

Using a Pros and Cons List to Identify the Consequences of Your Urges

Introduction to Therapists

“Creating a Pros and Cons List” is a distress tolerance exercise created by Marsha M. Linehan to be used in conjunction with other DBT therapeutic techniques. It can be helpful for clients who are aware of their harmful or self-destructive behaviors and are considering steps to reduce or eliminate them. The Pros and Cons List can be used for behaviors ranging from cutting and burning, to binge eating, to practicing unsafe sex.

The purpose of the Pros and Cons List is for clients to use it as a reminder tool before their next urge strikes, or before they act on that urge. It is geared toward clients ***who are not in crisis*** and who are able to take a step back to objectively identify the consequence of acting on, or resisting, those urges.

Clients who complete the list are expected to carry it with them, and to rehearse and review it repeatedly. Ultimately, the client should be able to envision the *positive* consequences of *resisting* the urge and the *negative* consequences of *acting* on the urge. They should also be able to remember past experiences when they acted on their urges, and the consequences they encountered.

Used along with distress tolerance techniques that identify healthier coping strategies, the following ‘Pros and Cons’ worksheet can be an effective tool to increase awareness and begin reducing or eliminating harmful behaviors.

Using a Pros and Cons List to Identify the Consequences of Your Urges

Objective

To use a Pros and Cons List to help you identify the consequences for both acting on and resisting your harmful urges.

You Should Know

When you experience overwhelming emotions, it is easy to keep repeating the same harmful behaviors - even when you are trying to reduce or eliminate them. During times of distress, you might cut yourself, overeat, drink excessively, destroy property, or engage in other dangerous activities. By using a Pros and Cons List to identify the positive and negative consequences of your urges, you can weigh your options and identify better choices.

You should work on the Pros and Cons List when you are feeling safe and out of a crisis. Reading and re-reading a list of consequences in your own words can help you delay turning those urges into action. It can also serve as a reminder of past instances when you acted on those urges.

What You Should Do

Name: _____ Date: _____

You will complete a Pros and Cons List that examines the positive and negative effects of acting on – and of *resisting* – your harmful impulses. For instance, if you cut yourself to feel relief from difficult emotions, you will first compare the pros and cons of acting on your urge to cut. Depending on the situation, acting on the urge can also mean giving in, giving up, or avoiding what needs to be done.

Then, you will compare the pros and cons of resisting the urge to cut. Depending on the situation, resisting the urge can also mean doing what needs to be done or not giving up.

Use the following chart to complete your Pros and Cons List. You can select any harmful activity to compare the pros and cons (overeating, drinking, etc.). Fill in the boxes on the chart in the following way:

- Pick one box to start. Write down everything you can think of for that category.
- Notice any shame, guilt, self-criticism, or worry that arises, and remind yourself that your feelings are just feelings.
- When you complete that category box, start on the next one.
- You might notice some overlap between category boxes. Keep writing until you feel you are done.

- Quantity does not matter. You might have two items in one category, and 20 in another.
- Once you have completed all four boxes, it is recommended that you carry the list with you. You can review it and rehearse it before you *experience* your next urge to engage in harmful behavior, or before you *act on* your next urge. The list can also help you remember the consequences of other times you acted on your urges.

	Pros	Cons
<p>Acting on Harmful Urges To:</p> <hr/>	<p><i>Pros of acting on my harmful urges, giving in, giving up, or avoiding what needs to be done.</i></p>	<p><i>Cons of acting on my harmful urges, giving in, giving up, or avoiding what needs to be done.</i></p>
<p>Resisting Harmful Urges To:</p> <hr/>	<p><i>Pros of resisting my harmful urges, doing what needs to be done, or not giving up.</i></p>	<p><i>Cons of resisting my harmful urges, doing what needs to be done, or not giving up.</i></p>

Reflections on This Exercise

What thoughts and feelings did you experience as you completed the pros and cons chart?

Were there any items on your list that surprised you? Explain.

Now, identify which pros and cons have short-term consequences (impact you today), and which have long-term consequences (impact your future).

Short-term pros:

Short-term cons:

Long-term pros:

Short-term cons:

What thoughts and feelings did you experience as you completed the short-term and long-term lists?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
