Dialectical Behavior Therapy Gets Our Attention

by Mark Katz PhD

DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY offers new hope to people with emotional self-regulation problems that significantly impair their ability to function. This therapy has generally been used to treat emotional dysregulation challenges far more serious than those associated with ADHD. Some DBT providers now think it can help people with serious self-regulation issues that occur with, or are worsened by, ADHD. Even better, it can help children, youth, and adults.

DBT draws from cognitive behavioral strategies to notably change behaviors. But it veers from tradition by providing "validating" strategies that help legitimize and de-stigmatize emotional and behavioral challenges, and increase motivation to change. Among these strategies is the notion of "radical acceptance." People learn to accept themselves and their life circumstances, challenges and all. For those who struggle with emotional dysregulation, this acceptance is a difficult concept. Still, radical acceptance is possible, and so is behavioral change—no matter how difficult it seems.



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Learning to think dialectically

Throughout treatment, DBT providers help clients to balance two realities: the capacity for self-acceptance and the capacity to change. At first glance they can seem like opposing views, but dialectical thinking teaches that they're not. The ability to think dialectically is what allows us to understand and accept that two seemingly incompatible views can both be true. It's a characteristic of flexible thinking, which allows us to appreciate that not everything is black and white. For people with impulsive and inflexible emotional and behavioral reactions, learning to think flexibly is an important step toward change.

To help people achieve behavioral change, DBT focuses on four areas of skills training:

- **Mindfulness**—learning to see things nonjudgmentally, and to accept one's past and current life. As a person becomes more mindful, he or she can better tolerate emotional pain.
- **Distress tolerance**—learning ways to distract themselves from intolerable emotions as well as ways to avoid emotional crises.
- **Emotion regulation**—learning to understand, label, and predict emotions; to reduce vulnerability to intense emotions; ways to increase positive emotions and pleasant events; and how to experience emotion mindfully.
- **Interpersonal effectiveness**—learning how to sustain relationships and to avoid and resolve potential conflicts with others.

DBT therapists are trained to provide several modes of treatment—individual therapy, skills training groups, and phone coaching

to help clients generalize skills to their day-to-day lives. To ensure they're following the treatment model with fidelity, DBT therapists attend weekly consultation team meetings.

DBT is the brainchild of Marsha Linehan, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. Linehan originally created the model to help people prone to chronic self-injury, suicidal behavior, and extreme behavioral issues. Many of her initial patients also met criteria for borderline personality disorder, a condition characterized by emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal instability. To truly help these individuals, Linehan realized therapists would have to learn radical acceptance of their patients' challenges. Only then would their patients learn the same. The concept of radical acceptance applies not only to those receiving treatment, but also to those providing it.

Researchers have recently begun exploring how DBT might help people with ADHD. A 2012 review of psychotherapeutic interventions for adult ADHD includes a group-based intervention based on DBT elements. Results showed a positive effect on self-rated ADHD symptoms (Philipsen, 2012). In addition, a recently published pilot study followed college students with ADHD who attended DBT group skills training. This study also yielded positive results. (Fleming et al., 2014).

Want to learn more about DBT?

- Check out behavioraltech.org/DBT, founded by the DBT treatment developer. You'll find books and videos, upcoming professional training, studies exploring the effectiveness of DBT in different populations, and a list of trained DBT providers throughout the U.S.
- Visit SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) website at samhsa.gov.
- Read Marsha Linehan's story, published the *New York Times* in June 2011, where she reveals for the first time her own struggles with mental illness.

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ADDITIONAL READING

Andrew P. Fleming, Robert J. McMahon, et al., "Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial of Dialectical Behavior Therapy Group Skills Training for ADHD Among College Students," in *Journal of Attention Disorders*, May 29, 2014. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24874347

Alexandra Philipsen, "Psychotherapy in Adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Implications for Treatment and Research," in *Expert Review of Neurotherapeutics*, October 2012. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23082738

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