

INTERVENTIONS

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based form of therapy that combines acceptance and change.

DBT was developed by psychologist Marsha Linehan and was originally designed to help people experiencing significant **emotional and behavioral difficulties**. It has since been adapted for a wide range of concerns.

The word “dialectical” refers to holding two seemingly opposing ideas at the same time: *“I can accept myself as I am AND work toward meaningful change.”*

DBT is particularly helpful for people who experience:

- Intense or rapidly changing emotions
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Impulsive behaviors
- Interpersonal conflict
- Difficulty maintaining relationships
- Difficulty tolerating distress
- Self-destructive behavioral patterns
- Chronic feelings of emptiness or instability
- Strong emotional reactions to perceived rejection or abandonment

DBT can also be adapted for concerns such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, and substance-use difficulties.

Depending on the treatment setting and adaptation, comprehensive DBT can include:

- Individual therapy
- Skills training
- Between-session skills practice/coaching
- Diary cards
- Behavioral analysis
- Treatment hierarchy
- Therapist consultation/team support

A therapist might spend one session teaching a skill and the next session examining how that skill worked—or didn't work—in the client's real life.

One of DBT's defining characteristics is its emphasis on both **validation and change**.

The therapist might communicate: *“It makes sense that you responded this way given what you've experienced.”*

AND: *“Let's work on finding a response that is more effective for you moving forward.”*

It isn't: **Acceptance OR change.**

It's: **Acceptance AND change.**

The broader goal of DBT is not simply to make difficult emotions disappear. It's to help clients build a life that feels worth living, while developing the skills necessary to navigate painful emotions, relationships, and difficult circumstances.

DBT helps people accept themselves and their experiences while developing practical skills to regulate emotions, tolerate distress, improve relationships, and create meaningful change.

INTERVENTIONS

DBT Activities

Mindfulness

Mindfulness helps clients learn to notice what is happening in the present moment without immediately reacting to it.

Common interventions include:

- Observing thoughts
- Describing emotions
- Participating fully in the moment
- Mindful breathing
- Five-senses exercises
- "Wise Mind" exercises
- Mindful eating or walking

Wise Mind: DBT describes three states:

Emotion Mind: "I feel it, therefore I need to act on it."

Reasonable Mind: "What are the facts?"

Wise Mind: "What do the facts AND my emotions tell me?"

Goal: Help clients respond rather than react.

Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance focuses on surviving difficult moments without making the situation worse.

Common interventions include:

STOP Skill

S — Stop: Don't immediately react.

T — Take a step back: Pause and breathe.

O — Observe: What's happening inside and around you?

P — Proceed mindfully: Choose your next action intentionally.

TIPP Skills

Useful for intense physiological distress:

T — Temperature: Briefly changing body temperature can help shift physiological arousal.

I — Intense exercise

P — Paced breathing

P — Progressive muscle relaxation

Radical Acceptance

Helping clients acknowledge reality as it currently exists rather than repeatedly fighting against something they cannot change.

Acceptance doesn't mean approval.

It means recognizing: "*This is what is happening right now. What do I want to do next?*"

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation helps clients understand emotions and develop healthier ways of responding to them.

Interventions include:

- Identifying emotions
- Tracking emotional patterns
- Identifying triggers
- Understanding the function of emotions
- Opposite Action
- Building positive experiences
- Reducing vulnerability to emotional dysregulation
- Checking the facts

Check the Facts

Ask: What happened?

What am I interpreting?

What assumptions am I making?

What evidence do I have?

Is my emotional response fitting the facts?

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DBT Activities

Opposite Action

When an emotion or emotional urge isn't effective or doesn't fit the facts, the client practices doing something opposite to the unhelpful urge.

For example:

Emotion: *Fear*

Urge: *Avoid*

Opposite action: *Approach gradually and safely.*

The goal isn't to ignore emotions—it's to prevent emotions from automatically dictating behavior.

Interpersonal Effectiveness

These skills help clients communicate needs, establish boundaries, navigate conflict, and maintain relationships.

DEAR MAN

D — Describe: Describe the situation objectively.

E — Express: Express your feelings or perspective.

A — Assert: Clearly ask for what you need.

R — Reinforce: Explain why the desired outcome is beneficial.

M — Mindful: Stay focused on your objective.

A — Appear confident

N — Negotiate

GIVE

Used to maintain relationships:

G — Gentle

I — Interested

V — Validate

E — Easy manner

FAST

Used to maintain self-respect:

F — Fair

A — Apologies appropriately

S — Stick to your values

T — Truthful

Chain Analysis

One of the most useful DBT tools for understanding problematic behaviors.

Trigger → Thoughts → Emotions → Body sensations → Urges → Behavior → Consequences

Instead of simply asking: "*Why did you do that?*"

the therapist explores: "*What happened immediately before the behavior? What happened next?*"

This helps identify points where intervention could occur.

Validation

DBT places significant emphasis on validating the client's experience while still encouraging change.

For example: "*It makes sense that you felt overwhelmed given what was happening. Let's also look at whether the way you responded helped you get what you needed.*"

This captures the DBT balance: **Validation + Change**

Diary Cards

Clients track things such as:

- Emotions
- Urges
- Behaviors
- Skills used
- Triggers
- Treatment targets

This gives the therapist and client a picture of patterns between sessions.