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Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Skills and Interventions



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Introduction

Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) is a powerful and evidence-based approach designed to help individuals navigate the complexities of mindfulness, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and distress tolerance. DBT has proven to be especially effective for people who have difficulty managing and regulating their emotions, and it is effective for treating and managing a wide range of mental health conditions. Mental health professionals can enhance their abilities by exploring the fundamental principles of DBT, its core skills, and effective interventions. These strategies can be applied to foster emotional resilience, enhance communication, and empower individuals to lead more fulfilling lives.

Origins

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy was developed in the 1980s by Dr. Marsha Linehan and her colleagues at the University of Washington. They found that their approach of using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to treat patients with Borderline Personality Disorder was ineffective, and they began to develop an alternative approach. DBT emerged as an evidence-based psychotherapy that used a combination of CBT and Zen Buddhism (dbtselfhelp.com, 2024; Rance, 2019).

DBT was created to help people with borderline personality disorder struggling with suicidal tendencies. However, with its focus on regulating emotions, mindfulness awareness, and distress tolerance, it is effective in treating numerous disorders, including depression, anxiety, bipolar, disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, binge eating, and borderline personality disorder (Rance, 2019).

DBT is recommended for anyone who feels emotions intensely and is overwhelmed by relationships and the demands of daily life to the point that their emotional reactions are out of control. In response, they may respond impulsively in an attempt to alleviate their distressing feelings. DBT relies heavily on validation

to encourage positive change. Linehan found that clients were more cooperative, felt more secure, and experienced fewer distressing symptoms around the idea of change when they were validated (Arris, 2022; Rance, 2019).

DBT Pillars

DBT is based on three assumptions or pillars. They are:

- **All things are interconnected:** Everyone and everything is interconnected and interdependent. We are connected to our family, friends, and community. We need others, and others need us.
- **Change is constant and inevitable:** Life is full of suffering and change. But because life changes, your suffering will change as well.
- **Opposite can be integrated to form a closer approximation of the truth:** Combining an idea (thesis) and the opposite (antithesis) is the core of dialectics.

Theoretical Foundation

There are three theoretical foundations that developed DBT:

Biosocial Theory

This theory states that people who struggle with emotional regulation do so because of an interaction in their biological makeup. This makes the person more emotionally sensitive, emotionally reactive, and slower to return to their emotional baseline. The cause for this is due to growing up in an invalidating environment where, as a child, their emotional experiences were not recognized as valid. The child then learns that they must escalate their emotions to an extreme for them to be recognized. This often leads to the child being punished

for expressing such extreme emotions, and they then learn other maladaptive behaviors, such as self-injury (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Behavioral Theory

This theory explains behavior by looking at antecedents of behavior. Antecedents are events, situations, circumstances, emotions, and thoughts that precede the behavior. Then, it looks at the consequences of the behavior based on the actions and responses post-behavior. Maladaptive behaviors are continued because the person lacks the skills for more adaptive behavior because of problems in processing emotions and thoughts (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Philosophy of Dialects

Dialectical theory, a cornerstone of many philosophical frameworks, elucidates reality as a dynamic interplay of interconnected and opposing forces. It invites contemplation on the complex nature of existence, urging us to recognize that contradictory elements often coexist within the same sphere. This perspective challenges conventional notions of truth by asserting that divergent perspectives can both hold validity within the fabric of reality. Furthermore, dialectics encourage exploration beyond surface-level contradictions, advocating for deeper inquiry into the underlying tensions that shape our understanding of the world.

Modes of Treatment

Within the context of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), its core modes of treatment, characterized by their fidelity to the model, encompass skills training, individual therapy, phone or skills coaching, and a therapist consultation team, contrasting with DBT-informed skills groups or individual psychotherapy. Other modes of treatment may be provided to a client, such as case management and medications, but these are in addition to DBT to meet the client's needs.

Skills Training

Skills group is one of the most frequently used modes of treatment in DBT. This is due to numerous reasons, including:

- The lack of DBT-trained staff makes implementing in a one-on-one setting difficult. Therefore, more clients can receive treatment from two co-leaders in a group setting.
- Skills training is easily implemented in a group setting.
- DBT has a set curriculum with handouts and homework, making it easy to implement in a classroom-type setting.
- Skills training on its own has shown significant evidence of being effective in treating numerous mental health symptoms.

During a skills training group, clients learn skills, practice them, discuss how they can be applied in their daily lives, and receive homework assignments to apply the skills throughout the week. Homework is then reviewed at the next training skills group. The four DBT skills modules are mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

DBT is effective when provided as one-on-one therapy, in group treatment settings, and telehealth. Group skills training classes typically meet once weekly for two to two and a half hours over six to twelve weeks. The first hour of the group session focuses on reviewing the homework assignment from the previous group session, and the second hour is spent learning a new skill. Followed by assigning homework for the week. Working through the four modules typically takes 24 hours but can vary depending on the needs of the clients and how quickly they learn the material.

DBT skills can be easy to implement when a person's emotions are calm and regulated, but they can be challenging to implement when there is emotional turmoil. It is easier to slip back into old patterns of maladaptive behaviors. The

more intense the emotion being experienced, the more likely the person is to return to old behaviors such as self-harm or substance use. Most clients aren't going to experience these intense emotions that trigger old ways of behaving in group skills training or individual therapy; they are more likely to happen while they are going about their daily lives.

Stages of DBT

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) typically progresses through four main stages, each designed to address different aspects of the individual's needs. The first stage focuses on achieving behavioral control, targeting behaviors that pose immediate risks, such as self-harm or suicidal tendencies. This phase involves acquiring basic coping skills, such as mindfulness and emotion regulation techniques, to manage distressing emotions effectively. The second stage emphasizes enhancing emotional regulation skills, addressing underlying issues contributing to emotional dysregulation, and building a stronger foundation for interpersonal relationships. In the third stage, the focus shifts towards improving interpersonal effectiveness, emphasizing assertiveness, boundary-setting, and communication skills to navigate relationships more successfully. Finally, the fourth stage centers on achieving a sense of fulfillment and self-actualization, fostering a life worth living by pursuing personal goals, values, and meaningful activities. Throughout these stages, the therapeutic relationship remains crucial, providing support, validation, and guidance as individuals progress towards greater emotional stability and overall well-being.

Group therapy works best for those who are in stage three or stage four of DBT. Those in stages one or two would benefit from working one-on-one with a therapist, meeting once or twice a week for one-hour sessions (Rance, 2019; Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Individual Therapy

DBT individual therapy is conducted in 60-minute weekly or biweekly sessions. Individual sessions focus on understanding, exploring, and targeting behaviors the client prefers to change. The therapist supports the client in maintaining motivation to complete treatment and apply the skills they have learned in the group to their daily lives (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Phone/Skills Coaching

Phone skills coaching provides immediate, brief support to implement the skills they know in the moment of crisis. Calls typically last less than 15 minutes (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Therapist Consultation Team

Therapists may experience compassion fatigue when working with clients at risk for suicide. It is not uncommon for therapists to feel the same despair as their clients feel when working with suicidal clients on a daily basis. Therapists may worry for their client's safety during times of emotional dysregulation. The therapist consultation team provides therapy for the therapist to offer support for them and the work they do with clients who have complex, severe, and difficult-to-treat mental health disorders. Consultation teams meet weekly for an hour to an hour and a half. They should involve all team members who are providing DBT therapy (individual therapists, family therapists, and group leaders) (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Functions of DBT Treatment

There are five functions of DBT treatment:

- **Increasing your motivation to change:** Changing maladaptive and self-destructive behaviors can be extremely difficult. The therapist supports the client in staying on track to reach their identified goals.
- **Enhancing your capabilities:** Clients who struggle lack or need to improve important life skills; these skills help regulate emotions, be in the present moment, navigate interpersonal issues effectively, and learn to tolerate distress.
- **Generalizing what you've learned in therapy to the rest of your life:** Applying what is learned in individual and group therapy to one's daily life.
- **Structuring your environment in order to reinforce your gains:** This ensures the person doesn't return to maladaptive behaviors, or if they do, they are able to ensure that they don't make too much of a negative impact.
- **Increasing your therapist's motivation and competence:** DBT therapists participate in team consultation to help them provide the best treatment for their clients and not become overwhelmed with the demands of providing therapy to people (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Stages of Treatment

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy is usually delivered in four stages, which are defined by how serious a person's behaviors are.

Before starting stage one, a person will go through a pretreatment stage in which they commit themselves and their therapist to participate in DBT therapy. The client will create a list of behavioral problems that are interfering with their daily life. Once the pretreatment stage is completed, the client will move into the treatment stages.

Stage One: The person is miserable with “out-of-control” behavior. This stage focuses on removing harmful behaviors and developing positive coping skills to respond to emotional pain instead of self-harming ones. At this stage, the goal is for the person to become more in control of themselves, their emotions, and their behaviors, eliminating any life-threatening behaviors (suicide, self-injury), therapy-interfering behaviors (late to appointments or not completing homework), as well as quality of life interfering behaviors (substance use or toxic relationships). Before moving to stage two, the client must agree to refrain from life-threatening behaviors.

Stage Two: The person feels like they are living in quiet desperation. While their life-threatening behavior is manageable, they are still suffering. The focus of this stage is for the person to address and accept their emotions without giving in to their intense feelings or being controlled by them. The goal at this stage is to move from quiet desperation to a life full of emotional experiences. This stage focuses on addressing the trauma the client has experienced in their life, which is often what has caused these feelings of desperation and misery. Addressing trauma at this stage may also include exploring childhood experiences where their emotions were invalidated.

Stage Three: The person is learning to define personal goals, build self-respect, and discover peace and fulfillment. This stage focuses on teaching the person skills to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Emotional triggers are often experienced in this stage, allowing the person to practice skills they have learned in stages one and two. Frequent themes addressed in this stage include emptiness, boredom, grieving, and identifying life goals. The goal at this stage is for the person to live a healthy life that balances happiness and unhappiness.

Stage Four: All prior stages must be completed before moving into stage four. In this stage, the person addresses their feelings of loneliness and emptiness and finds ways to connect with their environment. The focus is on the person identifying spiritual pursuits, career ambitions, and strengthened relationships to

give their life a sense of meaning. This stage aims to help the person find a deeper meaning in life through self-awareness, establishing a spiritual practice, and learning that happiness lies internally and not externally (Rance, 2019; Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

It is important to recognize that stages are not chronological. When addressing issues at different stages, there are often incidents in which the client needs to return to a previous stage to work through the situation.

Core Concepts of DBT

The core concepts of DBT are designed to assist individuals with their specific recovery needs. The four core concepts help people address their emotions (depression, anxiety, irritability, anger). It also helps them manage themselves in situations with other relationships, acting impulsively, dealing with stressful environments, and feelings of emptiness.

Dialects

Dialects are the philosophical process of explaining or examining the truth of opinion. In DBT, the concept of dialects is that everything has an opposite and that change will only happen when the opposing force is greater than the current force. The dialects or philosophies of DBT include:

- Change is the only constant and is a process.
- Everything is made of opposing forces,
- Combining the opposing factors' essential parts forms a new meaning, perspective, or outcome.
- The core dialect is acceptance and change (Rance, 2019).

Core Mindfulness

Core mindfulness focuses on centeredness and focusing on the present moment by paying complete attention to everything one does. Through mindfulness, the person learns grounding techniques that help them stay focused on the present moment. For example, if the person becomes anxious or stuck in a cycle of overthinking, they can use the mindfulness technique they have learned to slow down their mind and focus on what they are doing at the moment instead of excessively worrying about the past or future (Rance, 2019).

Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance helps the person learn to accept their current situation and to learn crisis survival skills to reduce the chance of engaging in problematic behavior. Distress tolerance teaches people how to self-soothe in healthy ways when they feel overwhelmed by emotions. It teaches acceptance and how to calm one's thoughts and feelings when dealing with them rather than avoiding them or becoming overwhelmed by them. Instead of falling into destructive patterns and acting impulsively, the person learns how to make wise decisions about how to act when they feel intense emotions. Crisis survival skills teach the person not to engage in problematic behaviors that can make situations worse. Examples of problematic behaviors include blaming or belittling others, refusing to follow the rules, throwing temper tantrums, using substances, refusing to eat, and physically or verbally lashing out at others (Rance, 2019).

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation skills teach the person how to label emotions, identify problems surrounding the emotions, reduce habits based on their feelings, and increase positive emotions by changing the way they think. Emotional regulation teaches the person to understand their own emotions and the core of where

these emotions are coming from. The person learns how to deal with overwhelming feelings and decrease their emotions' intensity. The person develops an understanding of their emotions, why they happen, and how to handle them best when they become too intense (Rance, 2019).

Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

Interpersonal Effectiveness skills teach the person practical strategies for asking and pursuing what they need and want, saying no without feeling guilty, and coping with close-bonding relationships like friends, family, or intimate relationships. Interpersonal effectiveness skills help the person work on their relationships while at the same time helping them understand their own needs and develop ways to have those needs met in a healthy way. This involves learning to respect oneself and others, mastering effective communication, dealing with challenging people, repairing broken relationships, and learning to say no (Rance, 2019).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness skills are the foundation of DBT skills training. Mindfulness brings one back to the present moment, to the here and the now. It allows a person to focus on what they are doing right now and to bring awareness to their thoughts, body sensations, feelings, and surroundings. Mindfulness is an important skill as many people who struggle with mental health disorders find their thoughts spiral out of their control, obsessing about things from the past or future that they have no control over. For some, this may even trigger dissociation. Mindfulness helps to bring the person's focus back to the present. Dr. Marsha Linehan incorporated mindfulness into DBT as she recognized how effective it was at alleviating the suffering that emotionally sensitive people tend to experience (dbtselfhelp.com, 2024; Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Simply put, mindfulness is the practice of seeing the reality of the present moment and all that entails without judgment. While this may sound simple, it can be extremely challenging considering all the different aspects that make up the present moment. This can include what is happening inside a person, what is happening around them, and what is happening on a broader scale, such as in their country or globally. With DBT mindfulness, the person pays attention to when they are doing things automatically. This is often played out in recognizing that just because a person has a thought doesn't mean it is true, an urge doesn't have to become a behavior, and an emotion will not last forever. The person's suffering can be reduced by choosing not to act on the thoughts, urges, or feelings (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Wise Mind

Dr. Linehan saw a pattern in the people who sought DBT treatment. They often fell into the category of struggling with high emotional states, but there was another group of people who acted from a place of logic and reason.

She labeled one state as the emotion mind, where people acted from a place of strong emotions that left them feeling like life was chaotic and disorganized.

Examples of emotion mind are:

- Making an impulse purchase on something one can't afford
- Snapping at a waiter who brought out the wrong order
- Snuggling a pet

The other state she labeled the rational mind, where people acted from a place of logic, facts, and reason, but that left them feeling cold and robotic in their responses to life and relationships. Examples of rational mind are:

- Studying for a test

- Planning for a trip in advance
- Measuring ingredients for a recipe

The third state of mind she labeled wise mind. The wise mind is where the emotional mind and rational mind overlap. When a person uses their wise mind, they take a deliberate approach to decision-making that includes all aspects of the mind: emotions, rational thinking, intuition, and goals. Dr. Marsha Linehan described the wise mind as "that part of each person that can know and experience truth. It is where the person knows something to be true or valid. It is almost always quiet. It has a certain peace. It is where the person knows something in a centered way."

Everyone has a wise mind, even if it is difficult for some people to access it. The wise mind can be different from person to person, and it is often experienced as intuition. Examples of wise mind are:

- Step back from a situation and observe the big picture.
- Access wise mind by following the breath in and out.
- Recognize the right choice in a situation as it arises from deep within, rather than from an emotional state.
- Experience reluctance to yield to wise mind, despite the desire for a different, easier, or less painful answer, acknowledging the truth within the situation. (dbtselfhelp.com, 2024; Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Practice: Set an alarm for a specific time throughout the day. When the alarm goes off, do a self-check. What are you experiencing at the moment? How are you experiencing the moment? Observe your thoughts and emotions. Describe them in writing. Remember, no judgment when observing or describing. At the end of the day, after doing this practice multiple times throughout the day, what did you learn about yourself? Were there any patterns? Now let go of all that happened today, no judgment, just this present moment. The more it is practiced, the easier

it is to shift into wise mind when it is needed (dbtselfhelp.com, 2024). DBT divides mindfulness skills into WHAT skills and HOW skills. The WHAT skills are observing, describing, and participating. The HOW skills are nonjudgmentally, one-mindfully, and effective.

WHAT Skills

Observe

Observing a situation from a sensing or experiencing perspective without describing or labeling it. Observing is the practice of noticing. Noticing things in the environment, sensations in one's body, thoughts and emotions in one's mind. Through observing, one learns to quiet the mind and refrain from commenting on thoughts. The challenge is allowing the thoughts to go by without getting caught up in preoccupation, rumination, and obsession. Observing requires balancing being slightly detached but not dissociated. Another challenge with observing is not reacting to the thoughts. When we experience unpleasant thoughts or emotions, we want them to stop; when we experience pleasant thoughts or experiences, we want them to continue. When observing, there is no judging those thoughts or emotions as good or bad; they're just thoughts or feelings.

One way of describing observing is having a Teflon Mind (Teflon is the non-stick treatment found on cookware, so food does not stick to the pan). Using the idea of having a Teflon Mind, thoughts and feelings can arise, but they are not going to stick; they will slip right on back out and not become stuck in one's consciousness, causing rumination (DBT Self-Help, 2024).

Describe

Describing is putting words to the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and situations one observes. The goal is to label situations and behavioral responses without judgment. Describing can help the person stay in the present moment and choose

what will improve the current situation. It can also be used to label feelings. Learning to label and describe one's feelings is a step towards improving communication with others about one's feelings and needs. When labeling, it is important to recognize that these are thoughts and feelings, not facts. For example, a person may have a thought of "no one likes me" or a feeling of being unlovable. These are valid thoughts and feelings, but they do not mean facts (DBT Self-Help, 2024).

Participate

Participating is getting involved in an activity completely, in the present moment, and letting go of self-consciousness and rumination. Participating with awareness allows the person to be in the moment and be okay. An example of not participating is if you have ever driven home from somewhere and have no memories of the drive. Not paying attention and being on auto-pilot is a form of dissociation and is the opposite of participation. The goal of participating is to feel more in control of one's life (DBT Self-Help, 2024).

HOW Skills

The HOW skills describe the way in which the WHAT skills are used.

Nonjudgmentally

This skill is the practice of letting go of judgment; when one notices they are judging, they don't judge themselves for judging. For most people, judging is a habit they do automatically, oftentimes not even noticing when they are doing it. The problem with judging is that it increases a person's emotional pain and damages their relationships. Sticking to the facts of who, what, where, and when helps to avoid judgments in a situation.

Nonjudgmentally also applies to one's self. Self-judgment is often the hardest and most painful to let go of. Through the nonjudgmentally skill, the person learns to accept themselves as they are. This doesn't mean they give up self-improvement, but it no longer comes from a place of judgment and negativity. It is now a place of choice around behaviors and long-term goals (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

One-mindfully

There are two parts to doing things one-mindfully.

1. Be fully present in the moment without ruminating on the past or thinking about the future.
2. Do one thing at a time instead of splitting one's attention between things (ex., Checking email while talking on the phone).

While many people claim to be good at multitasking, research shows that very few people are (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Effectively

Being effective is focusing on what will work versus what is right or wrong, fair or unfair. To practice effective skills, one must know what one wants from a situation. Once the goal has been articulated, it can then be decided what the most effective way is to achieve it (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance is a person's ability to manage distressful situations. The goal of distress tolerance skills is to get through stressful situations or times without being stuck in misery or making the situation worse. Improving one's distress tolerance reduces the likelihood of becoming overwhelmed and turning to maladaptive or destructive behaviors during intense emotions. Getting through

stressful situations and handling difficult emotions is key to maintaining stability in one's life. There are two categories of distress tolerance skills: crisis survival skills and reality acceptance skills. (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Crisis Survival Skills

Crisis survival skills can be used when

- The person is experiencing intense emotional pain that doesn't seem to end
- The person wants these emotions to end and is contemplating using behavior that will make things more difficult
- The situation feels overwhelming, and there are demands and obligations to meet
- The person is motivated to handle the situation immediately but has to wait

Crisis survival skills are not to be used for everyday problems. These are not problem-solving skills; they are skills that will help you make it through a challenging and difficult time. These are skills for managing a crisis situation. Some people struggle to identify a crisis, as any emotional stressor feels like a crisis. A crisis:

- Is a defined event that involves stress and possibly trauma with lots of strong, unwanted, and painful emotions. A crisis has a beginning and an ending.
- Has a need to be resolved immediately, or the person feels they need to find an immediate escape.
- Does not seem to have an obvious solution (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Two skills that are key to crisis survival are distracting oneself and soothing oneself.

Distract

Distracting means taking one's mind off the problem and putting one's attention on something else. DBT uses distraction skills as a way to manage distressing emotions and situations healthily, using adaptive behaviors instead of self-injurious ones. ACCEPTS is one way to distract from a distressing emotion or situation so one can return to it in a better mindset. It is not meant as a way to avoid a situation.

ACCEPTS

A: Activities

Do an activity that requires enough attention to take one's mind off the problem; it shouldn't be an activity that can be done mindlessly. The activity should be something the person can lose themselves in. Often, the more active the activity, the easier it is to forget the distressing situation. Examples include exercising, reading, spending time with friends, watching a movie or TV show, or participating in a hobby.

C: Contributing

Contributing helps the person shift their attention from the situation that is causing them pain to focus on helping someone else. Contributing helps by taking the person's mind off the distressing situation but also helps them feel better about themselves since they are doing something good for someone else. Examples include volunteering, babysitting for a friend or family member, doing something nice for a stranger, and reaching out to check in on a friend.

C: Comparison

Comparison can work in two ways. One can compare where one is now to where one was two to five years ago and how much better they are coping now. This is not to invalidate the pain of the current situation, but as a reminder that things have been worse in the past, and the person made it through that, and now they

have more skills to lean on. The second way to use comparison is to compare oneself to someone else who is in a worse situation.

E: Emotions

The distraction skill with emotions is to distract from one emotion by activating a different one. Ways to do this can be listening to happy music when sad or watching a funny TV show or movie when sad or angry. It's doing something to activate an opposite emotion to what one is experiencing in the moment that one wishes to distract from or change.

P: Pushing Away

If the person is in a situation where they can not handle the emotions or situation, pushing it away for the time being may be an appropriate temporary solution. There should be a set timeline for returning to the problem and resolving it so it is not avoided indefinitely. Pushing away can be an effective skill when the situation can not be resolved immediately. For example, if the person is up late at night ruminating about the day's events, there is nothing that can be done about the situation because it is the middle of the night. Using pushing away, getting a good night's sleep, and dealing with the problem in the morning would be an ideal use of the pushing away skill.

T: Thoughts

This distraction skill is shifting one's mind to think about something else instead of the distressing thought, as it is difficult to think about the distressing issue if one is thinking about something else. Examples include counting (counting to ten, counting tiles on the floor, or counting backward by two from 100), naming countries or states alphabetically, or listing all the things in a room that are the same color.

S: Sensations

Using sensations to distract oneself is an excellent skill to use when the emotional pain feels extreme, or the urge to do something impulsive or self-injurious is triggered. Examples include holding an ice cube in one's hand until it is completely melted, listening to loud music, taking a hot or cold shower, sucking on a strong mint, eating something spicy, smell something with an overpowering smell. It should be something that is intense on the senses but is not harmful. (dbtselfhelp.com 2024; Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Soothe

Self-soothing skills use the physical body senses. DBT uses the five senses to help soothe oneself when in crisis survival. The goal is to shift one's focus from a stressful situation to something different. This skill allows one to take a short break and connect or ground oneself with one's surroundings. DBT self-soothing encourages the person to create personalized sense rituals they can use during times of distress to regulate their emotions.

Vision: Visual self-soothing may involve creating a soothing environment through calming images or soft lighting to offer a visual refuge from distress. Other examples include focusing on a candle flame, looking at beautiful art or pictures, or observing flowers, trees, or other nature at a park.

Hearing: Auditory self-soothing can be achieved through calming music or sounds, providing a comforting backdrop to the chaos of emotions. Other examples include listening to the waves or a bubbling brook, hearing the breeze in the trees or windchimes, or even listening to the traffic going by or sounds in one's house.

Smell: Smell self-soothing may include essential oil aromatherapy, lighting a scented candle, baking or cooking something that has a comforting smell, going for a walk, and noticing the different smells.

Taste: Taste self-soothing may involve enjoying a cup of tea and savoring the flavors, slowly letting a piece of chocolate melt in one's mouth, eating a favorite meal, and focusing on the flavor of each bite.

Touch: Tactile self-soothing involves physically engaging with objects or sensations that bring comfort, such as cuddling a soft blanket or holding a comforting object. Other examples include petting a cat or dog, wearing comfy pajamas, taking a bath, or swimming in a pool and feeling the water on one's body (DBT Self-Help, 2024) (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Practice: *Pick one of these self-soothing methods to try right now. For each of the five senses, what activity or practice would be most self-soothing for you?*

IMPROVE

Sometimes, a situation can not be solved at the moment, but it may be possible to improve the moment. The goal is to reduce distress and feel better by improving the moment. IMPROVE skills support the person in accepting they do not have control over the situation but support them in getting through the intense distress until the emotions or situation subsides.

All DBT skills are meant to be practiced before you need them so that when you do need them they are there, ready to use. Practicing when one isn't in crisis will make it easier to access the skills in distressing moments.

I: Imagery

Imagery is changing the situation in one's mind. It could be imagining a different situation than the person is currently in. It is a way to leave a situation mentally, even if it is not possible to leave physically. It can also be imagining a situation going the way one desires or escaping to a safe place.

Practice

1. *Imagine in your mind a safe and relaxing place you would like to be. Focus on this place and let yourself feel as if you are there. Imagine the details of the place. What do you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch? Once you are in your safe space, let the hurt feelings and emotions fade away, allowing you to be more comfortable. As you breathe slowly and relax into your safe space, you will also relax in reality.*
2. *Imagine things are going well for you in your current situation. Imagine the outcome you desire. As you practice imagining situations going well for you, you may notice that it begins to happen more often in reality, too. As you get better at imagining coping better in situations, you are able to apply this skill to deal more effectively with challenging situations.*

M: Meaning

Making meaning out of one's situation means finding some positives from a negative or less-than-ideal situation, AKA making lemonade out of lemons. This is a way to make oneself more comfortable and turn a bad situation around. Trying to find positives in distressing situations and not denying that things may be bad or distressing is a way to improve and feel better in the moment.

This is not about finding a purpose in one's suffering like in some religious beliefs. There are other ways to find meaning. It can also be about finding inspiration or learning a lesson. Finding a lesson in an experience can result in positive aspects from negative experiences. In every situation, a person can ask themselves the following questions. What can I learn from this experience? What do I want to learn? How can I achieve what I want?

Practice: *Ways to practice meaning out of distressing situations may include:*

- *Sing loudly instead of yelling.*
- *Using angry energy to make art*
- *Using sad energy to write a poem or song*

- *Combating loneliness by joining a group or inviting friends for dinner*

P: Prayer

Prayer can be to God, other religious or spiritual entities, a higher power, the universe, or your wise mind. Prayer can relieve or increase tolerance of distress. Many people have an increase in faith during times of crisis, and while they may not pray regularly, they find it helpful during a crisis.

There are why-me prayers and distress prayers that are most often used when pleading for something. One may ask for distress relief, for something to happen, or for a higher being to take pity. There are also acceptance prayers that are similar to radical acceptance. One asks to be open to whatever happens and accept it.

For those who do not believe in God and struggle with the idea of a higher power and prayer, there is an alternative. Verbalizing one's issues and having faith that everything will work out can be an effective way to manage distressing situations.

R: Relaxation

When in crisis or distress, most people tense up, their muscles tighten, and it seems impossible to relax. This heightened level of stress triggers the fight-or-flight response. To exit that mode, one needs to relax their mind and body.

Different activities are relaxing to some and not others; it is important to find what works for each person. Some examples of relaxing activities include guided meditation, yoga, reading, listening to music, taking a hot bath, going on a walk, and intense exercise.

Practice: *When feeling tense one way to relax is to tense your muscles. Tensing them for a few seconds and then releasing. By overtensing the muscles it makes it more obvious when they are then relaxed. This can even be done discreetly in public.*

O: One Thing in the Moment

One thing in the moment is very similar to mindfulness or one-mindfully. It focuses on the one thing the person can do in the present moment. This allows the person time to settle down and calm themselves. Suffering can be exacerbated by remembering past distress and worrying about future distressing situations. Staying in the moment and focusing on the present can reduce suffering. Focusing on one thing at a time also reduces the likelihood of becoming overwhelmed. When a person is focused on one thing at a time, it makes it difficult for the mind to concentrate on the intense emotions, and therefore, the feelings become less consuming.

***Practice:** Suffering intensifies when you focus too much attention on memories from past situations. By staying in the present moment, you can recognize that those past situations are not happening now. They are just memories being remembered now. Shifting your focus when you recognize yourself dwelling in past memories and returning your focus to the present can reduce your suffering and distress.*

V: Vacation

This isn't a real go-away vacation but a temporary break from the current situation.

A mini-vacation could be:

- Taking a walk in the park
- Shutting your office door and having a quiet moment to yourself
- Lying on the couch with an eye mask and earplugs
- Watching a TV show or movie

There are two rules for the vacation skill:

1. Do not take a vacation that could harm you.

For example, don't take a mental health day when you are a planned presenter at an event or as a way to avoid a deadline at work. This will just cause more stress and potentially a bigger crisis when you return.

2. Do not let your vacation get too long.

For example, if you take a break from studying, set a time for when you will go back to studying. If you watch a TV show, it is just one episode, not a binge session. A vacation is a skill that increases your effectiveness and alleviates your suffering long enough to be able to move forward and do what needs to be done, not as an avoidance tactic.

Practice: Stop what you are doing right now and take a five-minute mini-vacation to relax.

E: Encouragement

This skill is about self-care and self-kindness. It is easy to talk negatively to oneself, especially in times of distress. People's moods are greatly impacted by the way they talk to themselves. Research shows that people who encourage themselves can increase their ability to perform the action they are focusing on. The practice of encouragement includes saying encouraging things to oneself, such as "I can do it," "I'll get through this," "I am strong enough to survive this," and "This will pass, I will get through it." It is important that these statements are clear and not halfway statements, no "maybe," "I guess," or "I'm kind of..." statements. It can be difficult to say these statements with belief during times of crisis. This is why practicing them is so important before being in a distressing situation.

Practice: Write down your encouraging statement. Look at it throughout the day, and read it out loud until you catch yourself repeating it. Find other times throughout the day to use positive self-talk (dbtselfhelp.com, 2024; Galen & Aguirre, 2021; Rance, 2019)

Reality Acceptance

Reality acceptance comprises three parts: radical acceptance, turning your mind, and willingness.

Radical Acceptance

Radical acceptance is one of the most effective and most difficult DBT skills. This skill is accepting the entire situation as it is, in the moment, with no judgment, and not fighting the reality. This can be extremely difficult to do in challenging, emotional situations. One can fight the situation or challenge, or accept it. Not accepting the reality is not going to change the reality and will only cause more emotional turmoil. It doesn't mean being happy about the situation, but it also doesn't mean being miserable about it either; it means accepting it for what it is. Radical acceptance is the complete and total acceptance of a situation, body, mind, and soul accepting of the situation. It means not denying, rejecting, or fighting the reality of the situation.

Radical acceptance is challenging, and people often struggle with resistance and want to find a better or easier solution. When dealing with painful situations, one can choose to

- Try and solve the problem
- Try and change how they feel about the problem
- Accept the problem or situation
- Do nothing and remain miserable

When a person is in a difficult situation, they can review the above list and consider each option. While the first three provide possible actionable solutions, the fourth offers no opportunity for improvement. Many people still pick option four. It requires the least amount of work, even though it offers no results.

People who practice radical acceptance find a sense of calm. It is not that they like what happened to them, but they know what happened has happened. Rather than spending this moment ruminating about it, they focus on other things.

A mantra of radical acceptance is "It is what it is." Repeating this mantra allows one to release their expectations and judgment of what has happened. It is a way to turn towards a higher power or the universe and say, "This is what you have given me, and I accept it."

One of the most challenging times to apply radical acceptance is to traumatic events. Using radical acceptance for trauma is acknowledging what happened to the person; denying it provides no benefit. What happened is most likely not the person's fault, but they are now responsible for living with it. The second part of radical acceptance around trauma is accepting that one's life is worth living, not despite what happened to them but including what happened to them. It is part of who they are, but they are also more than just what has happened to them. Radical acceptance is accepting the trauma did not ruin their life. It is important to address that a person needs to feel safe before attempting radical acceptance around trauma, and it may take years to get to that point.

Radical acceptance is not approval of a situation or trauma. It does not mean the person becomes happy that a situation happened to them. It is not agreement, approval, or condoning what happened. It is letting go so one can move on with one's life. While radical acceptance is free from judgment, a situation can still be unjust, but the person chooses to accept it in the best way for them (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Practice: Consider a minor situation that caused you to have an emotional response. Try to accept it as is without judgment. Use your mantra. Open your hands and turn them upward. Turn the mind when you find yourself straying from the path of acceptance (DBT Self-Help, 2024).

Turning your mind

Radical acceptance is challenging to implement all the time. It's a skill that must be repeated over and over again. When radical acceptance starts to slip, turning the mind is the skill that comes in. It is the practice of noticing when one is no longer using radical acceptance and turning the mind back to it. This is done in two steps:

1. Notice that you are not accepting the situation. This can be noticed when you feel anger, judgment, and repetitive and ineffective self-pity.
2. Committing yourself to acceptance. Commitment is different than radical acceptance. This step is making the commitment to turn your mind back towards working towards acceptance. It's a commitment to turn the mind towards alternative options beyond judgment and anger (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Willingness

Willingness is a practice and attitude of allowing things to be as they are, not fighting, and agreeing to participate in what is happening. Fully participating in what is necessary, no matter the conditions, is willingness. The opposite, willfulness, is refusing to do what is necessary.

Willingness does not mean that by accepting a situation, the person agrees, gives up, gives in, or lets the other person win. It is a skill that accepts that things are as they are and that the person is willing to participate in life anyway.

Willfulness is the refusal to participate in life. It is like throwing a temper tantrum and refusing anything that is offered, no matter the situation. Noticing willfulness and labeling it is the way to then move towards willingness and acceptance (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Practice: *If a person finds it difficult to turn their mind and shift away from willfulness towards willingness, one trick is to change to a more willing body*

posture. This is done by opening your hands, palm-up on your lap (rather than having closed fists or crossed arms). This is using your body to tell your mind that you are willing, even when your mind is resisting (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Emotional Regulation

Emotions have three functions:

1. To communicate information to yourself
2. To communicate and influence others
3. To motivate action

SUN: Identifying the Emotion

Many people struggle with identifying the emotions they are feeling, which then causes them to not know what to do when they have difficult feelings they cannot identify, which then leaves them feeling unbalanced. One method to identify an emotion is using the SUN acronym.

S: Sensations

Focus on what you feel and the physical sensations in your body. Notice whether there is tension in any part of your body.

U: Urges

Do you have any urges to do anything in particular? Most emotions come with an action urge. For example, people who are angry have the urge to attack. People who are sad have the urge to cry or isolate.

N: Name (the emotion)

When you put together the body sensations and action urges, it's easier to name the emotion (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021). See Emotions Wheel in Appendix A for assistance in labeling emotions.

Emotion regulation is the ability to balance emotions effectively in different situations and around different people. It is the ability to manage, cope with, and understand every emotion that one experiences. If someone is feeling distressed and knows how to self-regulate, they could label the emotion and find a way to get themselves into a better emotional state. A person without self-regulating skills won't be able to identify the emotion or change their mood and may react impulsively or inappropriately. Emotional dysregulation is the inability to regulate one's emotions, which results in behavior disorders and impulsive decision-making. Those who struggle with emotion dysregulation often experience intense and labile emotions that change frequently (Rance, 2019).

ABC PLEASE

One way to decrease emotional vulnerability is with ABC PLEASE. There are many things in life one can't control, but we do have control over our ability to find our own balance. ABC PLEASE is the emotional foundation that keeps one steady when there are emotional situations that are out of one's control. ABC focuses on psychological skills that can be performed over time to reduce one's emotional vulnerabilities. PLEASE focuses on physiological skills to take care of one's body.

A: Accumulate Positives

Accumulating positives means actively looking for what brings one joy and incorporating it into one's life. The person is not waiting for good things to happen but seeking out those things and experiences that bring joy into their life. When a person is suffering, it is difficult to do things that bring them joy. Small things can bring positive experiences each day and help build emotional resiliency. Not only do positive experiences bring joy in the moment, but they also build memories

that one can tap into to cheer oneself up and improve one's mood during challenging times (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

B: Building Mastery

Doing something every day that makes one feel confident, competent, and good at something is the way to build mastery. Doing something challenging every day is a way to have a sense of accomplishment and feel good about oneself (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

C: Coping ahead of time with difficult situations

Coping ahead involves creating an action plan for when one becomes emotional. This plan can include skills, instructions, and inspiration. When a person can anticipate and prepare for difficult situations, they will be less vulnerable to problematic strong emotional reactions.

Practice: Steps for a cope ahead plan are:

1. *Describe the facts of the situation. This should be done mindfully and nonjudgmentally, sticking to the facts of the situation that is creating worry. Once there is a clear definition of the problem, move on to step 2.*
2. *Decide what skills you will use to tackle the problem. This will likely require a group of skills as it is not likely there is one that is sufficient to do it all. A plan should include at least three different skills. Distress tolerance skills are a good place to start to reduce the intensity of emotions. From there, move on to acceptance skills or change skills depending on the problem. Write the skills plan down.*
3. *Imagine the situation with as much detail as possible. Imagine implementing the skills plan with effectiveness multiple times. Imagine situations or new problems that may happen that would be challenging to continue practicing this skill.*

4. *Think of the worst-case scenario; this is typically something the person has been worrying about, such as what-if ruminations. Use the plan to address these what-if situations and modify the plan as needed to deal with the worst-case scenario (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).*

PL: Physical Illness

When a person doesn't feel well physically, it impacts their mood. It may cause increased sadness or irritability, which then leads to increased urges for maladaptive behaviors, or the person may be more sensitive and reactive. Be aware that physical illness increases emotional vulnerability. It is important to seek treatment for physical illness. This may be as simple as taking pain medication for a headache or seeking medical attention for more serious issues.

***Practice:** Self-check-in: Do you have any physical illnesses that need to be addressed? Are you prescribed medication or treatments but are not taking/doing them? What is keeping you from seeking/participating in treatment for your physical illness? What would it look like for you to take care of your physical illness or needs? (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).*

E: Balanced Eating

When a person is hungry, they become more irritable and reactive. Yes, hangry is a real experience. It goes beyond eating and not eating; it can include the frequency of meals, what type of food is consumed, and the amount of food eaten.

***Practice:** Pay attention to the impact of what you eat has on your mood. How is your eating? Do you eat too little or too much? What foods do you eat? What foods make you feel calm? Energized? Bad? (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).*

A: Avoid Mood-Altering Substance

Drugs, alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine can impact a person's mood. It doesn't matter if the substance is being used legally, as prescribed, or responsibly or not; mood-altering substances leave a person more emotionally vulnerable. If the substance is impacting one's mood negatively, it may be time to reduce or eliminate their use. Substances can also cause a person to act in ways that are not congruent with their values (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

S: Balanced Sleep

Sleep is crucial for mental health and has one of the most powerful impacts on mood. One's experience of the day can be completely different depending on whether they have slept well and enough; both quantity and quality matter. When a person doesn't sleep, it makes it difficult to function. Be aware that if you don't sleep, you are more emotionally vulnerable and should be extra kind to yourself the next day. It may be necessary to work with a doctor and/or therapist to create a sleep hygiene plan, discuss medication, or address nightmares, depending on what the reasons are that are resulting in a lack of sleep (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

E: Exercise

There is a strong link between the benefits of exercise and mood. It can be difficult to be motivated to exercise if one is experiencing a low mood. However, finding an exercise routine that is independent of one's mood for the day can help. Finding a type of exercise that is enjoyable means the person is more likely to participate regularly. If one hasn't been exercising regularly, finding something to do for twenty minutes a day is a good starting point. Be aware of what gets in the way of exercising so those barriers can be addressed (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Opposite Action

Opposite action is an emotional regulation skill to use in the moment to change how one feels. It can be used when acting on an emotion being felt would not be an effective response. The purpose of opposite actions means that when one's behavior doesn't fit the emotion, one will have to train oneself to do the opposite of one's urges. If an emotion does not fit the facts of a situation, it is unjustified, and therefore, acting on the urge based on that emotion would be ineffective. All emotions have action urges, meaning that make one want to do something or avoid doing something. Justified emotions fit the situation's facts, including the emotion's duration and intensity to the situation. Unjustified emotions do not fit the situation's facts, and the emotional intensity and duration do not fit the situation.

The steps for opposite action skills are:

1. Identify and name the emotion.
2. Check the facts and determine if the emotion is justified or unjustified.
3. Ask: What is my action urge? What do I want to do as a result of how I feel right now?
4. Connect with your wise mind and ask yourself whether acting on the urges is effective. Does it move you towards or away from your goal?
5. If your emotion is unjustified and acting on your current urges is ineffective, identify some ways that you could act opposite to your current urges.
6. Act opposite 110%. The more extreme you go with acting opposite, the more powerful it will be for how you feel.
7. Continue the process of acting opposite until your urges and emotions decrease.

Opposite action skills require a lot of willingness, especially at times when the person may feel very stuck. While challenging skill, it has very powerful results. It can lead to long-term changes in how one feels, especially when compared to the short-term results that distress tolerance skills give. It can build mastery, which supports motivation to use the skill again in the future (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Opposite Action should not be used in situations that cause fear; fear can be a healthy emotion if it keeps one from unsafe situations. That would not be a time to use the opposite emotion skill because the emotion DOES fit the situation. It is a justified emotion (DBT Self-Help, 2024).

Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

Interpersonal effectiveness skills are designed to help people get what they want and need out of their relationships while also being respectful of themselves and others. Interpersonal relationships can be extra challenging when one is dealing with unstable emotions.

Interpersonal Objectives

There are three types of goals in interpersonal effectiveness. Often, there will be more than one of these goals at play in any given situation, and many times it is all three.

Objective Effectiveness: Obtaining what one wants

Objective effectiveness is asking for what one wants, and DEAR MAN is a skill that helps people effectively do that. If the person is finding themselves avoiding asking for things that want or need in their relationship, both small and big things, this is a helpful skill to use to build confidence in asking for what one needs.

D: Describe

Describe the facts of the situation aloud to the other person.

E: Express

Express how you feel openly and honestly. Use I statements to avoid blame. Do not assume the other person knows how you feel.

A: Assert

Assert yourself by asking for what you want or need. This should be done clearly and directly, so there is little room for misinterpretation. The most effective assertive question is a yes or no question.

R: Reinforce

Reinforce focuses on what's in it so the other person can respond positively to the request.

M: Mindful

Stay on topic, and don't get distracted by past or future issues. Stay mindful of the goal. Be a broken record and repeat the request if the conversation has gone off-topic. Ignore their attacks if the other person becomes agitated and repeat the request calmly.

A: Appear Confident

Present confidently and effectively, using a confident tone and body language. This includes good posture, making eye contact, and speaking clearly without minimizers like maybe or whispering.

N: Negotiate

Be flexible and willing to give in order to get something back. Discuss alternative solutions to get closer to the request. Ask the other person for solutions to the problem (dbtselfhelp.com, 2024; Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Relationship Effectiveness: Maintaining or improving a relationship

GIVE skills let the other person know their feelings matter and make sense. It is a form of validation that will help care for a relationship. Addressing relationship problems when they occur prevents hurts and problems from building up. Skills can also be used to prevent problems from happening. Toxic relationships can be ended, and it is not necessary to use GIVE on people who don't deserve it. GIVE skills are ways to build and maintain healthy communication in relationships.

G: Gentle

Gentleness is similar to kindness. It is being caring, genuine, and curious in one's interactions with others and mindful of others' feelings. It is staying away from being judgmental, black-and-white thinking, attacking, threatening, yelling, eye-rolling, and walking away.

I: Interested

Show interest in what the other person is saying and what is happening in their life. This communicates to the other person that what they are saying is being heard and valued. Acting interested includes listening, facing the person, making eye contact, and not interrupting.

V: Validate

Validate means showing the other person's understanding through one's words and actions. Acknowledge what they have said and their feelings around a situation.

E: Easy Manner

Nonverbal communication plays a large part in effective communication. This includes posture, staying relaxed, maintaining eye contact, smiling, staying lighthearted, and using humor. Things to avoid are too much intensity, guilt-

tripping, and bullying (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021), (Rance, 2019).

Practice: *How would you want to be treated during a conversation? Would you rather be yelled at or treated with kindness? How would the two different approaches look in words and actions?*

Self-Respect Effectiveness: Maintaining one's self-respect

It is easy to get caught up in emotions during an argument and unintentionally go along with what the other person is saying. FAST helps the person maintain their self-respect during a discussion or argument. The FAST acronym is a way to act in an argument to increase the likelihood of meeting the objective of the discussion without sacrificing one's values.

F: Fair

Being fair means not being judgmental, dramatic, or exaggerating. It is striving to see the situation from multiple perspectives. It is being fair to the other person's point of view while also being fair to oneself and not deprecating oneself.

A: (no) Apologies

Apologies should only be made when a person has done something wrong. Then, a genuine apology is in order. This should be made once and should come with a commitment to do something different next time. Apologies are meaningless if one doesn't change one's behavior next time. No one should apologize if they haven't done anything wrong. Over-apologizing degrades one's self-respect.

S: Stick to Your Values

Be honest about what is important, and do not compromise values or morals in an attempt to avoid conflict or make the other person happy. Sticking up for one's values and setting boundaries will build self-respect, confidence, and self-esteem.

T: Truthful

Truth is being honest with others but also staying true to oneself. It is speaking one's truth and not hiding behind generalities or other people. It is sticking to the facts and not exaggerating or being dishonest (DBT Self-Help, 2024), (Galen & Aguirre, 2021), (Rance, 2019).

Practice: FAST skills can be practiced in everyday conversations, even with strangers such as a cashier or server. The more comfortable one is using FAST in everyday conversation, the more competent one will be when using the skills during arguments or more difficult conversations (DBT Self-Help, 2024).

Active Listening

Communication is more about listening than talking. Effective listening involves understanding the meaning behind the other person's words and the emotions in the message being shared. Active listening involves:

Completely focusing on the speaker

Engage in the conversation with no distractions so as to give the conversation your undivided attention.

Avoid interrupting or talking about yourself

Shifting the conversation to yourself can cause the other person to feel as if you are not listening and send the message that what you have to say is more important.

Show interest

This can be nodding your head, saying okay, smiling, all ways that can encourage the other person to continue talking.

Listen non-judgmentally

To fully understand someone, you need to let go of previous ideas and negative emotions you may have had towards them so you can listen to them non-judgmentally and fully understand where they are coming from.

Provide feedback

Paraphrasing back to the person communicates that they have been heard and understood. If you are unclear about something, ask for questions to clarify (Rance, 2019).

Validation

Validation is what allows a person to feel heard and respected. It is an important part of any relationship, and one should practice validating others and themselves. It can be challenging to validate others when a person has strong feelings about something, which tends to make them focus on their thoughts and feelings rather than those of others. Validation is seeking to understand a person's experience. When people feel validated, their emotional intensity and speed slow down, and they begin to share what is going on and how they feel about the situation.

There are six different ways to validate oneself or others.

Pay attention

Give the other person your complete attention, make eye contact, nod, and ask clarifying questions. These actions let the other person know you are interested in their experience.

Reflect back

Reflecting back tells the other person that you are following what they are saying and want to make sure you understand.

Read minds

Reading minds lets the other person know you see how they feel without the other person saying anything. This often comes from taking cues from the other person's body language. However, it can be risky, as there is a chance of misreading, in which case, offer an apology and seek clarification.

Understand

Understanding is seeing how the other person's feelings or opinions make sense based on their history and identity.

Acknowledge the valid

Acknowledging the valid means letting the other person know that their experience is typical or normal and shared by others and that if you had the same experience, you might feel the same way, too.

Show equality/radical genuineness

This form of validation is less about using words and more about showing your authenticity when recognizing others' experiences. You can show this authenticity by handing someone a tissue who is crying or excited and celebrating a friend's win with them (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Setting Boundaries

It is important to have control over one's interpersonal boundaries to be able to build healthy and productive relationships. It is also important to set clear boundaries in situations that may be unhealthy or unproductive.

- Physical boundaries are around one's body if someone is allowed to touch one's body in any way, including sexually.
- Emotional boundaries are around who is and isn't allowed to affect you emotionally. This includes letting someone manipulate one's emotions, such as making you feel guilty or happy.

- Psychological boundaries are around what information one chooses to share with others about oneself, such as opinions, thoughts, and beliefs.

Part of setting boundaries is being mindful of the situation. Observing how much the other person is sharing and the type of information they are sharing will determine if this is someone to trust, open up boundaries with, and share more information about oneself with. Practicing boundary setting allows a person to protect themselves by establishing stronger boundaries. It can also help grow relationships by practicing flexible boundaries with people who are trustworthy.

Being aware of boundaries in a relationship or situation and changing the boundary as needed, either strengthening it or being more flexible and open with it, is the process of negotiating boundaries. Having a more flexible boundary means sharing more information, allowing the other person to affect one's emotions, or being more physically close to the other person. Having a more rigid boundary means shutting down certain subjects, creating more emotional distance, or physical distance (Dialectical Behavior Therapy, 2024).

Practice: *What was a recent situation in which you negotiated a boundary? What type of boundary was in question? What was the situation? How did you negotiate the boundary? What was the result of the negotiation?* (dialecticalbehaviortherapy.com, 2024).

Applying DBT Skills in Practice

DBT was initially created to treat people diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. It has since been applied to treat numerous other diagnoses effectively. This includes:

- **Anxiety & Depression:** DBT helps the person become aware of their negative thought patterns and change them. It helps the person focus on positive activities to improve health.

- Post-traumatic stress disorder: DBT helps the person process traumatic events and use grounding techniques to reduce the severity of their PTSD symptoms.
- Substance Use Disorder: DBT helps the person reduce cravings, avoid situations that trigger substance use, and find healthier ways to manage stress.
- Eating Disorders: DBT helps people with bulimia and binge eating to develop distress tolerance and emotional regulation skills.
- Self-Harm: DBT offers specific skills to manage self-harm impulses and avoid maladaptive behaviors.
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: DBT provides skills to improve impulse control and create life organizational skills.
- Anger management: DBT helps the person recognize triggers to their anger and offers skills to reduce emotion and eliminate aggressive behaviors (dialecticalbehaviortherapy.com, 2024; Galen & Aguirre, 2021)

It is effective in working with diverse populations, including:

- Adults
- Adolescents
- Incarcerated populations
- People with developmental disabilities
- Family members of people with borderline personality disorder
- Students as a social-emotional curriculum in schools (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Challenges with Dialectical Behavior Therapy

- DBT requires a significant time commitment from both the therapist and the client
- There are numerous skills in DBT which can be overwhelming. Clients may find it too confusing and be unwilling to commit to treatment.
- DBT requires homework that may not be a good match for some clients or they may not be capable of completing it.
- DBT is structured with strict boundaries.
- There is no structured trauma processing, which some clients may need to be able to recover from their traumatic experiences.
- Some DBT skills are derived from Eastern philosophies that some clients with Western religious beliefs may object to.
- DBT therapists require a high level of training and experience, as there is a high likelihood of risky behaviors during the treatment process (Beltrani, 2024).

Cultural Considerations

Cultural adaptations are ways to modify psychotherapy models that are usually developed for White people in Western countries to better fit the needs of different cultures, including people of color and cross-cultural clients. Cultural adaptations that have already been implemented with DBT include:

- Translating DBT handouts and delivering DBT content in different languages
- Matching therapist-client based on language and ethnicity
- Using metaphors from the clients' cultural background

- Including additional information on mental health stigma
- Discussing intergenerational trauma and Critical Race Theory
- Removing the use of self-respect where there is no translation or cultural familiarity with the concept
- Using diary cards that are visual and do not use numbers
- Incorporating tribal practices for Native American clients
- Delivering treatment in non-traditional settings due to transportation barriers (Haft et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

DBT therapists have the following ethical considerations:

- They must balance supporting a client's autonomy with the need for safety.
- They must be aware of the balance between validating a client's experience and reinforcing maladaptive behaviors.
- They must balance modeling nonjudgmental skills while still holding a client accountable for harmful behaviors.
- DBT informed consent should include the risks and benefits of the treatment, the expectation of homework and phone coaching in between sessions, and the likelihood of facing distressing emotions and situations (Grouport, 2024).

DBT has a built-in ethical support system for therapists with the consultation team. While a big component of the consultation team is to ensure adherence to the model, there is also the aspect of providing therapy for the therapist. Working with high-risk clients is extremely stressful, which leaves therapists at a high risk for burnout. Team consultation offers support to reduce burnout out through

listening, validation encouragement, humor, and irreverence, and provides a sense of community (Galen & Aguirre, 2021).

Providing DBT treatment requires training, supervision, and a consultation team. Many therapists may not have the necessary support available in their workplace to provide DBT treatment, or they may not wish to work with a high-risk population. However, many DBT skills can be incorporated into other models of psychotherapy.

Research Implications for DBT

DBT is an evidence-based treatment, but it should not stop developing and being modified to meet the needs of clients. Areas of research include:

Efficacy: When provided under ideal circumstances, does the intervention produce the expected results?

Effectiveness: Is there a beneficial effect in the real world? Across different settings and populations.

Dissemination & Implementation: How are DBT intervention materials disseminated to therapists and clients, and how well is it implemented as an evidence-based intervention?

Mechanism of Action: This type of research examines how and why DBT works. What variables improve or worsen outcomes?

Systemic Reviews: Comparing different DBT research topics to each other to find similarities and differences and draw conclusions.

Different Levels of Rigor & Credibility: How to ensure DBT is delivered in a way that adheres to the model, which improves clients' outcomes, reduces suicide attempts, reduces psychiatric hospitalizations, reduces substance use, and lowers treatment dropout. Adherence is critical in providing clients with a high level of

care and ensuring they have the best possible outcomes (Behavioral Tech Institute, 2024).

Conclusion

DBT is an evidence-based, effective treatment for numerous mental health conditions. It can be used in various settings, population groups, and cultural backgrounds with some adaptations. DBT is especially effective for individuals who have difficulty managing and regulating their emotions. The intervention is designed to help individuals navigate the complexities of mindfulness, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and distress tolerance. Each of the four core concepts has numerous skills the client learns to support their growth in each area. DBT skills are taught in group and individual sessions, clients are supported in between sessions with phone coaching, and therapists are supported with team consultations. The goal of DBT is for the client to learn strategies they can apply to foster emotional resilience, enhance communication, and empower them to lead more fulfilling lives.

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