



PURPOSE OF GROUP: to identify and explore the emotions that lead to self-harm  
to increase coping skills

MATERIALS NEEDED: pens/pencils for each group member  
piece of paper for each group member  
handout, "Turmoil vs. Stability" (print p. 5; have enough copies for each group member)

## 1.

-Facilitator can open group by giving each group member a pen/pencil & piece of paper.

\*Ask group members to think of the last time they self-harmed and to **write down the emotion(s) they were feeling at the time**

\*Collect their papers and put them aside for now

-For many people, **self-harm represents an unhealthy coping tool for difficult & intense feelings**, such as:

-Stress & anxiety

-Sadness (including feelings of depression, loneliness, isolation, emptiness/numbness, etc.)

-Anger

-Self-disgust or self-hatred (i.e. guilt, shame, low self-esteem, poor body image, etc.)

a. Those who feel guilt or shame may view self-harm as a way to punish themselves

b. This is especially true for those who have experienced trauma (i.e. sexual abuse) because they feel that they are "bad" or that something is wrong with them

-People who self-harm may **prefer the physical pain over the emotional pain**, or they would rather feel *something* instead of nothing (physical pain instead of numbness/feeling “dead” inside).

-Those who feel uncomfortable emotions may view self-harm as a way to release them, and those who feel “dead” inside may view self-harm as a way to feel “alive”

-When you feel overwhelmed by emotions, you feel like you have no control. For some, self-harm represents **a way to gain back that control**.

-The physical pain may be easier to manage, and it serves as a distraction from the emotional pain

-Also, when the physical pain decreases and you start to feel relief, your brain may be **tricked into believing that you are experiencing emotional relief, too**

a. That is because physical pain and emotional pain activate the same areas of the brain!

-Self-harm also represents a way for some to **communicate & express intense feelings** (because they are unable or unwilling to do so through words).

**1a.** Read the emotions on the papers you collected to show the wide range of intense emotions that people feel before they self-harm. You can ask group members the following questions:

-How long did it take (after you self-harmed) for these painful feelings to come back?

-Did you feel regret or shame after you self-harmed?

**2.** Now that you’ve discussed emotional pain, you can explore the emotions your group members actually *want* to feel.

\*You can go around the room and ask each group member to complete the following sentence: **I want to feel...**

a. Examples: I want to feel loved, safe, forgiven, whole, understood, at peace, hopeful, proud, clean, etc.

**3.** Self-harm may distract from painful emotions, but in the long-run, it doesn't lead to the stability we need.

-In that way, it's similar to substance abuse. Alcohol & drugs may serve as a temporary escape from emotional turmoil, but **it leads to more chaos in the long-run**

\*You can ask group members the following questions:

- a. Do you also turn to alcohol or drugs when you feel intense emotions?
- b. Do you think self-harming can become addicting?

**3a.** You can give group members handout, "**Turmoil vs. Stability**" (print p. 5 of this guide).

\*For part #1, they will write down an "uncomfortable" emotion (i.e. stress, guilt, lonely).

For part #2, they will write down a "comfortable" emotion (i.e. happy, proud, forgiven, calm)

\*For part #2, group members should write down steps they can take or things they can do to experience the emotion they write down

\*Allow volunteers to share when they complete the handout

**4.** Facilitator can end group by going over **healthier ways to cope with strong, painful emotions**:

-Try to come up with words that describe how you feel

- a. Not only does this serve as a better way to communicate your feelings, but it also alerts you to the fact that what you're experiencing is just a whirlwind of emotions. You *can* handle emotions, and they will pass if you let them!

-Identify the distortions behind the emotions

- a. Irrational thinking often leads to self-harm. **See what distorted thoughts are running through your mind**
- b. Be kinder and more compassionate to yourself. Don't interpret every event negatively, and avoid "black and white" thinking

-When we're dealing with intense emotions, we become impulsive & overwhelmed.

You must **slow down and become present!**

- a. Focus on your breathing or use mindfulness techniques to bring your attention back to the present moment
- b. Try the "5 Senses" exercise (identify 1 thing you can see, hear, smell, touch, & taste)

\*You can ask a volunteer to try this exercise

-Channel your emotions into something positive (i.e. painting, journaling, music, etc.)

-Use physical activity to release the emotions (i.e. running, kickboxing, swimming, etc.)

\*You can ask group members to brainstorm more ways to cope with strong, painful emotions

## Turmoil vs. Stability

### 1. Emotional Turmoil

I self-harm to avoid feeling \_\_\_\_\_.

### 2. Emotional Stability

What needs to happen in my life in order for me to feel \_\_\_\_\_?