Front Range Treatment Center's
DBT Skills for Friends and Family

Introduction

This 8-week DBT Skills course is designed for friends and family members supporting a loved one with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) or other intense emotional challenges. Your loved one may or may not be receiving treatment (DBT, or otherwise), but these skills will help you be more effective regardless.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) provides practical skills to help you understand your loved one's experiences, and respond to them more *effectively*. In DBT, *effectiveness* means acting in ways that support your long-term *wise-mind* goals. Effectiveness requires prioritizing the long term over the short term. It means letting go of judgments, such as what feels "fair" or how things "should be," and focusing on how things actually are.

Each week we will discuss new concepts and skills, building on previous lessons to form a comprehensive toolkit for navigating your relationship with your loved one (which will also apply to all your relationships). By learning and practicing these skills you'll reduce conflict, increase relationship satisfaction, and (if your loved one is also in DBT) help you best encourage your loved one's progress.

Course Overview

- Week 1: Skills Training Assumptions and Biosocial Model
- Week 2: Understanding Emotions
- Week 3: Mindfulness: States of Mind and Non-Judgmentalness
- Week 4: Dialectics and Balancing Priorities in Relationships
- Week 5: GIVE and Validation
- Week 6: FAST and DEAR MAN
- Week 7: Behavior Change Basics
- Week 8: Acceptance and Willingness

Week 1: Skills Training Assumptions and Biosocial Model

DBT Skills Training Assumptions

The DBT assumptions are shared beliefs that DBT therapists use to understand patients and guide treatment. DBT therapists adopt these assumptions, and ask DBT clients to do the same. We ask you to adopt these assumptions when considering your loved one. (We will adopt them for ourselves as well).

1. Your Loved One Is Doing the Best They Can
2. Your Loved One Wants to Improve
3. Your Loved One May Need Encouragement to Keep Trying
4. Your Loved One Is Ultimately the Only One that Can Solve Their Problems (Even If They Didn't Cause Them)
5. Skills Need to Be Practiced in Real-Life Situations
6. All Behaviors Have Causes
7. Understanding and Addressing Causes Is More Effective Than Judging or Blaming

The Biosocial Model of Emotion Dysregulation

The biosocial model explains your loved one's emotional struggles through two interacting factors: biological vulnerability and an invalidating social environment.

- Biological Vulnerability: A genetic predisposition to heightened emotional sensitivity and impulsivity. This is part of their brain's wiring, and influences emotional responses right from birth.
- The Social Environment: The social environment responds to the child's heightened emotional responses in some way. *Invalidation* is the key environmental factor that interacts with biological vulnerabilities that, over time, increases emotion dysregulation (and leads to related issues, such as BPD).
- The Transactional Model: Biology and environment interact. High emotional sensitivity by the child often triggers intense and/or invalidating reactions (primarily from parents/guardians, but also from siblings, teachers, and others). In a common pattern, low level emotions get ignored or punished, but high levels get recognition. Emotional intensity increases over time.

Homework

In the next week, observe a challenging behavior by your loved one. Write how one assumption (e.g., "They're doing their best") helps you respond with understanding. Observe changes in your reaction or interaction.

Week 2: Understanding Emotions

What Emotions Do

Emotions serve critical functions:

- Motivate and Prepare for Action
- Communicate to Others
- Communicate to Themselves

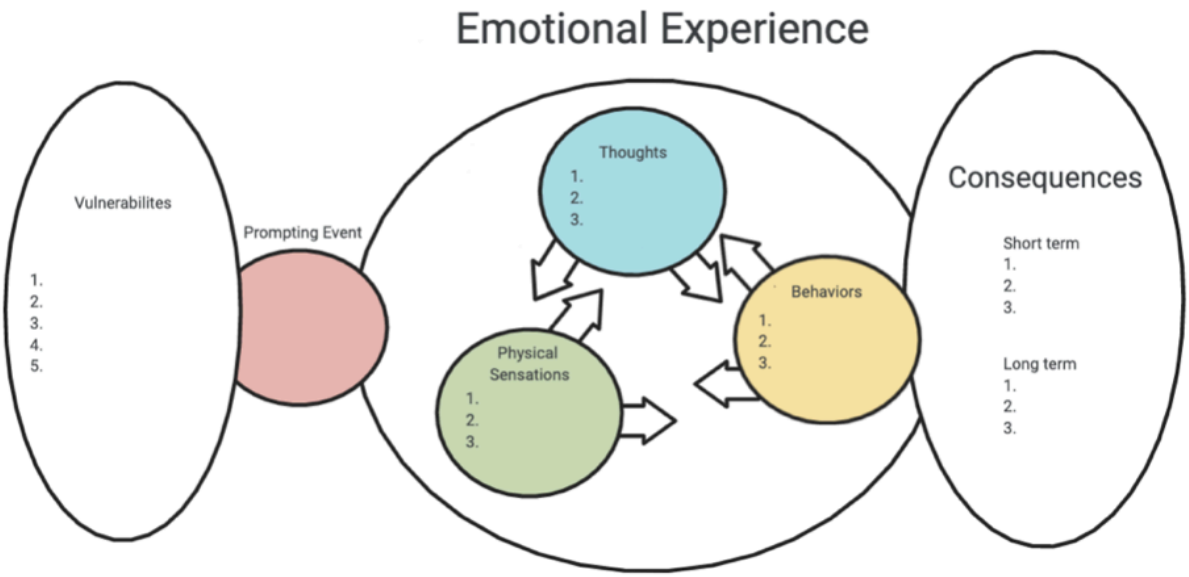
Why Regulating Emotions Is Hard

Several factors make emotion regulation challenging:

- Biology
- Lack of Skill
- Reinforcement from the environment
- Emotion Myths

The Model of Emotions

- Vulnerabilities
- Prompting Event (Trigger:
- Emotion (Broken down into thoughts, behaviors, and physical sensations)
- Consequences



Primary Emotions and Their Components

Here are the primary emotions (as discussed in DBT). We define each emotion by the situations that cause them (they "Fit the Facts When"), and by what they make you want to do ("Behavioral Urge"). Note that urges are not good or bad (though they can be fitting, or not fitting; and the actual expression can be effective or ineffective).

	Fit the Facts When	Behavioral Urges
Anger	Attacked, threatened, insulted, or important goal is blocked (self or loved one)	Attack or confront
Fear	Threat to life, health or wellbeing (self or loved one)	Escape or Avoid
Sadness	Permanent loss OR disappointment over life circumstances	Withdraw
Disgust	Threat of physical or moral contamination	Move Away from Source
Envy	A person or group has something you want but do not have	Equalize
Jealousy	An important relationship is at risk of being lost OR is threatened by another	Protect the Relationship
Shame	You will be rejected by a group you care about if facts or behavior is revealed	Hide or change shameful facts
Guilt	You engaged in behavior that violates your morals	Repair Harm, Stop Behavior
Joy	When something improves your life	Spending time with or doing what leads to joy
Love	Being in relationship with a person enhances your life and helps you attain life goals	Spending time with and being close to the persons you love

Homework

Observe one emotional experience. Identify all the parts in the model of emotions.

Week 3: Mindfulness: States of Mind and Non-Judgmentalness

States of Mind

States of mind provides a model for us to understand the proper role of emotion in decision making and behavior (effective or ineffective).

Emotion-Mind

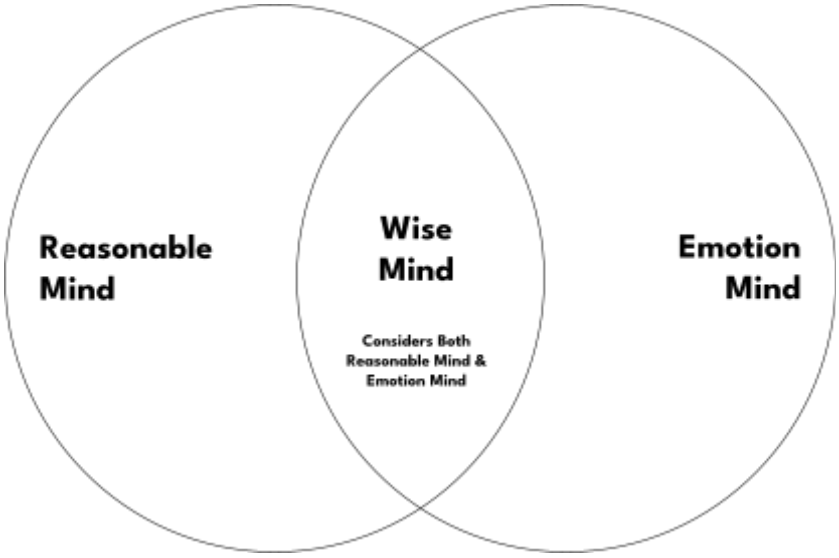
- Emotion-driven, non-verbal, hot/reactive (to Week 2's action urges).
- Being in emotion-mind can result in flooding, impulsivity, difficulty de-escalating, distorted cognitions.

Reasonable-Mind

- Logical, verbal, cold.
- Over-reliance on reasonable-mind leads to disconnection from others, invalidation, rigidity, low emotional awareness, over-control, missing crucial info.

Wise-Mind

- A balanced integration of emotion and reason, guiding decisions with both.
- Accessing wise-mind requires consideration of both emotion-mind and reasonable-mind. Effectiveness requires wise-mind.



Non-Judgmentalness

Judgments are a form of distorted thinking that leads to problems. With judgments, it can be easy to think you're in wise-mind when you're really in emotion-mind.

Judgments distort reality, harm relationships, and escalate conflict. Non-judgmentalness involves observing things as they are, without confusing our own subjective interpretations for objective reality.

What Are Judgments?

- Sticky: Linger, shaping perceptions (e.g., "They're just being dramatic").
- Black-and-White: Oversimplify (e.g., "They're just a bad person").
- Automatic: Feel true but distort reality and box in our responses (e.g., "They're lying/manipulating me").
- Emotion-Driven: Often fueled by our own emotions (though we may feel to recognize it the role of emotion here).

Homework

1. Non-Judgmental Practice: Spot and reframe at least one judgment (e.g., "They're dramatic" to "They're angry"). Reflect on response and impact.
2. Mindfulness: Practice a mindfulness exercise (e.g., stone flake or deep breathing) at least once this week. Mindfulness practice improves your ability to be present and non-judgemental in difficult situations. Your instructor may provide you with some options.

Week 4: Dialectics and Balancing Priorities in Relationships

Dialectics

A *dialectic* consists of two opposing ideas, and the tension and integration between those two ideas. Dialectics teaches us that apparently contradictory ideas can coexist together without actual contradiction. Embracing dialectical thinking fosters growth, improves relationships, and reduces suffering. Dialectical Principles:

1. Opposing Sides Coexist: Multiple perspectives exist, and seeming opposites can be true (e.g., everyone is doing the best they can, and they need to try harder, Week 1). You can be mad at someone and still love them.
2. Everything Is Connected: Your actions affect your loved one's, and vice versa (Week 1's transactional cycle).
3. Change Is Constant: Emotions and behaviors evolve.
4. Change Is Transactional: We shape our environments, our environments shape us.

How to Think and Act Dialectically

1. See Both Sides: Ask, "What's the other side," or "What am I missing?" Recover from conflict by validating each other's perspectives and finding synthesis.
2. Challenge Black and White Thinking: Move beyond rigid, simplistic thinking (e.g., "You're either with me or against me") to embrace both/and perspectives (e.g., "We can love each other and still need space").
3. Don't Fortune Tell or Mind Read: Question automatic negative interpretations of other's behaviors and predictions about the future (e.g., "They're ignoring me" vs. "They might be too dysregulated to be effective and need a moment").
4. Embrace Complexity: People are complicated and oversimplification leads to errors. You can be firm and kind, loving and frustrated.

Balancing Priorities in Relationships

Being effective means acting in ways that support your long-term goals, but in relationships we have to consider and balance three different sets of goals (which might conflict). These are:

1. Objectives Effectiveness: Achieving a specific objective. DBT Skill: DEARMAN.
2. Relationship Effectiveness: Preserving the relationship. DBT Skill: GIVE.
3. Self-Respect Effectiveness: Preserving self-respect. DBT Skill: FAST.

Homework

Observe an interaction, or think about a conversation you'd like to have. Write out your goals (objective, relationship, self-respect) for that interaction.

Week 5: GIVE and Validation

The GIVE skill and validation are DBT interpersonal effectiveness tools for fostering connection and reducing conflict.

GIVE: Preserving the Relationship

1. Gentle: Be kind, avoid attacks or judgments. Use “please” and “thank you.”
2. Interested: Pay attention, show engagement, use active listening. Demonstrate interest in what the other person is interested in. Connect to their words and their feelings.
3. Validate: Acknowledge emotions (see below).
4. Easy Manner: Use a light tone. Smile. Use humor (carefully). Everything doesn’t need to be serious: avoid statements like “We need to talk.”

Validation: Acknowledging (Emotional) Reality

Validation means expressing that you understand (and are non-judgmental about) the other person's emotions in the moment (even if you don’t agree with their perspective).

Why Validation Matters

- Validation reduces emotional intensity. Since emotions demand recognition, acknowledgement tends to decrease intensity. Ignoring tends to increase intensity.
- Validation defuses conflict, builds trust, supports everyone in being able to access Wise-Mind (Week 3), and begins to counter the effects of earlier invalidation (Week 1).

Common Mistakes

- Ignoring Emotions
- Overt Invalidation
- One-Upping
- Jumping to Problem-Solving
- Validating the Invalid

Six Levels of Validation

1. Pay Attention: Give your full, undivided attention. Listen actively without multitasking. Show engagement through eye contact, nodding, or physical closeness (if appropriate).
2. Reflect Back: Summarize or rephrase what they said, showing you heard them. Use a gentle tone, avoiding judgment or exasperation.
3. Read Minds: Reflect what was said, adding inferences based on their body language, history, or situation.
4. Show Understanding: Express that their feelings make sense given the situation and all the causes (without necessarily agreeing). "Because X happened, it makes sense you thought Y and felt Z."
5. Show Agreement: Express agreement with why they feel the way they do, and affirm their responses are valid given the situation.
6. Show Equality: Express that you would feel (or do feel) the same in their position, or that their emotions are universally relatable. This deepens empathy by connecting your experiences.

Homework

This week, focus on using GIVE and validation (Level 3+) during your interactions. Reflect on one such attempt, and how it changed how such situations often unfold.

Week 6: FAST and DEAR MAN

FAST and DEAR MAN are DBT interpersonal effectiveness skills for balancing self-respect and objective effectiveness, building on Week 4's priorities and Week 5's GIVE.

FAST: Maintaining Self Respect

1. (Be) Fair: Be fair to both yourself by honoring your own feelings and needs as worthy of consideration. Avoid prioritizing others over yourself or dismissing your perspective to keep the peace.
2. (No Unnecessary) Apologies: Don't apologize for having needs, making requests, or setting boundaries. Don't apologize for having opinions, respectful disagreements, or for existing. Stand confidently with good posture, eye contact, and a steady tone, avoiding signs of shame (e.g., looking down). Only apologize for actual mistakes, hurting someone, or violating your values.
3. Stick to Values: Act in ways that align with your personal values (e.g., honesty, respect, self-care), even if pressured to compromise. Be clear on what matters to you and hold firm unless a compromise is truly justified.
4. (Be) Truthful: Be honest without lying, exaggerating, or acting helpless when you're capable. Avoid making excuses to appease others.

DEAR MAN: Getting What You Want

1. Describe: Start by describing the situation objectively, focusing solely on the facts.
2. Express: Share your feelings, needs, desires, or opinions about the situation.
3. Ask/Assert: Make a clear, specific request for what you want.
4. Reinforce: Reinforce the other person by highlighting the benefits of agreeing to your *ask* or providing a tangible reinforcer.

- Mindful: Stay focused on your objective, even if the conversation veers off track.
- Appear Confident: Confidence signals that your request is reasonable and worthy of consideration.
- Negotiate: Be open to compromise.

When Your Loved One Uses DEARMAN

If they are in DBT, you may notice your loved one using these principles (with or without telling you they are using DEARMAN). If they do, praise their attempt and try to say yes if you can. This will reinforce their use of skills.

Homework

Write and then deliver a DEARMAN. Ideally pick a real but relatively small request.

Week 7: Behavior Change Strategies

Behavior change strategies are ways to change your behavior that can lead to changes in another's behavior.

Reinforcement: Increasing Desirable Behaviors

- A reinforcer is a consequence that increases the likelihood of a behavior happening again. We will primarily focus on positive reinforcement: Adding something desirable (e.g., praise, attention) that your loved one wants or likes, immediately after a desirable behavior.
- Tips:
    - Reinforcement should immediately follow the desired behavior to be effective.
    - Start by reinforcing every instance.
    - It's only a reinforcer if it works!

Ignoring: Decreasing Undesirable Behaviors

- Ignoring involves stopping reinforcement of an unwanted behavior, leading to it decreasing over time. This means not responding to the behavior at all.
- Extinction Bursts: Ignoring often causes a temporary "extinction burst" of the behavior (e.g., they may escalate initially) before it decreases, so patience is key.
- Intermittent Reinforcement: The worst possible approach is to ignore and then, at the height of the extinction burst, to revert to *your* previous behavior.
- Tips:
    - Stay consistent—any reinforcement during a burst can prolong the behavior.
    - Reinforce an alternative behavior (e.g., speaking calmly) to replace the unwanted one.

Punishment: Rarely Used to Decrease Undesirable Behaviors

- Punishment is an aversive consequence that decreases a behavior, either by adding something unpleasant or removing something desirable.
- Why We Avoid Punishment: Punishment almost always harms the relationship, fosters resentment, and teaches avoidance (e.g., hiding behavior) rather than more effective responses (such as DBT skills). Because of the downsides, we only use punishment when the behavior we're trying to reduce is *egregious*: this means the behavior is so serious, dangerous, ineffective or illegal that the downsides are worth it.

Homework

Practice reinforcing effective behavior with praise, and ignoring ineffective behavior. Reflect on response and impact.

Week 8: Radical Acceptance and Willingness

In Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), radical acceptance and willingness are distress tolerance skills that help you cope with difficult realities without intensifying suffering.

What Is Radical Acceptance?

Radical acceptance is the complete, total embrace of reality as it is. Many clients struggle with this concept. Key aspects of radical acceptance:

1. What It Is: Fully accepting reality, including facts about the past and present, even if you dislike them.
2. What It Isn't: Approval, love, passivity, or abandoning change.
3. Why It Matters. Rejecting reality doesn't change it. Acceptance is the first step to change. Change can only occur after we're honest about the work required. Refusing acceptance fuels painful emotions like anger, shame, or sadness, and escalates conflict. Acceptance may bring sadness in the short term but reduces suffering in the long term.

Willingness

For your loved one to manage their emotions and behaviors more effectively, and for you to support them while maintaining your well-being, change requires three essential components: awareness, capability, and willingness.

1. Awareness (Through Mindfulness): the ability to notice thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and situations as they happen, without judgment.
2. Capability (Through DBT Skills): One can have awareness of feelings and behavior urges, but you need to also have new, more effective options to choose from in order to do things differently.
3. Willingness: the readiness to act effectively, embracing reality and doing what's needed, even when it's hard.

Steps to Cultivate Your Own Willingness

1. Observe Willfulness: Notice when you're resisting reality (e.g., frustration, denial, "shoulds"). Label it: This is willfulness."
2. Turn Your Mind: Choose to shift toward acceptance and willingness, even if it feels hard.
3. Use Half-Smiling and Willing Hands: Adopt a serene facial expression (slightly upturned lips, relaxed face) and open hand posture (palms up, fingers relaxed) to signal acceptance to your brain.
4. Change Your Behavior: If you were fully accepting of reality and willing to do what was needed to be effective, what would you do, and what do you need to do to get yourself there?