

# Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills

*An Experiential Sampler*

Elisabeth Bellows, MD

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# What is DBT?

- D stands for dialectics: a branch of philosophy that emphasizes the synthesis of opposites to promote change.
- B stands for Behavior: defined as thoughts, emotions, urges and actions.
- Therapy: an interaction where a person with expertise engages with a client seeking to change something in their life.

# Who developed DBT and why?

- Marsha Linehan, PhD a psychology professor at the University of Washington, Seattle published her treatment textbook in 1993.
- She was initially interested designing a treatment to ameliorate self-harming behavior.
- She hypothesized that people who engage in self-harm behaviors are trying to manage their strong emotions.
- Over time, DBT has been used to treat a variety of mental health disorders characterized by emotional dysregulation.

# Is DBT treatment all about skills?

- Yes and no.
- Comprehensive DBT treatment includes one hour per week of individual behavior therapy, plus a weekly skills class taught in a small group format, plus phone coaching when needed.
- The skills class is more like a class and less like interactive group therapy. The main goal is for clients to acquire (learn) a variety of skills.
- The individual therapy is like have a private coach to teach you how and where to use the skills you learned in class to reach your goals in life.

# How is a DBT class organized?

- There are usually two co-leaders. One person teaches and the other person helps the class members stay on task
- Classes are 1.5 - 2.5 hours depending upon the preference of the co-leaders
- There is usually a break half-way through and a light snack is served
- We start class with a brief Mindfulness exercise

# What is the class format?

- The new skill for that week is taught during the second half of the class. We read and discuss didactic materials describing the purpose of the skill. We have in-session exercises so that students can try the skill in class.
- We assign homework at the end of class. Assignments are opportunities to practice skills during the week and identify questions or problems with using the skill.
- During the first half of class, members present the homework exercises that they did during the week. This allows for us all to learn (and troubleshoot) from other students efforts.

# What is the curriculum?

- Emotion Regulation: skills for increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions.
- Distress Tolerance: how to survive a crisis situation when you can't solve the problem right now, how to endure painful experiences without making things worse.
- Interpersonal Effectiveness: how to make requests from other people so that they will want to say "yes", how to decline requests from other people so they take you seriously.

# We also teach a lot of Mindfulness

- In DBT, Mindfulness is defined as “being aware” and “focusing your attention”.
- It is very hard to change anything in one’s life without first being aware of what is presently occurring.
- It is difficult to persist in practicing new behaviors if one is easily distracted, numbed out, or functioning on autopilot.
- In contrast to other ways of teaching Mindfulness, DBT Mindfulness skills are brief and can be done anywhere.

# Mindfulness Skills

- “What” does one do during Mindfulness?
  - Observe: just notice the present experience
  - Describe: use words to describe your experience
  - Participate: throw yourself into the present experience
- “How” does one do Mindfulness?
  - Non-judgmentally: move beyond opinion of Good vs Bad.
  - One-mindfully: give your full attention to one activity
  - Effectively: do what works to achieve your long term goals and live within your values.

# Mindfulness Exercises

- Observe: Self-Hug
- Describe: describe one thing you noticed during the hug
- Participate: Laugh Club
- Non-judgmental thinking: make a weird face, don't judge the other person's face, just OBSERVE it.
- One-Mindfully: fold paper, clap slowly, walk on tiptoes
- Effectively:

# Emotion Regulation Skill

- Take your emotions seriously: they are trying to give you important information.
- What is the function of emotions?
  - To get us motivated and organized to take action
  - To communicate our private experience to other people
  - To give us information about the world around us.

So the next time you experience an emotion, ask yourself “what is the message that this emotion is trying to give me?” Correctly identifying the message will help you to make Effective responses and the emotion will subside.

# Distress Tolerance

This group of skills are also called Crisis Survival Skills

- Distract: count all the blue colors you can see
- Improve the Moment: make a list of 3 things that would improve your experience right this moment even if the improvement is very small.
- Self-Soothe: what can you do to comfort or nurture yourself when life is painful and difficult?

# Interpersonal Effectiveness

- How to make a request so that the other person wants to say “Yes”.
- How to decline a request so that the other person takes you seriously.

# Making a request: DEAR

- D = Describe the relevant facts that pertain to your request.
- E = Express your opinion or how you feel about the situation leading to your request.
- A = Assert: make a direct and specific request for what you want.
- R = Reinforce: tell the other person reasons why they would want to grant your request

# References

Books by Marsha Linehan are available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder, Guilford Press, 1993. An in-depth description of comprehensive DBT treatment (textbook).

DBT Skills Training Manual, Guilford Press, 2014. Teaching Notes and Lesson Plans for the complete DBT skills curriculum.

DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets, Guilford Press, 2014. Spiral bound set of skills class materials, including homework assignments.

# Resources

[www.dbtselfhelp.org](http://www.dbtselfhelp.org). A self-help website with many useful pieces of information.

[www.behavioraltech.org](http://www.behavioraltech.org). The “official” Linehan DBT website; offers training for professionals, written resources for consumers and professionals, sells books and videos.

[www.suicide.com](http://www.suicide.com). A website that addresses suicidal thinking (encourages staying alive).

[www.ebellows.com](http://www.ebellows.com); [www.enhancedrecovery.center](http://www.enhancedrecovery.center); information about Elisabeth Bellows, MD