



What is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

A practical guide to understanding DBT and how it can help you build balance, resilience, and emotional control

Definition and Overview

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based treatment originally developed by Dr. Marsha Linehan for individuals struggling with intense emotions, self-destructive behaviors, and difficulties in relationships. DBT combines elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with mindfulness and acceptance-based strategies. The term 'dialectical' means bringing together two opposite ideas — acceptance and change — and finding balance between them.

Core Principles of DBT

DBT is built upon several foundational principles that guide both the therapy and the client's work:

- 1. Dialectics:** The belief that two seemingly opposite things can both be true — for example, accepting yourself as you are while also working toward change.
- 2. Validation:** Recognizing that your feelings and experiences make sense in the context of your life, even if they are painful or problematic.
- 3. Acceptance and Change:** Balancing acceptance of reality with efforts to change unhelpful behaviors and emotions.
- 4. Mindfulness:** Learning to stay present, observe thoughts and feelings without judgment, and respond intentionally rather than react impulsively.

[Visual: Balance Scale showing Acceptance ↔ Change]

The Four Core DBT Skills Modules

1. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the foundation of all DBT skills. It teaches awareness of the present moment and acceptance without judgment. Clients learn to notice thoughts, feelings, and urges as they arise and let them pass without reacting automatically.

Try It: Take one deep breath and notice the sensation of air entering and leaving your body. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to your breath.

2. Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance skills help individuals survive emotional crises without making things worse. The focus is on accepting and managing pain skillfully rather than trying to escape or avoid it.

Try It: Use the 'TIPP' skill — change your body temperature, engage in intense exercise, practice paced breathing, or pair muscle relaxation.

3. Emotion Regulation

These skills help you understand and manage emotions more effectively. You learn to identify emotions, reduce emotional vulnerability, and increase positive emotional experiences.

Try It: Check in with your emotions and ask, 'What triggered this feeling?' Then consider a small action that moves you toward your long-term goals instead of reacting impulsively.

4. Interpersonal Effectiveness

Interpersonal effectiveness skills focus on maintaining self-respect while improving relationships. You learn to assert your needs, set boundaries, and communicate effectively without damaging connections.

Try It: Practice the 'DEAR MAN' skill — Describe, Express, Assert, Reinforce, Mindful, Appear confident, Negotiate.

[Visual: Four interconnected circles labeled Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, Interpersonal Effectiveness]

DBT Intervention Techniques and Program Components

DBT is delivered in a structured program that includes multiple components to support learning and application of skills:

1. Individual Therapy: Weekly sessions help clients apply DBT skills to their specific life challenges.

2. Skills Training Groups: Clients learn and practice DBT skills in a supportive group setting, often with homework and real-life applications.

3. Coaching Calls: Between sessions, clients can access brief phone coaching to help apply skills in moments of crisis.

4. Consultation Team: Therapists participate in consultation meetings to maintain adherence to DBT principles and support each other.

In addition to these program elements, DBT incorporates behavioral strategies (e.g., exposure, reinforcement, behavior tracking) and cognitive techniques (e.g., thought restructuring, problem-solving) to help clients understand and change problematic patterns.

Summary

DBT is a powerful, structured approach for people seeking balance between acceptance and change. By learning and practicing its core skills, individuals can build greater emotional control, resilience, and healthier relationships.

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