



What is Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) was developed by Marsha Linehan. DBT was found to be effective in treating females diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) who were suicidal and/or self-harming. In those studies, clients who received DBT had significantly fewer suicide attempts, self-harm episodes, visits to emergency departments, psychiatric inpatient days and fewer drop outs from therapy. Because those original studies were so effective, research was done with other populations and problems: substance dependence, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and eating disorders. DBT is now considered to be the gold standard for BPD and an evidenced based treatment for individuals with complex needs.

DBT is classified as a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) which means that it focuses on changing emotions, thoughts and actions that are currently interfering with a client's ability to have the life that they want; what DBT calls a Life Worth Living. Validation strategies were added to DBT to keep the client in therapy, keep the therapeutic relationship intact and to help clients (and therapists) be regulated enough for the treatment to work. Linehan also added mindfulness strategies with roots in eastern meditation into the treatment to be practiced by the client, the therapist and the team of DBT clinicians and treaters who are the community that supports the treatment providers. Finally, to bring the dissimilar theories of acceptance (validation and mindfulness) and change (CBT) together, Linehan introduced dialectics, a way of balancing the strategies, moving the therapy when it was at a stalemate and modeling fluidity of thinking.

How DBT Helps

DBT views suicidal behavior as an individual's attempt to solve a problem that otherwise feels unsolvable. DBT works by helping clients to better understand the factors that are contributing to suicidal and self-injurious behaviors and to identify and use more adaptive problem-solving strategies. For example, clients learn DBT skills that can be used to tolerate urges to engage in these behaviors, reduce painful emotions without resorting to life-threatening behaviors, and improve difficult relationships that may be contributing to suicide risk. DBT includes four primary modes of treatment. Clients receive group skills training to learn the DBT skills of mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. In addition, clients receive individual therapy focused on applying the skills and strategies of DBT to help them achieve their specific treatment goals. Clients also receive coaching from their individual therapists between sessions when they need help using DBT skills or for crisis situations. DBT therapists also participate in a therapist consultation team focused on helping them provide the most effective treatment possible.