

# Dialectic Behavior Therapy

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is a comprehensive and evidence-based treatment designed to address complex mental health challenges. Initially developed to support suicidal women and individuals with borderline personality disorder, DBT has since been adapted to treat a wide range of mental health issues, particularly those involving difficulty managing and regulating emotions.

Therapists practicing DBT strive to balance validation and change. They work to acknowledge and accept the client's experiences and challenges while equipping them with new skills to improve emotional regulation and overall well-being.

## DBT treatment function

DBT clearly articulates the functions of treatment that it is designed (Linehan, 2015):

1. To enhance an individual's capability by increasing skillful behavior;
2. To improve and maintain the client's motivation to change and to engage with treatment
3. To ensure that generalization of change occurs through treatment;
4. To enhance a therapist's motivation to deliver effective treatment; and
5. To assist the individual in restructuring or changing his or her environment progress and advancement toward goals.

## Structure

In its standard outpatient format, DBT consists of four major components:

### 1. Individual therapy

Each client meets with a therapist one-on-one to address specific challenges and events that have occurred in their lives. These sessions focus on identifying factors leading up to and following high-priority incidents, developing insights, and practicing alternative, skillful responses for future situations.

### 2. Skills training group

This component involves group sessions where clients are taught practical skills to manage emotions, improve relationships, and cope with distress. Skills training focuses on four primary modules:

- **Mindfulness:** Enhancing present-moment awareness.
- **Distress tolerance:** Building resilience in stressful situations.
- **Emotion regulation:** Identifying and managing intense emotions effectively.
- **Interpersonal effectiveness:** Navigating relationships with balance and assertiveness.

### 3. Phone skills coaching

Clients can access brief coaching via phone calls to receive real-time support in applying DBT skills during crises or challenging situations. This component ensures clients feel supported in moments when they need guidance the most.

### 4. Consultation team for therapists

A support system for DBT therapists, this team ensures that therapists stay motivated and deliver the best care possible. It also provides an opportunity for therapists to discuss challenges they face in treatment and seek advice from colleagues.

# Hierarchy of treatment targets

DBT organizes treatment goals based on a hierarchy to ensure the most critical issues are addressed first:

- **Life-threatening behaviors:** Behaviors such as suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and self-injury are the highest priority.
- **Therapy-interfering behaviors:** These include any behaviors that hinder the therapy process, such as missing sessions, being uncooperative, or failing to follow treatment plans.
- **Quality of life behaviors:** Addressing issues like relationship conflicts, financial struggles, and housing instability to improve the client's overall life circumstances.

**Skills acquisition:** Teaching clients new, effective behaviors to replace maladaptive ones and achieve personal goals.

## Treatment stages

DBT progresses through four treatment stages, each tailored to the client's needs based on the severity of their behaviors and challenges:

- **Stage 1:** The focus is on achieving behavioral control. Clients often enter DBT feeling overwhelmed and out of control, experiencing issues such as suicidal behaviors, self-harm, or substance abuse. The goal is to move from chaos to stability.
- **Stage 2:** Clients work on addressing unresolved emotional pain and past trauma. Although their behaviors are under control, they may still feel emotionally numb or trapped in "quiet desperation." The goal is to achieve emotional freedom and experience a full range of emotions.
- **Stage 3:** The emphasis shifts to building a meaningful life. Clients focus on setting personal goals, building self-respect, and cultivating happiness and fulfillment.
- **Stage 4:** For clients seeking deeper meaning, this stage involves exploring spirituality, connection, and a sense of purpose. The goal is to move toward a life marked by joy and a profound sense of freedom.

## DT session structure

Each session is structured to maximize therapeutic effectiveness, maintain focus on priorities, and integrate skill-building into the client's life.

### 1. Review diary card

The session begins with the therapist and client reviewing the client's Diary Card, a tool used to track emotions, behaviors, and skill usage over the past week. The card provides a snapshot of the client's experiences, including:

- Intensity and frequency of emotional states.
- Occurrences of self-harm, suicidal ideation, or other target behaviors.
- Successes and challenges in applying DBT skills.

### 2. Attention to target hierarchy

After reviewing the Diary Card, the therapist prioritizes the session based on DBT's treatment hierarchy. Life-threatening behaviors, such as suicidal ideation or self-injury, are addressed first. Next, therapy-interfering behaviors, like missed appointments or lack of collaboration, are discussed. The focus then shifts to quality-of-life issues, including relationship conflicts or emotional distress. Finally, the therapist evaluates skills acquisition, identifying gaps and areas for improvement to help the client navigate daily challenges more effectively.

### 3. Chain Analysis on the highest-priority target

The therapist conducts a *Chain Analysis* to examine the highest-priority behavior or event from the past week. This involves:

- Breaking down the event step by step to understand triggers, thoughts, emotions, and actions.
- Identifying vulnerabilities and ineffective responses that contributed to the event.
- Recognizing patterns and recurring themes in the client's behavior.

The goal is to develop insight into the chain of events that led to the target behavior and identify points where intervention could prevent recurrence.

### 4. Weave in solution analysis

After the chain analysis, the therapist conducts a solution analysis to help the client explore alternative ways to respond to similar situations in the future. This involves brainstorming skillful responses, practicing specific DBT skills like mindfulness, emotion regulation, or interpersonal effectiveness through role-playing, and reinforcing the importance of applying these skills in real-life scenarios. By focusing on skill development and real-world application, the therapist helps the client break unhelpful patterns and make lasting changes.

### 5. Move down hierarchy to discuss skills related to current life situations

The session concludes with a broader discussion of current life situations and related skills. The therapist and client address additional concerns or issues that may not have been the top priority but are still significant. This portion of the session provides an opportunity to reinforce progress, explore new skill applications, and clarify any uncertainties. The therapist ensures the client leaves with a clear understanding of their next steps and encouragement to continue practicing their skills outside of therapy.

## Additional notes

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