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

Coming Up...



In Module 8 (Dietary Rules) we'll revisit the topic of strict dietary rules, and their relation to disordered eating behaviour



About This Module

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BACKGROUND AND REFERENCES

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment of eating disorders, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). This can be found in the following:

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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- Linehan, M. (1993) *Skills Training Manual* NY: Guilford Press

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