



# DBT, GROUNDING AND SOOTHING STRATEGIES

*For First Responders with PTSD*

**HUMMINGBIRD THERAPY CLINIC**



# INTRODUCTION



First responder life is unpredictable. Alarms go off at 3 a.m., adrenaline spikes mid-shift, and you're expected to perform no matter what's happening inside. Over time, that pressure takes a toll. PTSD can show up in ways that feel intense, confusing, or isolating — but you're not broken, and you're definitely not alone.

This booklet is designed by mental health professionals with deep experience working with first responders, and shaped with language and strategies that fit operational culture. You won't find clinical jargon here. Instead, you'll find practical tools — grounding, soothing, and DBT techniques — that can help you ride the waves, regulate your nervous system, and build emotional resilience.

These are not "one size fits all." Think of them as a toolkit — some tools will work better for you on certain days, in certain situations. That's normal. Over time, the goal is to figure out which strategies feel like yours.

## How to Use This Booklet:

- **Take what works.** You don't have to do every exercise.
- **Keep it handy.** This is meant to be thrown in a gear bag, locker, or kept on your phone.
- **Practice when calm.** Grounding is easier to use under stress if your body already knows it.
- **Adapt to your world.** Use language, locations, and routines that make sense in your service.
- **Reach out.** If you hit a wall, connect with a peer, therapist, or support program.



# SECTION 1: DBT CORE SKILLS



## 1. MINDFULNESS –

### “Operational Awareness + Inner Awareness”

Mindfulness in DBT isn’t about incense and yoga mats. It’s about learning to pay attention on purpose, both to what’s happening around you (which you already do on calls) and to what’s happening inside.

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#### Operational Mindfulness Examples:

- Notice the sound of your radio without reacting.
- Do a 30-second breath reset before keying up.
- Take in the feel of your boots on the ground at a scene.

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#### Inner Awareness Examples:

- Notice tension in your jaw or shoulders.
- Acknowledge “I’m on edge right now” without judgment.
- Name what you’re feeling: “I’m frustrated and tired.”

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#### Practice Box:

- Noticed one physical sensation today
- Checked in with my breath once during shift
- Named one emotion in the moment

## 2. DISTRESS TOLERANCE – “Riding the Wave”

These skills help you get through high-stress moments without making it worse. They don’t fix the problem — they stabilize you long enough to choose your next move.

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### TIPP – Fast Regulation

- Temperature: splash cold water on your face / hold ice / cold pack on neck.
- Intense exercise: 20–30 jumping jacks, sprint up stairs, push-ups.
- Paced breathing: 4-in, 6-out breathing to slow heart rate.
- Paired muscle relaxation: tense → release major muscle groups.

Tried a TIPP strategy today

Found one that works fast for me

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### STOP – Hit the Pause Button

S – Stop – don’t act on impulse

T – Take a breath

O – Observe what’s going on inside and outside

P – Proceed mindfully

Practiced STOP at least once this week

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### ACCEPTS – Distract in a Pinch

- Activities (walk, clean gear, stretch)
- Contributing (check on a teammate, hold a door)
- Comparisons (remind yourself of past resilience)
- Emotions (listen to music that shifts your mood)
- Pushing away (temporarily shelf the problem)
- Thoughts (do a puzzle, count backwards)
- Sensations (chew gum, hold a textured object)



### 3. EMOTION REGULATION – “Name it to Tame it”

You’re trained to read scenes quickly – but how often do you read your own emotional scene?

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- Identify what you’re feeling (angry, sad, exhausted, numb).
- Understand what triggered it (call type, tone of voice, fatigue).
- Respond, not react (deep breath, opposite action, self-soothing).

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#### Checklist:

- I named an emotion today
- I tried an opposite action
- I used a regulation skill when tired

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### 4. INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS – “Clear & Respectful Communication”

DBT gives some simple structures that actually fit well with paramilitary communication styles.

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#### DEAR MAN – for asking or asserting:

- D – Describe the situation
- E – Express feelings clearly
- A – Assert what you need
- R – Reinforce – explain benefits
- M – Mindful – stay on track
- A – Appear confident
- N – Negotiate if needed

#### GIVE – for maintaining relationships

#### FAST – for self- respect





# SECTION 2: GROUNDING STRATEGIES

**“Bring your mind and body back to the present”**

When PTSD symptoms flare — flashbacks, intrusive memories, panic, or emotional flooding — grounding can help you reconnect to the \*here and now\*. Think of it like grabbing hold of something solid when a wave hits.

These techniques work best when you practice them during calm moments, so they're easier to access when you're in distress.

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## 1. 5-4-3-2-1 SENSORY GROUNDING

This is a classic — and it works because it pulls your attention to your senses, not the memory.

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- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel (boots on the floor, chair under you)
- 3 things you can hear (radio hum, traffic, HVAC)
- 2 things you can smell (coffee, fresh air)
- 1 thing you can taste (mint, gum, dry mouth)

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**Pro Tip: Do it out loud if you can. It anchors you faster.**

- Practiced 5-4-3-2-1 grounding this week
- Identified “go-to” sensory anchors for work

## 2. ORIENTATION STATEMENTS

If you're coming out of a flashback or a dissociative moment, simple orientation can bring you back.

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Say (out loud or internally):

> "My name is [Name]. I'm a [role]. It's [date]. I'm safe. I'm here at [location]. This is now, not then."

You can even keep a short version on a laminated card in your gear bag.

- Practiced orientation statement
- Created personal version I can use anywhere

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## 3. MOVEMENT-BASED GROUNDING

Your body is your best anchor.

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- Plant both feet on the floor. Press down firmly.
- Feel your weight in your boots.
- Roll your shoulders. Stretch your hands.
- Take one slow, deep breath into your belly.

If you're outside, notice the ground beneath you (concrete, grass, asphalt), or the weight of your gear. This simple act tells your nervous system: \*I'm here, I'm safe enough.\*



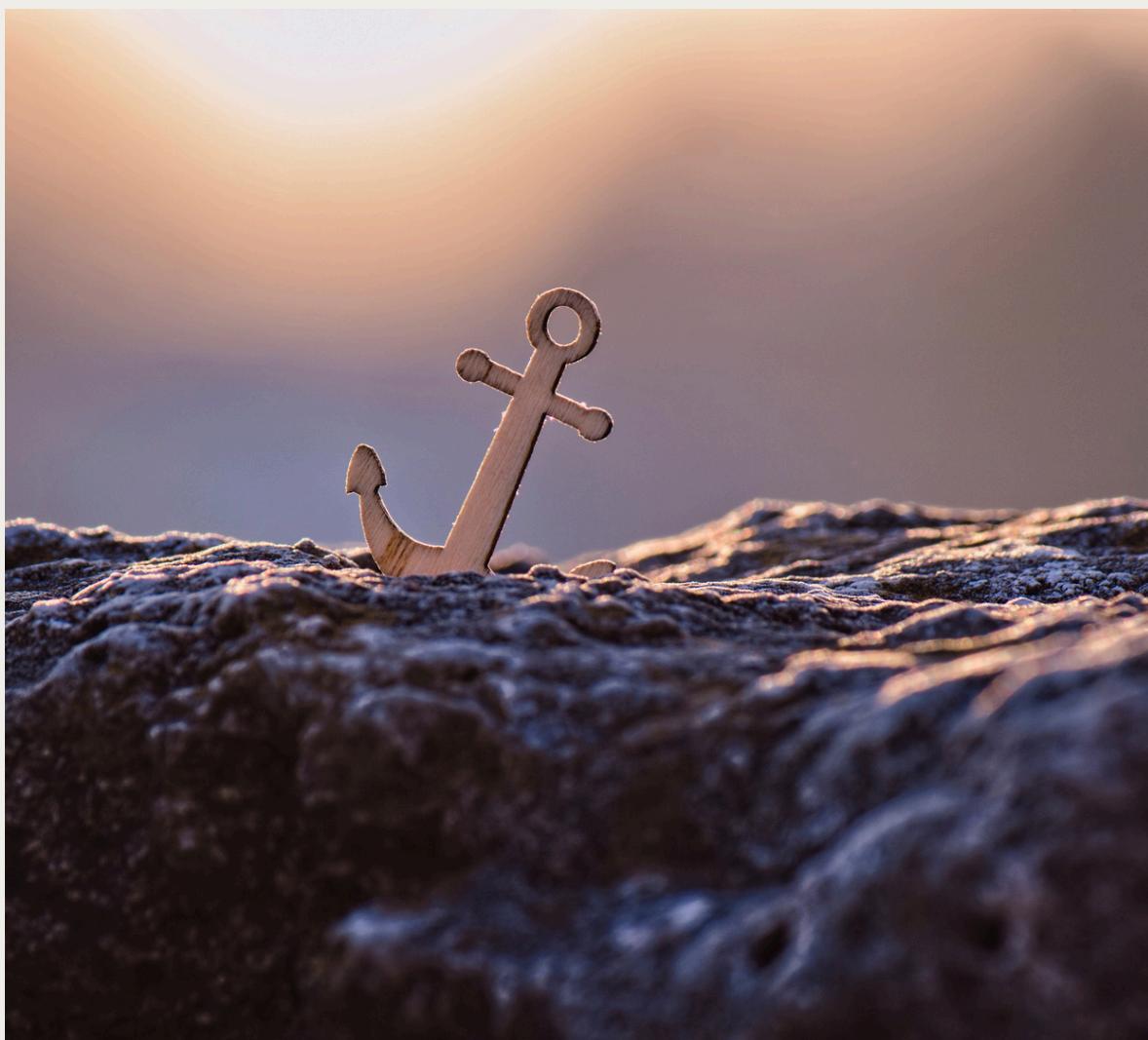
## 4. ANCHOR OBJECTS

Keep a small physical grounding object with you — a smooth stone, challenge coin, fabric swatch, bracelet, etc. Something non-triggering that you can touch when you feel overwhelmed.

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During a flashback or surge of panic, hold it. Feel the texture, temperature, and weight. Describe it to yourself silently.

- Identified an anchor object
- Practiced using it under mild stress





# SECTION 3: SOOTHING & REGULATION TECHNIQUES

**“Turn down the volume on your nervous system”**

When your stress response is in overdrive, soothing techniques help shift your body from “threat” to “safety.”

Think of this as tactical nervous system reset.

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## 1. BREATHING STRATEGIES

### Box Breathing (4-4-4-4)

- Inhale 4 seconds
- Hold 4 seconds
- Exhale 4 seconds
- Hold 4 seconds
- Repeat for 1–2 minutes.

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### Paced Breathing (4-6)

Breathe in for 4, out for 6. The longer exhale activates the vagus nerve, calming your system. Try doing this in your vehicle post-call or before sleep.

### Tactical Breathing (4-4)

In through your nose for 4, out through your mouth for 4. Steady and rhythmic. Great for in-the-moment regulation on calls.

- Practiced at least one breathing technique today
- Found a favourite I can do anywhere



## 2. SELF-SOOTHING KIT

Build a small, portable kit you can keep in your bag, locker, or vehicle. Include things that speak to your senses and identity as a first responder.

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### Examples:

- Strong mints or gum (taste)
- Soft cloth or textured keychain (touch)
- Personal photo or calming image (sight)
- Favourite playlist or ambient sounds (hearing)
- Essential oil roller / coffee beans (smell)

- Started assembling a kit
- Practiced using one item intentionally

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## 3. VISUALIZATION & SAFE PLACE

Close your eyes (if safe), and picture a place where you feel calm, safe, or steady. It can be real or imagined:

- A cabin by a lake
- Your backyard
- A favourite hiking trail
- The station gym at 3 a.m. when it's quiet

Engage your five senses in the image. This isn't "escaping reality" — it's giving your nervous system a break.

## 4. TEMPERATURE MODULATION

Cold water is your friend. Splash your face, run cold water over your wrists, or hold an ice pack to your neck. This triggers the dive reflex, which lowers heart rate quickly.

- Practiced cold water regulation
- Identified practical ways to use it at work/home



# SECTION 4: PTSD-SPECIFIC ADAPTATIONS FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

**“PTSD looks different in the field – your tools should too.”**

PTSD for first responders doesn't always look like the textbook. It can show up as irritability on shift, emotional numbness off shift, sleep disruption, or “hyper-readiness” that doesn't shut off. The following adaptations help tailor DBT, grounding, and soothing skills to the unique rhythms of responder life.

## 1. HYPERVIGILANCE VS. SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

Hypervigilance is that constant scanning – even when you're off duty. Situational awareness is a targeted, time-limited focus.

### Quick Re-set Drill:

1. Name your role – “I'm off duty / I'm on shift.”
2. Name your environment – “I'm at home / in a restaurant.”
3. Identify the actual risks in the moment.
4. Consciously lower your shoulders and take one deep breath.

This drill reminds your nervous system: not every situation is a call.

- Practiced hypervigilance re-set
- Identified personal “off duty” rituals

## 2. MANAGING INTRUSIVE OPERATIONAL IMAGERY

Flashbacks or intrusive memories may come as mental images, smells, sounds, or full-body sensations. You can pair grounding or soothing techniques with clear self-statements like:

> “This is a memory. I’m not back there. I’m safe right now.”

Combine with:

- 5-4-3-2-1 grounding
- Holding an anchor object
- Cold water or paced breathing

Practiced memory labeling statement

Paired it with a grounding strategy

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## 3. SHIFT WORK & SLEEP DISRUPTION

PTSD symptoms often spike during night shifts or post-rotation crashes. Fatigue amplifies irritability, hyperarousal, and emotional numbing.

Tactical Sleep Tips:

- Use pre-sleep rituals (e.g., same music, dim lights, gentle stretching).
- If you can’t sleep, do paced breathing or a short grounding routine – don’t fight the insomnia.
- Keep cold water and soft lighting near your bed so flashbacks don’t fully jolt you awake.

Created a pre-sleep ritual

Practiced grounding during night wakings



## 4. TRANSITION RITUALS BETWEEN WORK AND HOME

Without conscious transitions, operational stress rides home with you.

Examples:

- Change clothes at station.
- 2-minute grounding in vehicle before driving.
- “Verbal offload” with a trusted peer before walking in the door.
- Music playlist that signals “I’m done for today.”

- Identified a work→home ritual
- Practiced it this week

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## 5. PEER CULTURE & EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Many responders are more comfortable supporting others than talking about their own struggles. That’s normal — and why peer-to-peer tools like these are powerful. Using grounding or DBT techniques doesn’t mean you’re weak; it means you’re operating smarter.

> “The same way we maintain gear, we maintain our nervous system.”

- Talked to a peer about mental health tools
- Shared one strategy with a teammate





# SECTION 5: WORKSHEETS & PRACTICE LOGS

**“Skills only work if they get off the page and into real life.”**

These worksheets are designed to help you practice, track, and personalize your grounding, soothing, and DBT strategies. They're meant to be low-pressure — think of them as gear checklists for your mind.

## Daily Regulation Tracker

| Date | What emotion(s) showed up today? | What skill(s) did I try? | What worked best? | Notes / Wins |


- Practiced at least one skill today
- Reflected on what worked





## Distress Tolerance Practice Log

| Date | Situation | Skill Used (TIPP / STOP / ACCEPTS) |  
Effectiveness (1–5) | What I learned |

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- Practiced skill during mild stress
- Tried again during higher stress

## Grounding Menu Builder

My Go-To Sensory Grounding Tools:

- See: \_\_\_\_\_
- Hear: \_\_\_\_\_
- Touch: \_\_\_\_\_
- Smell: \_\_\_\_\_
- Taste: \_\_\_\_\_

## Orientation Statement:

> “My name is \_\_\_\_\_.  
I’m a \_\_\_\_\_. It’s  
\_\_\_\_\_. I’m safe. I’m here  
at \_\_\_\_\_.”

- Practiced grounding during calm time
- Saved orientation statement in phone / card

## Personal Soothing Kit Checklist

| Sense | Item | Packed in Kit | Works Well |

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Taste	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Touch	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sound	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Smell	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

- Created my kit
- Tried using items intentionally

## Crisis Coping Plan

Fill this out during a calm time. Keep a copy in your bag, locker, or saved on your phone.

### Warning Signs / Triggers

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Grounding Strategies that Work for Me

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### People I Can Call / Text

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Professional Supports

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Safety Actions / Steps I'll Take

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

- Completed crisis plan
- Stored it somewhere accessible





# SECTION 6: POCKET CARDS

**“Quick hits for when your brain is overloaded.”**

These are designed to be printed, cut out, laminated, or saved as phone lock screens. Keep them in gear bags, wallets, or taped inside lockers.

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## **TIPP Card — Fast Regulation**

T — Temperature: Cold water / ice on face, neck, wrists

I — Intense exercise: 30 sec. push-ups, jumping jacks, stair sprints

P — Paced breathing: In 4 s, out 6 s

P — Paired muscle tension: Tense/release groups

Works fast to calm the body's alarm system.

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## **STOP Card — Pause Before Reacting**

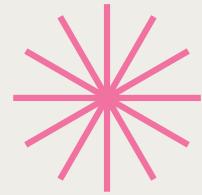
S — Stop what you're doing

T — Take a breath

O — Observe what's happening inside & out

P — Proceed mindfully

Use before sending that message, responding sharply, or making a quick decision under stress.



## 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Card

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Say it out loud if possible – it anchors faster.

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## Breathing Techniques Card

Box Breathing (4-4-4-4)

In 4 • Hold 4 • Out 4 • Hold 4

Paced Breathing (4-6)

In through nose 4 • Out through mouth 6

Tactical Breathing (4-4)

In 4 • Out 4 – smooth and steady

These can be done anywhere: in the rig, car, station, or at home.

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## Orientation Statement Card

> “My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I’m a \_\_\_\_\_. It’s \_\_\_\_\_. I’m safe. I’m here at \_\_\_\_\_. This is now, not then.”

Use during flashbacks, nightmares, or dissociation.

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## Shift Transition Ritual Card

- Change clothes / shoes
- 2-minute grounding in vehicle
- Verbal offload to peer
- “Off-duty” playlist

Helps separate work stress from home life.



# SECTION 7: REFERENCES & RESOURCES

**“You’re not meant to do this alone.”**

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## Key Therapeutic References

- Linehan, M. (2014). DBT Skills Training Manual (2nd Ed.).
- Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2015). Principles of Trauma Therapy.
- Van der Kolk, B. (2014). The Body Keeps the Score.
- Porges, S. (2017). The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory.

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## Canadian & First Responder-Specific Supports

### Badge of Life Canada

Peer-led national charity supporting psychological wellness of first responders and their families. [www.badgeoflifecanada.org](http://www.badgeoflifecanada.org)

### Wounded Warriors Canada

National mental health service provider for uniformed service members, veterans, and families. [www.woundedwarriors.ca](http://www.woundedwarriors.ca)

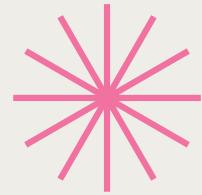
### Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC)

Guidelines, research, and workplace programs.

[www.mentalhealthcommission.ca](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca)

### WSIB PTSD Claims (Ontario)

If you’re a first responder in Ontario, PTSD claims are presumptive. Check your employer or union resources for filing information. [www.wsib.ca](http://www.wsib.ca)



## Boots on the Ground

- Peer support for first responders
- CALL 24/7: 1-833-677-BOOT (2668)
- <https://www.bootsontheground.ca/>

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## Crisis Supports (Canada)

- 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (National): Call or text 988
- Kids Help Phone (For youth / families): 1-800-668-6868
- Local crisis lines: Check regional listings in your province or municipality.
- 911: If you or someone else is in immediate danger.

Keep at least two crisis contacts in your phone under “Favourites” or “ICE” (In Case of Emergency).

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## Hummingbird Therapy Clinic

Specialized trauma-informed psychotherapy & wellness services for first responders, their families, and communities.

Aurora, Ontario

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## FINAL WORDS

**This booklet isn’t therapy — it’s a toolkit. It doesn’t replace trusted peers, good sleep, supportive leadership, or qualified clinical help. But it can give you something solid to grab onto when the waves hit.**

- > **“Just because you carry it well doesn’t mean it’s not heavy.”**
- > **You don’t have to carry it alone.**