

FACT SHEET: What is Dialectical Behaviour Therapy?

The term “dialectical “ refers to the idea of tolerating two opposing ideas at the same time and being able to see more than one point of view. It aims to encourage approaching difficulties with the idea of “walking the middle path” between acceptance and change. Change is constant. Dialectic means seeing more than one point of view. Avoiding a “my way or the highway approach” to thinking. DBT was developed by American Psychiatrist, Dr Marsha Linehan in the early 1990’s. DBT has proven to be an effective treatment for a range of mental health problems especially those characterised by overwhelming emotions. Research shows that DBT can improve a persons ability to handle distress without losing control and acting destructively.

In order to tolerate overwhelming distress and emotion a person needs to develop the following skills:

- Distress Tolerance skills
- Mindfulness Skills
- Emotion Regulation Skills
- Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

This approach considers the three states of mind a person experiences (emotion mind, reasonable mind and “wise mind”) and encourages greater balance between emotion and reason - enabling a person to make decisions from “wise mind”.

Emotion mind – The feeling side of the brain, autonomic arousal, reactive, emotional, responses.

Reasonable mind– logical, rational, thinking part, planning, getting things done, practical tasks

Wise mind – the ability to make healthy decisions about your life based on both your rational thoughts and your emotions. Balancing the reasoning of your thoughts with the needs of your emotions.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy teaches the following skills:

- Mindfulness: Learning to observe oneself and the moment, awareness that emerges through paying attention, intentionally, non-judgementally in the present moment.
- Radical Acceptance: Learning to be less judgemental about thoughts and reactions and experiences as either good or bad.
- Learning to tolerate short term pain and suffering rather than trying to change it – accept “what is”, lower expectations and learn to live life as it is in this moment.
- Increasing positive experiences in the short and long term eg setting goals, repairing important relationships, stop avoiding, scheduling pleasant events.
- Boosting ourselves against negative emotions – sleep, exercise, eating well and avoiding harmful substances.

Further reading: McKay, Wood, Brantley (2007) The Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Skills Workbook. New Harbinger

See also separate Mindfulness Handout

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