

# Facing Your Feelings

## Module 4

### **Tolerating Distress**

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## Introduction

By working your way through Modules 2 and 3, we have introduced you to all the skills you need to start tolerating your distress. In this Module we will pull together all that you have learned in a Distress Tolerance Action Plan. It is then just a matter of lots and lots of practice, and we will give you some ideas on how to get the practice you need. As you will see, if you can apply your action plan regularly, then over time you can change the distress intolerant beliefs that are at the heart of your difficulties dealing with distress.

## Distress Tolerance Action Plan

A good Distress Tolerance Action Plan requires 5 steps. Let's look at each in turn:

### 1. Triggers

For an action plan to be useful, you need to first have some awareness of the common things that trigger your distress. Being more aware of what ignites your distress, will give you a 'heads up' for when you might particularly need to be using your action plan. These triggers could be external, such as certain situations, events, people, cues in the environment, etc. Or these triggers could be internal, such as certain thoughts, memories, images, bodily sensations, etc. A good way to get in touch with your common triggers is to think of past examples of not being able to deal with distress. That is, past times you used your old escape methods (i.e., situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction and suppression, alcohol or drugs, binge eating, excessive sleep, harmful releases, etc). See if you can work out what triggered off or led you to these behaviours in the first place. Below are some common triggers of distress, tick any that apply to you or note others that are specific to you that are not listed.



Relationship problems	Hearing bad news	Other:
Friendship problems	Seeing family	
Family problems	Seeing friends	
Partner/spouse behaviour	Arguments	
Anniversaries	People being unfair or rude	
Socialising	Medical appointments	
Financial problems	Work or study stress	
Unemployment	Thinking about the past	
Body sensations/symptoms	Thinking about the future	
Going out in public	Being disorganised	
Untidiness	Health problems	
Thinking about myself negatively	Physical sensations	
Comparing myself to others	Physical appearance	

### 2. Warning Signs

In addition to being aware of common triggers of your distress, it is also useful to be aware of the warning signs that tell you that you are having trouble dealing with your distress, and hence need to focus on using your action plan. Warning signs are the feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, and behavioural urges or actions that signal you are feeling overwhelming distress, and need to decide how best to handle this feeling. Like before, we have listed some common warning signs over the page. Underline any that apply to you or note others that are specific to you that are not listed.



Feelings	Thoughts	Physical Sensations	Urges or Actions
Disappointment, Hurt, Despair, Guilt, Shame, Sadness, Depression, Grief, Misery Irritation, Agitation, Frustration, Disgust, Jealousy, Anger, Rage, Hatred Nervousness, Anxiety, Dread, Fear, Panic, Terror	I can't cope This is hopeless This is unbearable This isn't going to get better I am losing control I can't deal with this I'm a mess I am weak I have to stop this	Low Energy, Fatigue, Heaviness, Crying Excessive Energy, Tension, Increased Heart Rate, Fast Breathing, Sweating, Hot, Shaking, Stomach Problems, Chest Pressure, Restlessness, Fidgety	Pace, Can't Sit Still Withdraw/Isolate Self Lash Out, Yell, Throw Things Avoid, Reassurance Seeking, Checking Distraction, Suppression Alcohol or Drug Use Binge Eating Excessive Sleep Harming Self
Other:	Other:	Other:	Other:

### 3. Commit To Dropping Escape Method & Doing Opposite Action

Once you acknowledge your distress, via being more aware of your triggers and warning signs, you are then in a better position to make a commitment to dropping your usual escape methods (i.e., situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction and suppression, alcohol or drugs, binge eating, excessive sleep, harmful releases, etc). In Module 3 we saw how important it is to try to do the opposite of our escape methods. Our escape methods are usually automatic habits we quickly jump to when we feel distressed, hence the decision not to go down this path sometimes slips past us. By being more aware of triggers, warning signs and our distress, we can choose to take a different path of doing the opposite action.



The commitment you make might sound something like...

*"I will try to tolerate this distress, rather than using my old habit of drinking to dull the pain"*

or

*"I will stay with this feeling, rather than avoiding situations that make me feel this way"*

Making a commitment to drop your usual escape methods and do the opposite, could be something you do mentally, or say out loud to yourself, or write down, or tell someone else about. It is up to you. The main thing is making your actions a conscious choice, rather than an automatic habit.

Take time to write a statement that reflects the commitment you might like to make to dropping your usual escape method and instead doing the opposite action. You might gain inspiration from what you have already written in the *What Not To Do* and *What To Do* section of Module 3, page 7.

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### 4. Accepting Distress

In essence, this step is about applying all that you learnt in Module 2. Your Personalised Mindfulness of Distress Script (see Module 2, page 8) is of most relevance here. The script you devised and have been practicing will help you to:

- i) recognise and allow the emotion;
- ii) watch the emotion by detaching from it, describing it and using imagery;
- iii) be present focused on a task or your breath; and
- iv) deal with the inevitable emotional comebacks.

### 5. Improving Distress

In essence, this step is about applying all that you learnt in Module 3. List all the distress improvement activities (both active and soothing) that you have discovered work for you, the words of encouragement that can help you through the moment of distress, and aspects of problem solving that may be relevant when you do have some control over the situation distressing you.

Now we want to put all 5 steps together on a single page that becomes the most important page of all these Modules. Try to keep this page somewhere easily accessible (you may even make multiple photocopies to put in various places). The idea is that when you are facing emotionally difficult times, you can look at this sheet to guide you through the new process of practicing distress tolerance, rather than giving in to old habits. As always, there is an example Distress Tolerance Action Plan on the next page, followed by a blank copy for you to complete using what you have already written in this Module and Modules 2 & 3. Put time and effort into your personalised Distress Tolerance Action Plan, refining it each time you use it, until you have a plan that works really well for you.



## Distress Tolerance Action Plan - example

### My Triggers (external or internal)

Any relationship, friendship or family problem. Arguments. Thinking negatively about myself, the past or the future.

### My Warning Signs (feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, urges or actions)

Sadness, Hurt, Despair, Depression  
Thinking this is "hopeless", "unbearable", "unchangeable", "what's the point to anything"  
Low energy, heavy, tired, want to cry  
Isolate myself from everyone, urge to drink to dull pain

### My Commitment to Dropping Escape Method(s) & Doing the Opposite Action

I will stay with this feeling, rather than isolating myself and trying to escape with alcohol

### Accepting My Distress (personalised mindfulness of distress script)

#### Recognise & Allow Emotion:

Aha! I'm feeling sad. This is a normal emotion to have. I can allow myself to have this feeling...I don't have to be afraid of it or try to get rid of it.

#### Watch Emotion:

I can just watch this feeling...make space for it...see what it does...I don't have to get caught up in it.  
I notice the emotion in my stomach and shoulders. I notice my body feels lethargic and heavy.  
This is just an emotion, just a feeling to be felt, nothing more and nothing less. I am not my emotions, I am the watcher of my emotions.  
I can just observe the feeling like a cloud floating past in the sky - it will just hang around of its own accord until it drifts out of sight.

#### Be Present:

I will turn my attention back to the task I am doing now ...noticing what I can feel...hear... see... smell... taste...OR to my breath - noting each in and out breath

#### Deal with Emotional Comebacks:

I feel the sadness returning...that's OK, that's what emotions do, they like to rear their head again. I will just go back to watching it again...it is just another cloud in the sky...

**Note:** remember if the distress I experience is extremely intense unbearable emotional pain, such that I am currently unable to apply the acceptance strategies, then skip ahead to the next step of 'improving'. This is particularly relevant for people who engage in self-harm, or drug and alcohol use to manage their distress, as it is more important to avoid engaging in behaviours that are damaging to myself.

### Improving My Distress (active & soothing distress improvement activities, words of self-encouragement, problem solving if relevant)

Walk around block	Enjoy sunshine
Get out of house - beach, park, shops, friends	Singing
Clean the kitchen	Shower
Water the garden	Pat my dog
Baking	Focus on any positive aspects in my life
Plan and make a nice dinner	Laugh out loud
Call best friend	Favourite energetic music

Encourage myself: "I can get through this", "This feeling will pass".

Is it a situation I can control? If yes then problem solve: what's the problem, list all possible options for solving, look at pros and cons, pick a solution(s), break into steps, plan when to do each step, take action, revisit options if needed.

**Note:** remember that if I am dropping the following escape methods - situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction & suppression - then it is best to leave doing any distress improvement activities until after I have faced the distress and experienced it naturally subside. In this way the distress improvement activities become a reward for approaching rather than avoiding my distress.

## **My Distress Tolerance Action Plan**

<p><b>My Triggers</b> (external or internal)</p>
<p><b>My Warning Signs</b> (feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, urges or actions)</p>
<p><b>My Commitment to Dropping Escape Method(s) &amp; Doing the Opposite Action</b></p>
<p><b>Accepting My Distress</b> (personalised mindfulness of distress script) <b>Recognise &amp; Allow Emotion:</b></p> <p><b>Watch Emotion:</b></p> <p><b>Be Present:</b></p> <p><b>Deal with Emotional Comebacks:</b></p> <p><u>Note:</u> remember if the distress I experience is extremely intense unbearable emotional pain, such that I am currently unable to apply the acceptance strategies, then skip ahead to the next step of 'improving'. This is particularly relevant for people who engage in self-harm, or drug and alcohol use to manage their distress, as it is more important to avoid engaging in behaviours that are damaging to myself.</p>
<p><b>Improving My Distress</b> (active &amp; soothing distress improvement activities, words of self-encouragement, problem solving if relevant)</p> <p><u>Note:</u> remember that if I am dropping the following escape methods – situational avoidance, reassurance seeking or checking, distraction &amp; suppression – then it is best to leave doing any distress improvement activities until after I have faced the distress and experienced it naturally subside. In this way the distress improvement activities become a reward for approaching rather than avoiding my distress.</p>

## Distress Exposure

Aside from practicing your Distress Tolerance Action Plan the next time (and anytime) you happen to experience distress, another way to gain confidence that you can deal with your distress is to purposely seek it out. In other words, purposely expose yourself to emotional discomfort, and apply your action plan. Now, this approach may not be for everyone, but it is a good way of gaining practice and building confidence in your distress tolerance abilities, and reducing any fear of negative emotion you may have.

### Distressing Situations I Could Approach

If you would like to give distress exposure a go, then the first step is to think of a variety of situations, places, people, activities, etc, that may bring on emotional distress for you. The key being that we are looking for situations that will allow you the opportunity to practice your Distress Tolerance Action Plan. Here are some examples of potentially distressing situations. Note those relevant to you, and add others you can think of.

- Emotional movies, TV shows, music, books
- Watching the News
- Looking at old photos/memorabilia
- Visiting the cemetery
- Thinking about the past or future
- Emotional conversations with family or friends
- Stating my opinion or raising an issue that might lead to an argument
- Situations that make me anxious like public places, shops, socialising, public transport, etc
- Activities that bring on physical sensations that make me anxious, like heavy exercise, sitting in a hot car, caffeine, breathing rapidly, spinning on the spot, etc
- Activities that make me angry like driving, standing in a queue, debating topics, etc.

Others:

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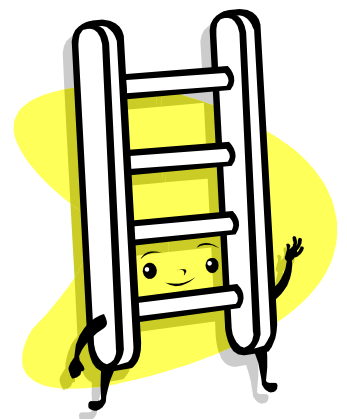
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### Distress Exposure Stepladder

Now you can create a Distress Exposure Stepladder. This is a list of activities likely to be distressing for you, that you can now start doing gradually as a way of practicing your new distress tolerance skills. The first step is to work out your goal – that is, what would you like to be able to do, but can't because you fear feeling distressed. Each step can then be about working towards that goal.

Your steps could involve a variety of activities (like the stepladder example given over the page) or could involve just one activity. If it is just one activity that distresses you, then each step on your stepladder might involve increasing the amount of **time** you spend doing that activity, or changing **who** you do that activity with, or **where** you do that activity, or **when** you do it, etc. The main thing is trying to create manageable steps that go from easier activities to harder activities, and that each activity generates some distress which you can use to practice your Distress Tolerance Action Plan.



When planning your steps make a note of the distress rating (0-100) that you would give each step, that is, how much distress you think you will experience when doing each step. This rating scale is a good way to check that you have your steps in order from easiest to hardest, that you are starting with a manageable first step, and that your steps are fairly evenly spaced without huge jumps in between each step.

## Distress Exposure Stepladder - Example

GOAL: <i>Watch an emotional movie in one sitting</i>	DISTRESS (0-100) <i>85</i>
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	STEP	DISTRESS
1	<i>Listen to an emotional song</i>	<i>25</i>
2	<i>Watch the TV news, without switching channels when a sad story comes on</i>	<i>35</i>
3	<i>Listen to an emotional CD in full</i>	<i>45</i>
4	<i>Watch an emotional TV show</i>	<i>55</i>
5	<i>Read an emotional book - 20mins at a time</i>	<i>65</i>
6	<i>Watch an emotional movie - in 30min intervals</i>	<i>70</i>
7	<i>Watch an emotional movie in 2 sittings</i>	<i>75</i>
8	<i>Watch an emotional movie in one sitting</i>	<i>85</i>

## My Distress Exposure Stepladder

GOAL:	DISTRESS (0-100)
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	STEP	DISTRESS
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

### Distress Exposure Guidelines

Now that you know what the first step is, it is time to do it. But before you do, here are a few guidelines to keep in mind to ensure that your distress exposure is effective.

- 1. Apply your Distress Tolerance Action Plan.** Don't forget to put the action plan you have worked so hard on, into practice each time you take a step on your stepladder. After all, distress exposure is your opportunity to practice distress tolerance, and fine-tune any teething problems.
- 2. Stay in the situation.** As much as possible, try to stick with each activity by using your Distress Tolerance Action Plan, until you experience your distress subside. If you pull out too soon before you have experienced your distress drop, you will feel like the distress has gotten the better of you, and it may rock your confidence.
- 3. Repetition, repetition.** With each step on your stepladder, repeat it until you no longer feel that activity is a problem for you, before moving on to the next step. This way your progress will be steady and solid.
- 4. Reward your successes and learn from any negative experiences.** Building distress tolerance is a learning process. Purposely confronting your distress in order to put your Distress Tolerance Action Plan into practice is a big deal. So recognise this and reward yourself! However, when we are learning a new skill, we can't expect things to always go smoothly. If things don't go to plan, try to sit back and learn from it. How could you do it differently next time? Do you need to refine anything on your Distress Tolerance Action Plan? Do you need to go back to an easier step on your stepladder and do some more repetition, before tackling the harder step again?



## Distress Exposure Diary

You can use the following table to record your stepladder progress. You can describe what you planned to do, and your Distress ratings for how distressed you both *expected* to be and how distressed you *actually* were. The last column asks you to jot down any comments about the experience – were you able to do the activity you planned? Were you able to put your Distress Tolerance Action Plan into practice? If so, how did it go? If you experienced a great deal of difficulty, you can note down why you think this might have been the case, and how you can approach it next time or rework your action plan.

Distress exposure step	Expected DISTRESS 0-100	Actual DISTRESS 0-100	Did you do it? Did you use your Distress Tolerance Action Plan? How did it go? OR Describe what made it difficult to complete the step and how you can prepare for next time?

## Adjusting Distress Intolerant Beliefs

As was introduced back in Module 1, at the heart of distress intolerance are certain negative beliefs about what it means to experience negative emotions. These beliefs tend to centre on the notion that negative emotion is either:

- bad in some way (e.g., “distress makes me weak”, “it is wrong or bad to be emotional”, “it’s stupid”, “it’s unacceptable”), or
- unbearable (“I can’t bear feeling distressed, I hate it, I can’t stand it, I must get rid of it”), or
- will lead to disastrous consequences (e.g., “if I feel negative emotion, then I won’t be able to cope/ I will lose control/ I will go crazy/ I will be a mess/ I won’t be able to function/ it will be dangerous”).

In Module 1 (page 6 & 9) you identified your Distress Intolerant Beliefs. Let’s double check these beliefs by answering the following questions.

If I experience emotional distress then...

What will happen? \_\_\_\_\_

What will it be like? \_\_\_\_\_

What will it mean about me? \_\_\_\_\_

What will I need to do? \_\_\_\_\_

See if you can summarise your answers above into one key Distress Intolerant Belief you strongly hold. Emotional distress is bad because...

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It is important to realise that if you keep using your Distress Tolerance Action Plan, and keep facing your distress rather than trying to escape it, then over time your distress intolerant beliefs will weaken and erode. This is because by the very act of tolerating your distress, you will be gathering evidence and experiences that show you these beliefs are not true. This adjustment process does rely on time, and your persistence in practicing what you have learned throughout these modules. However, let’s see if we can help the process along a little by working through the worksheet on the next page. As always, we have provided a completed example, followed by a blank worksheet for you to work on. The worksheet will guide you through a series of questions that will challenge your distress intolerant beliefs,

allowing you to start adjusting them and developing more distress tolerant beliefs. “What is a distress tolerant belief?” I hear you ask. This might sound something like...

*Negative emotions are normal and nothing to be feared  
Feeling distressed doesn't have to lead to disaster  
Negative emotions pass if you don't fight or avoid them  
I can stand uncomfortable emotions*

## Adjusting Distress Intolerant Beliefs - example

**The Distress Intolerant Belief I want to adjust is:**

*I can't handle any emotional distress*

**Do I have any evidence or experiences that go against this belief, particularly from when I have used my Distress Tolerance Action Plan (either spontaneously or via planned distress exposure):**

*I have been able to use my action plan to deal with distress on a number of occasions:*

- *After a bad exam mark*
- *After a fight with mum*
- *After watching a sad movie*
- *After an argument with my partner*
- *When I had to do public speaking*
- *After many times of just sitting with my negative thoughts about everything*
- *...*

*Friends turn to me for support when they are upset, which shows I can be emotionally strong.*

*I have had to cope with a lot of emotional things during my life, and I am still here so I must have some emotional strength I am not always aware of.*

**Why is distress not necessarily a bad thing, and may even be important?** (see Module 2, page 2)

*Negative emotions like sadness, fear and anger are normal and important to the survival of human beings; they can protect us, keep us safe, and show that certain things in our life are important to us. If we didn't feel negative emotions we would be like lifeless robots. Experiencing distress may allow me to be more sensitive to other people's distress.*

**What is a realistic expectation of human beings, when it comes to experiencing distress?**

*All human beings experience distress. It would be unnatural if people didn't experience negative emotions when something went wrong for them.*

**If a friend held the same distress intolerant belief for themselves, what advice would I give to them?**

*Yes you can get through times of distress, it is just that you don't believe you can...the distress will pass, just take it one moment at a time, and remember all the times you have handled distressing emotions*

**What would be a new Distress Tolerant Belief I would like to hold?**

*Distress is uncomfortable, but I can deal with it*

**What would I need to do to be living my life in accordance with this new belief?**

*Keep using my Distress Tolerance Action Plan when I feel distressed, and make a note of times I use it effectively so I remember that I can do it.*

*Challenge myself by purposely doing something that makes me feel distressed, to reinforce to myself that I can handle distressing emotions.*

*Don't avoid distress by using drugs, or avoiding emotional situations.*

**Adjusting My Distress Intolerant Beliefs**

**The Distress Intolerant Belief I want to adjust is:**

**Do I have any evidence or experiences that go against this belief, particularly from when I have used my Distress Tolerance Action Plan (either spontaneously or via planned distress exposure):**

**Why is distress not necessarily a bad thing, and may even be important?** (see Module 2, page 2)

**What is a realistic expectation of human beings, when it comes to experiencing distress?**

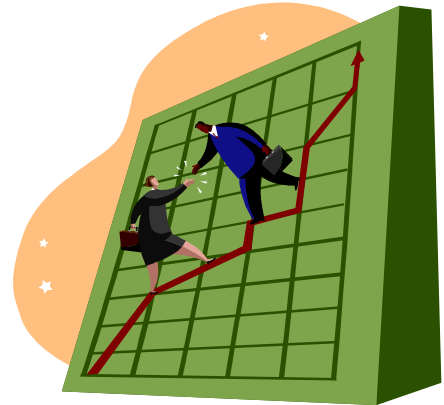
**If a friend held the same distress intolerant belief for themselves, what advice would I give to them?**

**What would be a new Distress Tolerant Belief I would like to hold?**

**What would I need to do to be living my life in accordance with this new belief?**

### Maintaining Your Gains

Congratulations! You have made it to the end of these Modules. You should feel proud of yourself for sticking with it. Now, at the end of the day the important thing is to **keep going!** Expect that changing how you deal with distress will take time, practice, persistence and patience. Expect that you will have good days and bad. Expect you will have days you feel like you are tolerating your distress really well, and days you feel like you have slipped back to being 'intolerant'. The old saying of "two steps forward, one step back" is very true. If you expect setbacks when you sign up for the journey of learning how to tolerate your distress, then when you face a bump in the road, you will be less likely to criticise your efforts and give up. As such, you will be better able to keep going with your Distress Tolerance Action Plan, to help you get back on track.



If you are struggling...don't give up! Revisit the earlier Modules, take your time, and find someone who can support you through developing these new distress tolerance skills. If you are finding that you are continuing to use your old escape methods, particularly drug or alcohol use and self-harm, then we strongly advise seeking professional assistance. Contact your GP to find a mental health professional who can help.

### Emotional Wellbeing

Whilst these modules have focused on helping you learn skills to better tolerate emotional distress, we hope that they lead to much more than just 'tolerance' of emotional discomfort. These modules are ultimately about building a sense of **emotional wellbeing and resilience**. This journey hasn't been about changing who you are as a person, but instead finding space and strength within yourself to face your feelings. Developing confidence that you can better cope with your emotions through applying the skills introduced in these Modules, will likely have flow on effects to feeling more content in your life and feeling a healthier human being all round.

The take home message of these modules is that emotional discomfort is not the problem, it is how we react to our emotions that is the issue. If we can see emotional pain as a normal and inevitable human experience that we don't need to fear and avoid, but instead can ride through, then our distress no longer has power over us. Distress is just something to be tolerated, by balancing both accepting our distress with improving our distress. Remember, that your new distress tolerance skills and beliefs will be a 'work in progress' initially. But, if you keep at it consistently over time, you will soon be able to face your feelings with the new attitude..."I can stand it!"



### Module Summary

- A Distress Tolerance Action Plan requires 5 key steps:
  - Identifying triggers of distress
  - Identifying warning signs of distress
  - Committing to dropping escape methods and doing the opposite action
  - Accepting distress using mindfulness skills
  - Improving distress via distress improvement activities (e.g., active and soothing activities), self-encouragement, and problem solving.
- Your Distress Tolerance Action Plan can be used at times when distress spontaneously arises for you, or at times you actively seek out distress – which is what we call distress exposure.
- Distress exposure is purposely confronting situations that cause you emotional distress. This is done in a gradual, stepladder fashion. It requires applying your Distress Tolerance Action Plan when you face these situations, staying in the situation until your distress subsides, repeating steps to gain confidence before moving to the next step, rewarding your successes and learning from any difficulties. Distress exposure is designed to help you gain practice and confidence in your new distress tolerance skills.
- If you keep using your Distress Tolerance Action Plan, and keep facing your distress rather than trying to escape it, then over time you will weaken the Distress Intolerant Beliefs that are at the heart of your difficulties in dealing with distress.
- Congratulations on making it through these Modules, now is the time for practice and persistence!



**The End!**

## About The Modules

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### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behavioural and Mindfulness-Based Therapies. These modules are based on the approach that distress intolerance is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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### “FACING YOUR FEELINGS”

We would like to thank Bruce Campbell for the title of this module that forms part of the InfoPax series.

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