Your 8 Senses & DBT

DBT's distress tolerance skills work through the body. Classic Self-Soothe uses five senses, but neurodivergent nervous systems run on eight. Using all of them gives you more ways back to calm.

THE FAMILIAR FIVE

Senses that take in the world around you

Sight
Light, color, movement, clutter

SELF-SOOTHE

Sound
Voices, music, background noise

SELF-SOOTHE

Smell
Scents, odors, fragrances

SELF-SOOTHE

Taste
Flavor, plus texture and temperature

SELF-SOOTHE

Touch
Pressure, texture, temperature

SELF-SOOTHE
TIPP · T

THE HIDDEN THREE

Senses that read your body from the inside. Often the fastest route to calm.

Vestibular
Movement and balance, from the inner ear

TIPP · I SELF-SOOTHE

Proprioception
Body position and force, from muscles and joints

TIPP · P paired muscle relaxation

Interoception
Inside signals: heartbeat, breath, hunger, thirst

TIPP · P paced breathing

SAME SENSE, DIFFERENT NEEDS

+ Seeking
Your system wants **more** input to feel "just right." Soothing means **adding**: pressure, movement, sound.

— Avoiding
Your system is already **full**. Soothing means **subtracting**: dimmer, quieter, fewer textures.

Most people are a mix, and it shifts with stress and sleep. **Removing input counts as self-soothe.**

WHICH SKILL, WHEN?

0–3	4–7	8–10
Everyday care Build sensory breaks into the day so distress has less to build on.	**Self-Soothe** Pick any sense. Add or subtract input.	**TIPP first** Change your body chemistry fast, then soothe.

TIPP AT A GLANCE

For distress at 8–10, when thinking skills are offline

T — Temperature
Cool water on your face for 15–30 seconds while holding your breath.
TOUCH

I — Intense movement
Run, dance or do jumping jacks for 10–15 minutes.
VESTIBULAR

P — Paced breathing
In for about 4, out for about 6. Longer out-breaths slow the heart.
INTEROCEPTION

P — Paired muscle relaxation
Tense a muscle group for 5 seconds as you breathe in, release as you breathe out.
PROPRIOCEPTION

63 autistic adults in a 2025 randomized trial: **DBT reduced emotion dysregulation**, partly by easing alexithymia (trouble naming feelings). Gains held at six months. One small study: promising, not final.

BEFORE YOU TIPP

Cold water and intense exercise change heart rate fast. **Check with your doctor first if you have a heart condition or concerns about eating.** Never push through input that hurts.

Sources: Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual*, distress tolerance (Self-Soothe, TIPP); UC San Diego TIPP skill handout; Fledglings, "The 8 Senses and Sensory Systems"; Bemmouna et al., *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 2025. Educational only, not medical advice.

The 8-Sense Menu

Ideas to try, not rules. Circle what works for your body, cross out what doesn't, and add your own.

Sense	To settle when you're revved up	To wake up & ground when you're numb or shut down	To take input away when you're overloaded
Sight	Dim or warm lights · Nature photos · Slow visuals like a lava lamp or fish tank video	Bright light or daylight · Look out a window · A colorful fidget to watch	Sunglasses or a cap brim · Close your eyes · Turn to a blank wall
Sound	A comfort playlist · Brown or pink noise · Rain or ocean sounds · Humming	Upbeat music · Singing out loud · A podcast you love	Earplugs or noise-canceling headphones · Find a quiet room
Smell	Lavender or vanilla · A loved one's hoodie · A familiar blanket	Peppermint · Citrus peel · Coffee beans	Step outside · Unscented products · Breathe into a scarf
Taste	Warm tea or cocoa · Smooth, creamy foods · A safe, familiar snack	Mint · A crunchy snack · An ice-cold drink	Plain, familiar food · Sips of water
Touch	Weighted blanket · Soft fabric · Petting an animal · Warm shower	Textured fidget · Cool water on your hands · **TIPP: cold water on face**	Tag-free, soft clothes · Take off scratchy layers · Ask for space
Vestibular	Rocking chair · Slow swinging · Gentle side-to-side sway	Brisk walk · Dancing · Jumping jacks · **TIPP: intense movement**	Sit or lie down, feet on the floor · Slow your head movements
Proprioception	Tight hug or self-hug · Weighted lap pad · Push against a wall · **TIPP: paired muscle relaxation**	Carry something heavy · Wall push-ups · A chewy snack	Rest fully supported: beanbag, pillows, lying flat
Interoception	**TIPP: paced breathing** · Hand on heart or belly · A warm drink	Body check: hungry? thirsty? too hot or cold? need the bathroom?	If body-focus spikes anxiety, use timers for food and water instead

STACK YOUR SENSES

Pairing senses often works faster than one alone.

- Weighted blanket + brown noise + dim lamp
- Brisk walk + upbeat music + cold drink

TEST IT LIKE A SCIENTIST

Rate your distress 0–10 before and after a tool. Keep what lowers the number.

Before _____ After _____

DBT REMINDER

Self-soothe isn't about fixing the problem. It's about getting through the moment without making it worse.

Calm body first. Solve later.

Based on DBT distress tolerance skills (Linehan): Self-Soothe and TIPP. Check with your doctor before using TIPP if you have a heart condition or concerns about eating. Educational only, not medical advice.

Build My Sensory Kit

Map your senses, then pack a kit you can actually reach when distress is high.

1 · MY SENSORY MAP

SENSE	I MOSTLY… (CIRCLE)	WHAT SOOTHES ME	WHAT OVERWHELMS ME
Sight	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Sound	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Smell	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Taste	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Touch	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Vestibular	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Proprioception	Seek · Avoid · Both		
Interoception	Notice · Miss · Both		

2 · PACK MY KIT

Pocket or phone
Always with me

Bag or car
Work, school, out and about

Home base
My calm-down spot

3 · MY DISTRESS PLAN

At 0–3, every day I'll…
Sensory breaks I can build in

At 4–7, I'll self-soothe with…
Add or subtract, any sense

At 8–10, my TIPP skill is…
Then, once I'm lower, I'll…

My early warning sign is _____ **I can reach out to** _____

Revisit your map when life changes: stress, sleep, illness and seasons can shift what your senses need. Check with your doctor before TIPP if you have a heart condition or concerns about eating.