



Dialectical Behavior Therapy: Brief Background and Introduction to Mindfulness Skills

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Developed by Marsha Linehan, PhD as a treatment for persons with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is one of the first empirically validated psychosocial treatments for mental illness. DBT is described as a blend of three theoretical positions: behavioral science, dialectical philosophy, and Zen practice.

When attempting to apply standard CBT to produce behavioral changes in women with recurrent suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, and self-injury, Linehan (1993) and her research team came to understand that due to the personality dynamics of the treatment population, the treatment needed modification. Persons with BPD are often extremely sensitive to perceived criticism, and the behavioral focus on change often resulted in increased emotional dysregulation with corresponding destructive behavioral consequences. When clinicians attempted taking the opposite stance, acceptance, this was also viewed by the clients as invalidating, since they were clearly in pain and what they had been doing was not working. Dialectic theory, which involves principles of inter-relatedness, synthesis of polarities, and constant change inherent in reality, helped to frame both the theoretical grounding and behavioral interventions in treating this population and forming the basis for a modification of standard CBT.

Over time, DBT has been demonstrated to be helpful not only for persons diagnosed with BPD, but with many clients who have engaged in patterns of

self-destructive behaviors, including those with substance abuse and binge eating disorders. For these persons, attempts to escape emotional pain (e.g., suicidal ideation and attempts, self-injurious behavior, binge eating, explosive anger outbursts, substance abuse) may provide temporary relief, yet produce an increase in potentially lethal consequences, physical injury, tumultuous relationships, and loss of functioning.

Standard DBT consists of three main modes of treatment: individual therapy, skills-teaching group, and coaching. Groups have a didactic skills training orientation, and include four modules: Core Mindfulness, Interpersonal Effectiveness, Emotion Regulation, and Distress Tolerance. Of these, mindfulness is viewed as the “core” skill upon which all others depend. Although the concepts and skills taught are relatively straightforward and may appear simple, putting the skills into practice in every day life requires motivation, bravery, problem-solving, and disciplined practice.

Core Mindfulness

“Mindfulness practice is the intentional process of observing, describing, and participating in reality non-judgmentally, in the moment, and with effectiveness.” - Robins, Schmidt, and Linehan (2004) Mindfulness skills help clients balance reason and emotion, gain control over attention, increase awareness, and change their relationship to ineffective patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

In the dialectical conceptualization,

mindfulness helps to integrate polar states of reason and emotional mind, leading to a synthesized, ideal of “wise mind.” For many DBT clients who are struggling with problems of emotional regulation, mindfulness is especially useful as a means to be able to cope with painful, overwhelming emotions.

Mindfulness as awareness of present moment experience helps the DBT client to notice what he or she was in the habit of not noticing, such as subtle changes in one’s own breathing, muscle tension, tone of voice, body language, thinking, and emotional state. If clients practice mindful awareness regularly, then intense and overwhelming emotions of sadness and anger no longer appear to suddenly come out of nowhere. The goal is for clients to watch these emotional experiences taking shape and take control of their own behavior before becoming overwhelmed by affect.



Mindfulness Skills

Observe. The first mindfulness skill taught is *observe*: noticing pure experience without adding to it; letting thoughts, sensations, feelings, and emotions come and go without becoming attached or pushing away; and being attentive without using words, just experiencing at the pre-verbal level of awareness. Typical exercises include asking a client to imagine her mind as the sky and thoughts as clouds, noticing each cloud as it drifts by or asking a client to notice the space between his nose and upper lip. In this way, clients are taking a step back, increasing distance between themselves and the object of attention, which can feel immensely liberating.

Describe. Following naturally from *observe*, another skill, *describe*, involves verbalizing observations. Describing is focusing on “just the facts.” An important rule here is that what is not observed cannot be described, which helps clients learn to refrain from jumping to (often hurtful) conclusions. For example, because we cannot observe another’s thoughts we cannot describe them. This helps to prevent us from feeling badly about the supposed thoughts of another person.

A “describe” exercise could be to ask a client to view his or her thoughts as books in a library, and he or she has to create the label or title for each one. Another exercise could be to describe all sensations experienced in the next minute. In this way, the client learns to use self-talk to describe moment-by-moment experience that he or she can use to maintain balance in behavior, thoughts and actions.

DBT clients may use *describe* to help them realize that they are becoming angry: “I’m noticing that my hands are clenched... my tone of voice has changed... I’m having a thought ‘I hate this person.’”

Non-judgmental. In order to describe in this manner, DBT therapists teach a *non-judgmental* stance. DBT clients often struggle with negative judgments of self and others that have the effect of distorting reality, increasing painful emotion and suffering, and reducing capacity for problem-solving and change. Non-judgmental language and focusing on facts help clients to accept reality and their present experience, and increases the ability to effect change. Being non-judgmental is a good example of a skill that appears simple, but can be quite challenging to put into action. When we begin tuning into judgmental thinking, we may see it everywhere. Therefore, this concept requires careful validation and acceptance when taught. Linehan (1993) sums it up this way: “Don’t judge your judging!”

Effective. Rather than getting caught up in labels of *right* and *wrong* or *should* or *should not*, clients are encouraged to weigh the facts of reality and make the most *effective* decisions based on those facts. When reality is accepted, it is much easier to see clearly objectives and stay focused on them. When all else fails, perhaps when one is overwhelmed by emotion, one can still practice being effective by focusing on skillfully meeting the needs of the situation.

Participating. Whereas *observing* and *describing* are akin to taking a step back, *participating* is entering fully into experience. Skills must be practiced repeatedly until one is able to engage intuitively and completely. An analogy can be drawn to an athlete who must learn in practice before being able to perform skillfully in a game. Participating is a way of being completely mindful and engrossed in experience in a spontaneous, skillful, and non-self-conscious manner.

One-Mindfully. To accomplish this, clients are taught to engage *one-mindfully* with their experience, focusing on one thing in the moment, experiencing fully. Exercises of *participation* can involve active playing such as dancing or exercise, as well as routine activity such as preparing dinner or speaking on the phone with a heightened sense of mindfulness and involvement. So, when one is eating, that is all there is, and one is fully tasting that bite; when one is in conversation with another, that is all there is, and one is hearing the other with his or her total attention. What a relief - to be able to participate fully in the moment, not doing three things at once, letting go of ruminating about the past, letting go of worries about the future, but simply enjoying that moment!

These core mindfulness skills are at the heart of DBT. With practice, clients may use these skills to make significant changes in their relationships with other people, their own emotional states, and painful situations so that they are able to decrease chaos, increase stability, and create “lives worth living.” Ψ

References Available Upon Request.

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