

For Therapists: The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills

The DBT Skills can help with a wide range of symptoms and negative behaviors. Below are examples of various difficulties that some clients experience. Also listed are specific DBT skills which clients can use to feel better (or act better) in stressful moments or in the long-term. For each symptom or negative behavior listed there are certainly other DBT skills which might also be helpful. Following this table is a brief summary of the DBT skills and ways in which you can assist your clients in utilizing them.

Problem	Skill
Aggressive Speech	Assertiveness Skills (DEAR MAN, GIVE, FAST)
Anger/Rage outbursts	Radical Acceptance of the situation Observing the Breath and Half-smiling to calm down Identify the Function of Emotion before releasing it
Alcohol & drug abuse	ACCEPTS and Describing to distract from urges IMPROVE to cope with urges Radical Acceptance to stop fighting (and therefore thinking about) urges Assertiveness skills (DEAR MAN, GIVE) to utilize the help available in the 12-step programs
Anxiety	IMPROVE Self-soothing Observing the Breath Acting Opposite to Emotion
Avoidance	Acting Opposite to Emotion to decrease fear in the long run ACCEPTS, IMPROVE, and Self-soothing to decrease fear in the moment.
Binge eating	ACCEPTS Effectively Pros & Cons
Depression	Increasing Positive Emotions Acting Opposite to Emotion Self-soothing
Dissociation	Describing to ground/orient to the environment Wise Mind to identify when dissociation occurs Awareness to re-connect to the body
Distorted Perceptions	Non-judgmentally Wise Mind (Don't try to understand a situation when in Emotion Mind!)
Flashbacks	Describing to ground/orient to the safe present Observing the Breath ACCEPTS, Self-soothing
Inhibited Grieving	Non-judgmentally towards crying Radical Acceptance of the need to grieve Functions of Emotions to understand the need to grieve

Hallucinations	Radical Acceptance to decrease the fear of hallucinations Describing and ACCEPTS to distract
Hypomania	Observing the Breath and Awareness to decrease psychomotor agitation. Wise Mind to identify hypomania Willingness to take corrective action (instead of enjoying the hypomania as a “high”)
Insomnia	PLEASE MASTER Radical Acceptance of being awake and Observing the environment Self-soothing IMPROVE DEAR MAN to work with psychiatrist productively
Irritability	Half-smiling Observing others (instead of reacting to them)
Medications noncompliance	PLEASE MASTER to help remember medications. Willingness to take medications DEAR MAN to address concerns about medications with the doctor
Missing Appointments	PLEASE MASTER Wise Mind and IMPROVE to tolerate anxiety or anger in and before sessions
Negative self-talk	Non-judgmentally
Obsessive thoughts	Non-judgmentally ACCEPTS and Describing to distract Radical Acceptance of thoughts (so as not to “fight” them)
Overtaking medications	All Distress Tolerance Skills Effectively
Overeating	PLEASE MASTER Distracting with ACCEPTS Self-soothing
Oversleeping or staying in bed	Effectively Willingness to get out of bed Increasing Positive Emotions
Overworking	PLEASE MASTER Increasing Positive Emotions Effectively DEAR MAN, GIVE, FAST to say “no” to volunteering
Panic attacks	Describing to ground/orient to environment Radical Acceptance to stop “fighting” panic
Passive speech and behaviors	Assertiveness skills (DEAR MAN, GIVE, FAST) Overcoming Myths about Interpersonal Effectiveness
Phobia of emotions	Radical Acceptance of Emotions Primary vs. Secondary Emotions Observing & Describing Emotions (exposure) Non-judgmentally

Poor judgment	Wise Mind (Don't make decisions in Emotion Mind!) Effectively Pros & Cons
Projection	Non-judgmentally Wise Mind
Purging	Pros & Cons Willingness to experience fullness
Self-esteem issues	Increase self-respect with FAST Non-judgmentally towards self
Self-harm	Describing and ACCEPTS to distract from urges IMPROVE and Self-soothing to cope with urges
Shame	Acting Opposite to Emotion Non-judgmentally
Social phobia and isolation	Participating in conversations Increasing Positive Emotions (as applied to relationships) Acting Opposite to Emotion (as applied to fear) Half-smiling in social settings GIVE to enhance relationships
Suicidal urges	Distraction with ACCEPTS IMPROVE Pros & Cons
"Switching" parts or alters without awareness	Describing skill to ground/orient to the safe present Radical Acceptance of own needs and desires (so that other parts don't have to "take over" to get needs met)

The Mindfulness Skills:

Wise Mind – Identifying one's state of mind in the moment. In "Emotion Mind" feelings are in control of judgment, perceptions, and actions. It is not a good idea to make decisions in Emotion Mind! The desired state is "Wise Mind." In Wise Mind, goals--such remaining sober, having healthy relationships, being successful in the workplace--guide behavior. Wise Mind can also be thought of as intuition or a spiritual connection to God/Higher Power.

Observing – Noticing feelings, thoughts, and the actions of self and others without reacting to them. Learning to "sit back" and take it all in.

Describing – Stating aloud or silently what one sees, hears, or feels in the moment. For example, a client might say aloud to herself, "I see a pencil, a table, and a rug. I hear the fan and the clock," or "I feel fear at a 3 [on a scale of 0-5]." This is a great skill for grounding and for getting out of Emotion Mind quickly.

Participating – Focus one’s attention on interacting with others or the environment. Decreasing distracting negative self-talk.

Non-Judgmentally – Describing emotions, events, and people without judgment. This skill really helps with negative thoughts about self and others. For example:

“I’m stupid.” vs. “I dropped the milk when I slipped and fell.”

“I shouldn’t be feeling this way.” vs. “I’m angry.”

“He did that just to make me angry.” vs. “He left without saying good-bye.”

One-Mindfully – Doing one thing at a time. Since the brain is not designed to multi-task, trying to do so can cause stress. Also, it is important to be able to focus on self-soothing or distracting skills when upset.

Effectively – Focusing on what works to achieve short-term or long-term goals. This means *not* focusing on what is “fair” or “good.” For example, telling one’s supervisor that the workload distribution isn’t “fair” may get immediate positive results, but may also get one labeled as a ‘complainer’.

Distress Tolerance Skills: These skills help with decreasing intense and negative emotions.

ACCEPTS – Distracting from painful emotional thoughts.

Activities – hobbies, games, etc.

Comparisons – comparing oneself to people coping less well

Contributing – doing things for others

Opposite Emotions – experiencing music or books which elicit other emotions

Pushing Away – imagining negative thoughts in a “box” or “on a shelf”

Thoughts – counting, car “games”

Sensations – holding ice, hot shower, hard exercise

IMPROVE the Moment

Imagery

Meaning – finding meaning in the pain

Prayer (This skill is for participants who are already spiritual or religious.)

Relaxation

One-mindfully – doing one thing at a time

Vacation – taking a break in a stressful day

Encouragement – positive self-speech

Self-soothing – Being kind to the self with soothing music and smells, attractive pictures, soft touch

Pro’s & Con’s – Listing the advantages and disadvantages of impulsive behaviors before doing them

Observing the Breath – Focusing on breathing in the face of intense feelings

Half-smiling – Adopting a serene or peaceful expression. Emotions can change somewhat just by changing one’s facial expression

Awareness – Being aware of the body. This resembles meditation.

Radical Acceptance – Learning to stop fighting reality, minimizing problems, or making difficulties worse than they are. Giving up on “This can’t be happening!” or “This is a disaster!”

Willingness – Doing what it takes to get through situations gracefully. Learning to stop “fixing” people and situations.

Emotional Regulation Skills: These skills help with accepting and understanding emotions and with changing emotions over time.

Primary vs. Secondary Emotions – Secondary emotions arise from negative judgments about primary emotions. For example, the thought “I’m a baby if I cry,” causes shame in response to grief. It is important to be able to identify and address secondary emotions, as they are often more painful than primary ones.

Observing & Describing Emotions – Describing the many components of an emotional response. This skill helps clients and clinicians understand complex negative behavioral patterns. An emotion starts with a trigger and an interpretation of the triggering event. An emotion ends with a behavioral response.

Functions of Emotions – Sometimes it is difficult to “give up” or decrease a painful emotional response. For example, decreasing anger might make one feel vulnerable to attack from others. It is helpful to identify why one might want to “hold onto” negative feelings.

PLEASE MASTER – This skill is all about self-care. Self-care makes painful emotions less likely to occur.

Treat **Physical Illness**

Balanced **Eating**

Avoiding drugs and alcohol

Balanced **Sleep**

Exercise

Build **MASTERY** – Doing things to build a sense of competency or mastery

Increasing Positive Emotions – Doing things that are healthy and fun. It is important to *not* be distracted by 1) wondering when the fun will end and low mood returns and 2) wondering whether others will assume that no more help is required. This skill also supports planning for long-term goals. For example, achieving the goal of a better job will certainly increase positive emotions at work.

Acting Opposite to Emotion – Change emotions in the long run by acting opposite to them. This skill often makes one feel worse in the short-term, but better in the long-term.

Shame which is justified – Apologize and repair

Shame which is not justified – Do or talk about the event that causes shame

Anxiety which is not justified – Approach the feared event again and again

Anger – Gently avoid the object of anger. Think charitable thoughts about the person or pray (if applicable) for him/her.

Sadness & Depression - Do things which foster a sense of competency

Overwhelmed – Make a short list and do the first thing on the list

Interpersonal Effectiveness / Assertiveness Skills

Myths about interpersonal Effectiveness – Identifying one’s own cognitive distortions surrounding assertiveness. Eg: “It’s selfish to ask for what you want.”

Passive/Assertive/Aggressive/Passive-Aggressive Behaviors – Identifying whether behaviors are more passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive or assertive.

DEAR MAN - Asking directly for needs and wants or saying “no” utilizing the following steps and tactics:

Describe what the situation is

Express an opinion or feeling

Assert what is needed or wanted or saying “no”

Reinforce the person ahead of time for compliance

Stay **M**indful of what is needed or wanted in spite of verbal attacks from the other person

Appear confident

Negotiate

GIVE - Have a communication style which keeps relationships strong:

Be **G**entle – No attacks, threats, or judgments

Act **I**nterested

Add **V**alidating statements

Use an **E**asy manner

FAST – Have a communication style which enhances self-respect and self-esteem:

Be **F**air

No unnecessary **A**pologies

Stick to your values

Be **T**ruthful

Encourage your therapy clients to utilize the DBT skills by:

- Asking her to explain to you what she learned in DBT skills group that week
- Asking her which skills she could use before doing a self-destructive behavior
- Asking her to use the distress tolerance skills in session if she becomes overly upset
- Validating that it can be hard to learn, remember, and use these skills
- Reassuring her that you will not discontinue therapy with her when she becomes more skillful