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Reviewed by Psychology Today Staff Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is a structured program of psychotherapy with a strong educational component designed to provide skills for managing intense emotions and negotiating social relationships. Originally developed to curb the self-destructive impulses of chronic suicidal patients, it is also the treatment of choice for borderline personality disorder, emotion dysregulation, and a growing array of psychiatric conditions. It consists of group instruction and individual therapy sessions, both conducted weekly for six months to a year, The "dialectic" in dialectical behavior therapy is an acknowledgment that real life is complex, and health is not a static thing but an ongoing process hammered out through a continuous Socratic dialogue with the self and others. It is continually aimed at balancing opposing forces and investigating the truth of powerful negative emotions. DBT acknowledges the need for change in a context of acceptance of situations and recognizes the constant flux of feelings—many of them contradictory—without having to get caught up in them. Therapist-teachers help patients understand and accept that thought is an inherently messy process. DBT is itself an interplay of science and practice. article continues after advertisement Expect a course of treatment that typically consists of weekly group, skill-focused instructional meetings as well as individual therapy sessions. Individual sessions usually last an hour; group meetings, usually consisting of four to 10 people, are designed to run for an hour and a half to two hours. DBT is present-oriented and skills-based, and patients are asked to practice their skills between sessions. Patients can expect homework assignments, which might, for example, focus on taking specific, concrete steps to master relationship challenges. DBT specifically focuses on providing therapeutic skills in four key areas. Mindfulness enables individuals to accept and be present in the current moment by noting the fleeting nature of emotions, which diminishes the power of emotions to direct their actions. DBT also inculcates distress tolerance, the ability to tolerate negative emotion rather than needing to escape from it or acting in ways that make difficult situations worse. Emotion regulation strategies give individuals the power to manage and change intense emotions that are causing problems in their life. Last but not least, DBT teaches techniques of interpersonal effectiveness, allowing a person to communicate with others in a way that is assertive, maintains self-respect, and strengthens relationships; a core principle is that learning how to ask directly for what you want diminishes resentment and hurt feelings. DBT incorporates many of the techniques of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). It helps patients recognize and challenge the varieties of distorted thinking that underlie negative feelings and prompt unproductive behavior. For example, patients learn to identify when they are catastrophizing—assuming the worst will happen—in order to avoid acting as if it were the case. They review their own past and present experience for instances of all-or-nothing thinking, seeing everything in extremes of black or white, devoid of the nuance that is more generally the nature of life. Mindfulness training is an important part of DBT. In addition to keeping patients present-focused, it slows down emotional reactivity, affording people time to summon healthy coping skills in the midst of distressing situations. Patients are asked to keep a diary tracking their emotions and impulses, a tool that helps them gain awareness of their feelings, understand which situations are especially problematic for them, and use the information to gain control over their own behavior. In individual sessions, patients review difficult situations and feelings they faced the prior week and engage in problem-solving by actively discussing ways of behaving that might have delivered a positive outcome. In addition, patients typically have access to therapists between sessions for skills coaching if they are in a crisis. In seeing many mental health conditions as disorders of emotion dysregulation, DBT is focused on emotions and how they feed ineffectual action patterns. Many elements of the therapy are aimed at teaching patients how to recognize, understand, label, and regulate their emotions and how to handle interpersonal situations that give rise to negative or painful emotions. Each week, for individual therapy sessions, patients complete a diary "card" (often done via an app), a self-monitoring form that tracks individualized treatment targets relating to moods, behavior, and skills. Patients identify and rate the intensity of emotions they experience each day—fear, shame, sadness, anger, pain, suicide attempts, and more—and space is provided to discuss emotional experience in more detail if needed. In addition, using a checklist of skills—which also serves as a handy reminder to deploy them—patients note the frequency with which they engaged in positive practices, from self-soothing and radical acceptance to reducing vulnerability and acting in ways contrary to how they felt. The information on the diary card lets the therapist know how to allocate session time. Life-threatening or self-injurious behavior takes priority, not surprisingly. After identifying the behavioral targets for a session, the therapist helps the patient engage in behavioral analysis, figuring out what led to a specific problem situation the patient encountered, including any underlying beliefs or attitudes that surreptitiously reinforce the behavior, and discussing the consequences of the patient's actions. The therapist and patient discuss more skillful ways to solve emotional and life problems. Because DBT is a demanding therapy to deliver even for experienced therapists, therapists typically work in consultation with a treatment team and regularly meet with a team. The team's recommendations are often applied in individual therapy sessions. While studies of DBT have documented improvement within a year of treatment, particularly in controlling self-harmful behavior, patients may require therapy for several years. A DBT therapist is a licensed mental health professional who has additional training and experience in DBT. Several organizations provide certification in DBT to qualified therapists who have completed advanced academic and clinical work. Certified DBT therapists may use the designation CDBT. DBT is a comprehensive and multifaceted therapy designed to help patients cope with extreme emotional suffering and, often, self-injurious behavior. Many patients seeking DBT have undergone other forms of therapy without experiencing significant improvement. DBT is a complex treatment modality that makes many demands of therapists and requires extensive training to be administered in the way it was developed and tested. Many components of the therapy, such as the skills training, have been adapted to treatment programs that do not reflect the comprehensive DBT treatment protocol. Finding a clinician who has undergone training and certification in the full DBT treatment model can be important to a good outcome. When seeking a DBT therapist, experience counts. It is advisable to seek a therapist who has not just extensive training but also experience using DBT to treat patients presenting with concerns such as yours. Important as qualifications and experience are, so is a good fit. As with all forms of therapy, it is also advisable to find a DBT therapist with whom you feel comfortable. Look for someone with whom you can establish clarity of communication. Here are some important questions to ask a prospective DBT therapist: How often have you dealt with problems such as mine before? How do you know whether my situation is a good candidate for DBT? How does DBT work? What is a typical plan of treatment, and how long is a typical course of therapy? How do you measure progress? What is the nature of your training in DBT? Do you provide comprehensive DBT or a modification? Do you belong to a DBT consultation team? What is your policy on phone calls and emails during the week? What length of time do you initially ask a client to commit to? Chapman AL. Dialectical Behavior Therapy: Current Indications and Unique Elements. Psychiatry. Sep 2006;3(9):62-68 Panos PT, Jackson JW, Hasan O, Panos A. Meta-analysis and systematic review assessing the efficacy of Diabletctical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Research on Social Work Practice. 2014;24(2). Valentine S, BankoffSM, Poulin RM, Reidler EB, Pantalone DW. The use of dialectical behavior therapy skills training as stand-alone treatment: A systematic review of the treatment outcome literature. Journal of Clinical Psychology. Jan 2015;71(1):1-20. Find a Dialectical Behavior (DBT) Therapist Get the help you need from a therapist near you–a FREE service from Psychology Today. Atlanta, GA Austin, TX Baltimore, MD Boston, MA Brooklyn, NY Charlotte, NC Chicago, IL Columbus, OH Dallas, TX Denver, CO Detroit, MI Houston, TX Indianapolis, IN Jacksonville, FL Las Vegas, NV Los Angeles, CA Louisville, KY Memphis, TN Miami, FL Milwaukee, WI Minneapolis, MN Nashville, TN New York, NY Oakland, CA Omaha, NE Philadelphia, PA Phoenix, AZ Pittsburgh, PA Portland, OR Raleigh, NC Sacramento, CA Saint Louis, MO San Antonio, TX San Diego, CA San Francisco, CA San Jose, CA Seattle, WA Tucson, AZ Washington, DC Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) is a form of therapy often used to treat a variety of mental health conditions such as borderline personality disorder. DBT is a structured, skills based therapy that helps you manage intense emotions and cope with challenging situations. DBT was born out of Marsha Linehan's efforts to find a treatment for women struggling with multiple mental health concerns and suicidal tendencies. When Linehan began looking at the current treatments used for anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders, she found that much of the focus was on changing your thinking and behaviors. This type of intervention led to patients feeling judged, misunderstood, and invalidated in their experience. Linehan thus began a treatment that allowed the patient to accept their emotions and thoughts while also working to make positive changes. The term "dialectical" refers to "opposing forces." This is what DBT seeks to do: find a balance between the opposing forces of accepting one's self while also working toward change. Dialectical behavior therapy techniques help you gain skills to regulate your emotions and increase your distress tolerance. This in turn enables you to more effectively deal with your emotions, reframe your thoughts, and manage your behavior in healthy and constructive ways. Here's what to expect during dialectical behavioral therapy: A nonjudgmental and accepting environment from your therapist Mindfulness exercises such as self monitoring behavior and journaling Using distraction as a way to tolerate distress Improving self esteem through positive self talk and affirmations Practicing interpersonal communication and conflict resolution Deep breathing and relaxation techniques for emotional regulation Observing thoughts, feelings, and sensations Learning self care and self soothing skills such as meditation or yoga DBT involves a multimodal approach that often includes a mix of individual therapy, group therapy, and a therapist consultation team. There are five functions of DBT: Improving coping skills such as emotional regulation, mindfulness, interpersonal skills, and distress tolerance Applying these skills to everyday life through "homework assignments" from the therapist Maintaining motivation toward change and decreasing dysfunctional behaviors Improving therapist's motivation and skills through team consultations Making changes to a patient's environment that will support positive changes and not reinforce negative behaviors While DBT can benefit just about anyone, it's particularly helpful when treating depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders. These types of conditions often come with intense emotions and DBT helps you to learn how to understand and cope with those strong feelings. Those who struggle with mood disorders also often battle intensely negative feelings about themselves including shame, guilt and self loathing. Patients will describe feeling ashamed that they cannot control their thoughts and feelings. When work or relationships suffer because of a mental health concern, this can negatively impact your self esteem and shake your confidence. DBT can be helpful since it promotes acceptance and compassion alongside cognitive restructuring and behavioral change. DBT has been proven to be very effective in treating borderline personality disorder (BPD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use, self-harming behaviors, and other mental health conditions. Borderline personality disorder-focused dialectical behavior therapy helps individuals manage emotional instability and impulsivity. People with BPD are born with a biologically hard wired disposition toward emotional vulnerability which means they have a relatively low threshold for managing intense emotions. They also have difficulty returning to a baseline level of emotion. Since DBT focuses on regulating emotions and increasing distress tolerance, those with BPD benefit greatly from the techniques. Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that affects those who have experienced a traumatic event. PTSD often involves symptoms such as flashbacks of the traumatizing event, intrusive thoughts, anxiety, phobias, depression, and suicidal thoughts. DBT helps patients learn how to regulate their emotions and intrusive thoughts. The balance between acceptance and change helps these patients accept their reality and their traumatic past while taking back control over their present state. Substance use disorder is another condition that has been shown to respond positively to DBT. One technique when using DBT to substance use disorder is for the patient to commit to sobriety for a certain amount of time, even if it's just for the duration of a therapy session. The goal is for you to eventually achieve long term abstinence by piecing together successive drug or alcohol free periods. Another element of the DBT strategy used to treat SUD involves a concept called "coping ahead." This involves learning how to anticipate certain signals or cues that you may be about to encounter a tempting situation or urge to misuse substances. Then you will learn ways to respond proactively to those situations to maintain your sobriety. Relapse is a common occurrence in SUD. If and when this does happen, it can often feel like a failure, but DBT focuses on it as a problem to solve and not as an inadequacy of the patient. DBT is also effective in treating self harming behaviors which often arise as a response to anxiety. Utilizing DBT techniques to increase distress tolerance is particularly helpful in this case. Learning to pay attention to certain things that trigger the urge to self harm is part of the process. You'll also learn to distract yourself from that harmful urge and redirect the urge into other positive behaviors. An important part of DBT includes engaging in group therapy. The following are some aspects of what to expect from dialectical behavior therapy groups: Learning a new skill each week Practicing mindfulness exercises together Discussing how therapy homework assignments went throughout the week Assigning a new homework assignment to the group Group sessions differ from individual therapy in a few different ways. Individual therapy allows you time to process your feelings and gain a deeper understanding of your specific issues. Group therapy focuses on learning new skills and practicing them, not processing emotions. DBT groups provide peer support and structured learning. In groups, you will be able to hear from your peers about their progress and learn from each other's experiences. What is Dialectical Behavioral Therapy? DBT is a type of therapy that utilizes individual counseling as well as group therapy and therapist team consultations. It can help to alleviate the symptoms of many mental illnesses, including mood disorders such as depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder. What are Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills? The main skills that are focused on in DBT are mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness. How Does Dialectical Behavior Therapy Help With Borderline Personality Disorder? DBT helps those with BPD by teaching them how to regulate emotions and increase their tolerance to distressing situations. DBT therapists will work to create an environment that is free of judgment, enabling patients to accept themselves and their challenges while also working towards positive and deliberate change. How Do Dialectical Behavior Therapy Groups Work? DBT therapy groups consist of a small group of patients who are all engaged in individual DBT sessions and will meet together with a therapist to practice the new coping skills that they've learned on their own, in individual therapy sessions, or in group meetings. Patients can discuss their progress or barriers to progress with the group. Our directory has a comprehensive list of therapists offering DBT across the United States. Some therapists offer both in person and online counseling. You can specify which you are looking for when searching for practitioners. Many professionals will also offer free consultations so you can meet with the therapist first to see if you would be a good fit to work together. Some things to look for in your DBT therapist include: Supportive and nonjudgmental attitude Training in DBT techniques Access to a therapist consultation team Group therapy options Working with a trained DBT therapist can help you learn new coping skills and effective strategies for achieving positive change. Equipped with the tools DBT offers, you can build the healthy, happy, and purposeful life you want and deserve. If you have a child with emotional or behavior problems, there's a good chance you've heard of mindfulness or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), two different approaches to helping kids with anxiety and mood disorders. But there's another very popular therapy that combines elements of both: DBT, or dialectical behavior therapy. DBT is an intensive, highly structured program that's been adapted for children and adolescents with serious emotional instability, including self-harm and suicidal ideation. "DBT is best suited for people who have a core challenge with highly sensitive emotions, and it's impairing their functioning," explains Lauren Allerhand, PsyD, co-director of DBT programs at the Child Mind Institute. "The extreme emotions can cause a wide range of symptoms." Those symptoms might include explosive anger or outbursts, intense mood swings, physical aggression, conflict with parents and siblings, or impulsive behaviors like self-harm, substance abuse, or risky sex. "Many of these challenges can be viewed as the downstream effect of emotion dysregulation." While DBT was first developed to treat people diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, it is now being used to help kids with a wide range of diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and disruptive behavior disorders. "Since there are many ways emotional dysregulation can present, DBT is a transdiagnostic treatment," Dr. Allerhand says. DBT is "dialectical" because it works by simultaneously addressing two things that might seem contradictory: acceptance of feelings (mindfulness) and learning to use coping strategies to change unhelpful feelings and thought patterns (CBT). It's basically "'I'm doing the best I can' on the one hand, and 'I need to do better,'" notes Alec Miller, PsyD, a professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. "That's a dialectical truth." Dialectical behavior therapy was developed by Marsha Linehan, PhD, in the 1970s to treat adult borderline personality disorder — a disorder with symptoms that include emotional volatility, trouble with relationships, self-destructive behaviors and suicidal thoughts. These patients were typically thought of as "difficult," if not impossible, to treat. Dr. Linehan redefined the disorder, reframing it as a specific problem of the emotion regulation system that can be addressed with a structured intervention. People with borderline personality disorder have trouble regulating their moods, which leads to impulsivity and conflict in interpersonal relationships. That, in turn, often leaves them feeling misunderstood by others around them. First, Dr. Linehan tried traditional CBT, which emphasizes using conscious thoughts to confront and change overwhelming emotions. She was unsuccessful with her patients. So she then tried an acceptance-based approach that came out of her meditation and mindfulness practice. This, too, failed. "So then she had this brilliant epiphany," says Dr. Miller. "Blending the acceptance strategies of mindfulness with the change technologies of CBT to create this dialectical behavior therapy." A comprehensive DBT program involves four components: Individual therapy Group skills training for managing intense emotions 24/7 access to phone coaching from the therapist to help kids and parents manage difficult situations using their skills Weekly team meetings for therapists to support each other and consult on their cases For children and adolescents, parents are involved in skills training so they can encourage their child to use the skills they are learning in real-life situations. "The feedback from parents is, 'Where have these skills been all my life? I need these skills too,' " says Jill Emanuele, PhD, a clinical psychologist who specializes in mood disorders. The highly structured nature of DBT, combined with the therapists' stance of acceptance, can make it especially helpful for some kids who have tried other treatment without success and need a higher level of intervention. "A comprehensive DBT program, while still at the outpatient level, is a step up, a more intensive treatment from your standard CBT, which might be a once-a-week therapy," Dr. Allerhand notes. For some children, DBT offers an alternative to a residential program. Treatment usually lasts from 6 months to a year. DBT skills training is very structured. For adolescents and children, it consists of five modules: Mindfulness skills: Being present, accepting, and non-judgmental in the moment and understanding the signs of unregulated emotions. Emotion regulation skills: Coping with difficult situations by building pleasant, self-soothing experiences to protect from emotional extremes. "Especially with teenagers," says Dr. Emanuele, "there's a big focus on the physical body: eating properly, getting enough sleep, taking their medicine, and avoiding drug use." Interpersonal effectiveness skills: "It's often interactions with others that are the negative triggers for impulsive behaviors," Dr. Emanuele says. The purpose is to teach adolescents how to interact more effectively with other people and enable them to feel more supported by others. Distress tolerance skills: "It's being able to recognize urges to do things that would be ineffective, such as hurting themselves or trying to kill themselves" and consciously controlling them, says Dr. Emanuele. These skills are the crisis survival tools for the most challenging moments. Walking-the-middle-path skill: Kids and parents learn how to validate one another, how to compromise and negotiate, and how to see the other person's side of things. "It has to do with acknowledging multiple truths in the teenagers' and the parents' worldview as opposed to 'I'm right and you're wrong,'" explains Dr. Miller. Some clinicians who do individual therapy, but are not part of a comprehensive DBT program, use DBT principles and introduce DBT skills — what's often called DBT-informed treatment. "That would probably look more like CBT with mindfulness and acceptance-based strategies woven in," notes Dr. Allerhand, "and it would be probably once a week." One of the most unusual elements of DBT programs, phone coaching, is designed to support patients' efforts to apply DBT skills in their lives outside the therapy session, something therapists call "skills generalization." As Dr. Allerhand puts it, "How do we actually help people to do the things that we talked about in session when they are in the moments of crisis?" Ideally, the patient calls the therapist when they are tempted to do something self-destructive, to get support in using their DBT skills instead. Emotion dysregulation also leads to ineffective problem solving, and phone coaching can help kids and parents utilize more constructive problem solving skills rather than falling into old, unhelpful patterns. Therapy sessions in comprehensive DBT don't hew to a step-by-step manual, but they do follow structured principles, Dr. Allerhand says. Each individual therapy session is structured around a diary card that the patient brings to the session, which is like a weekly tracker of their emotions and their urges to engage in whatever their problematic behaviors are. There is a hierarchy of behaviors: Target 1 are life-threatening behaviors. Target 2, therapy-interfering behaviors. And Target 3, quality-of-life-interfering behaviors. The therapist makes it a priority to focus on Target 1 behaviors, giving them the most time in a session. "The point is that you can't ignore if they're thinking about hurting or killing themselves," Dr. Allerhand explains, "and talk about, the test that they got a B- on." DBT programs treat kids as young as 6. Dr. Allerhand says that the younger kids they see include those diagnosed with disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD). DMDD is a relatively new diagnosis for children who have explosive tantrums — big and emotional responses that are out of proportion to the events that triggered them — and in between outbursts they usually continue to be irritable. Some of these young kids have behaviors that we usually associate with teenagers — hurting themselves, talking about killing themselves, or trying to kill themselves. "Recent CDC data actually showed that there's been an increase in suicide attempts and completed suicides for younger kids," she notes. Referrals to a DBT-C program (one structured specifically for children ages 6-12) often happen, she adds, "when the behavior has become so problematic that parents are worried for the safety of the child or other members of the family, or school placement is in jeopardy." After the 6-12 months of the comprehensive DBT program, most patients continue with individual or family therapy. "Once they've gained control over the behaviors that were really making their life worse, the dangerous behaviors," Dr. Allerhand explains, "most people still have lots of other goals that they need to work on to truly make their life feel fulfilling rather than just tolerable." Many continue to do the diary cards, and they are able to focus in therapy on the continuing barriers to them having the things that they want in their life. Dr. Allerhand notes that, as that Marsha Linehan famously said, "DBT is not a suicide prevention program. It's a life-worth-living treatment program. The idea is that people who have the life that they want, the things that they want in their life, and the relationships they want, are much less likely to hurt themselves or kill themselves." An intervention for teens to increase social connectedness. What does DBT stand for? DBT stands for dialectical behavior therapy. It is an intensive, structured therapy that can help kids and teens who have trouble handling strong emotions. How does DBT work? DBT works by combining two sets of skills. The first, called mindfulness, helps kids understand and accept difficult feelings. The second, a treatment called CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy), teaches them how to change their feelings and behavior. What is DBT used to treat? DBT was designed to treat borderline personality disorder, but it is also used to treat many other disorders, including depression, ADHD, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, and drug abuse. It's helpful for kids who have had trouble managing strong emotions without acting out or doing something self-destructive. If you're struggling with intense emotions or a mood disorder, finding the right therapy can present several challenges. Acronyms such as CBT, DBT, and ACT can mean very little to someone who is new to navigating a mood disorder diagnosis. However, by understanding different treatments and their unique approach to addressing mental health problems, you can better understand your therapeutic options and set yourself up for a sustained life of fulfillment and purpose. Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based technique that many therapists use, which can help you with emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and promote self-care. Here's a breakdown of DBT and how you can benefit from its skill development and approach. DBT is a type of therapy based on the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). It aims to help you manage intense feelings by teaching you how emotions affect behaviors, while balancing self-acceptance with motivation for positive change. This balancing act is the "dialectical" aspect of DBT — the coexistence of two opposing concepts that are both true simultaneously. DBT was created by psychologist Dr. Marsha Linehan to treat borderline personality disorder (BPD), but has since been used to treat people struggling with a host of other mood disorders and intense emotions. One way to understand the unique benefits of DBT and how it can promote emotional stability is by comparing it to other therapeutic approaches. Here's a breakdown of what that looks like: DBT vs. CBT: While DBT is based on the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and both are structured and skills-based, DBT emphasizes emotional regulation, distress tolerance skills, and acceptance strategies alongside change techniques, whereas CBT primarily focuses on changing negative thoughts and behaviors. DBT vs. psychotherapy: Traditional psychotherapy often explores past experiences and unconscious processes over extended periods, while DBT is more present-focused, skills-based, and typically follows a structured format with defined treatment components and goals. DBT vs. ACT: Though both incorporate mindfulness and acceptance, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) focuses more broadly on psychological flexibility and values-based action, whereas DBT provides more concrete skills training and structure. DBT vs. MBT: Both address emotion regulation, but DBT offers a more comprehensive skills training approach, while mentalization-based therapy (MBT) focuses specifically on understanding mental states. Although each therapy style presents its own advantages, research consistently demonstrates that DBT is particularly effective for individuals with BPD, significantly reducing self-destructive behaviors, suicidal ideation, and hospitalizations while decreasing reliance on outpatient mental health services 1. To understand how DBT works, a more in-depth analysis is required to see how its core components promote mood management and what a DBT course typically includes. The dialectical aspect of DBT centers on balancing self-acceptance with the desire for change. This balance extends to various aspects of therapy, informing how DBT therapists help reframe thought patterns and beliefs. The "wise mind" concept exemplifies this balance. It recognizes two distinct mentalities: the emotional mind — guided by intuition, emotions, and feelings — and the rational mind — guided by logic and facts. By conceptualizing these as separate but complementary entities, DBT helps you recognize when one dominates the other. Through practice, you learn to integrate both perspectives, accessing a balanced state that draws on both emotional wisdom and rational thought processes. There are four DBT skills that dialectical behavior therapists will use to improve your emotional regulation skills, including: Mindfulness emphasizes present-moment awareness and helps you maintain control of your attention. Distress tolerance teaches crisis survival strategies and radical acceptance. Emotional regulation will help you identify, understand, and subsequently change emotional responses. Interpersonal effectiveness strengthens relationships with others and yourself by improving communication skills and teaching new skills to navigate conflict. DBT utilizes several formats including individual and group sessions, and by implementing multiple components, DBT therapists can effectively help you achieve results. Here's what those components look like, and what you can expect from each session 2: Individual therapy sessions typically recur weekly and last 50 to 60 minutes. During sessions, you may be assigned emotional observation homework whereby you'll use a diary card to track negative behaviors. DBT group therapy skills training is where you'll meet weekly — typically for 1.5 to 2.5 hours — and review homework with the support of others and the guidance of a therapist. Care will be adjusted based on your progress. Phone coaching for implementing lessons and crisis management help you practice dbt skills learned in group and individual therapy into your daily life and provide support in moments of severe emotional distress. DBT consultation team meetings are not something you as a patient will participate in, but help to coordinate care and review cases among licensed mental health professionals. It's important to remember that different DBT formats will have varying durations, and not every package will include the same components. However, this offers insight into the conventional DBT package model. The conventional approach of DBT treatment typically follows a four-step process: Behavioral dysregulation: To start, DBT teaches you how to reduce self-destructive behaviors through skill-based practices. Processing emotions and experiences: While your behavior may be better regulated after stage one, you may still struggle with extreme emotions. The second step of DBT will address traumatic experiences and problems experienced within childhood to improve your emotional functioning. Building ordinary happiness and addressing life problems: This stage helps you cope with everyday challenges to put you on the path toward mentally healthy living. Finding deeper meaning and fulfillment: The final step of DBT helps you to find connection and live a life of happiness through discovering spiritual meaning. It's important to note that not all DBT programs follow this exact sequence. The stages are not strictly sequential, and there may be issues that require repeated work throughout different stages of treatment. Additionally, you may decide that the fourth stage focusing on spiritual fulfillment isn't necessary for your treatment goals. The 24-hour rule in DBT is a guideline that helps you manage intense emotions without acting on them. It gently encourages you to wait a full day before acting on strong emotional urges, particularly those that might lead to harmful behaviors or impulsive decisions. This waiting period allows emotions to naturally subside in intensity and gives you time to use your DBT skills to respond more effectively and with a level head. During these 24 hours, you are encouraged to practice learned skills for distress tolerance and emotion regulation while considering the potential consequences of acting upon your impulses. This rule helps create space between strong emotions and actions, promoting more mindful decision-making and reducing potentially regrettable behaviors. While initially created to help those struggling with BPD, DBT can help those with various other disorders, including addiction. Here are some other ways that a DBT course can support mental health. DBT has been shown to be significantly effective for BPD treatment — research shows that it has a 50% success rate at reducing suicidal behaviors for those who struggle with this mood disorder 3. BPD is a personality disorder characterized by impulsivity and struggles to regulate emotions, which can significantly impact the stability of relationships, self-worth, self-image, and your ability to distinguish between reality and emotions. DBT combats these struggles by addressing emotional instability, identity confusion, impulsivity, self-harm tendencies, suicidal behaviors, and relationship difficulties. Through its comprehensive approach combining acceptance and change strategies, DBT provides patients with practical skills they can apply in their day-to-day to create stability and improve their overall quality of life. DBT has also been proven effective for treating substance use disorders (SUD), particularly when partaking in DBT skills training and for those with co-occurring disorders. Furthermore, DBT skills training has proven to have high retention rates compared to standard treatment groups, emphasizing this approach's ability to keep people engaged 5. DBT can support those struggling with addiction by helping them manage overwhelming emotions that may lead them to self-medicate with substances. It can also help them manage cravings, repair relationships damaged by substance use, and withstand strong cravings without acting on them. During a DBT course, therapists will also support you as you implement its skills in daily life. While its main applications are helping those with BPD or SUD, DBT has been proven effective to treat several other conditions and mental health struggles, including: Eating disorders (particularly binge eating and bulimia). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Major depressive disorder (MDD). Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Bipolar disorder. Additionally, DBT can also be used to treat psychological problems that may not meet the criteria for a clinical diagnosis, including: Intense emotions and anger management issues. Relationship conflicts and communication problems. Self-destructive behaviors. Struggles with work-life balance or work-related stress. Unhealthy perfectionist tendencies. Stress management. While DBT has proven highly effective for many individuals, it's important to understand both its strengths and potential limitations. Here's what the research reveals about DBT's advantages and limitations to help you make informed treatment decisions. DBT stands out among therapeutic approaches for its robust scientific validation across numerous clinical trials and real-world implementations, offering several distinct advantages: Strong research support for reducing harmful behaviors: Multiple controlled trials have demonstrated DBT's effectiveness in reducing self-harm behaviors and suicidal ideation, with one study showing an 87.5% full remission rate for SUD compared to 33.3% in control treatments 6 . Practical, skills-based approach: DBT provides concrete and actionable techniques clients can implement immediately in their daily lives, making it particularly valuable for crisis management and long-term coping skills. Comprehensive treatment model: Unlike some therapeutic approaches that focus on single domains, DBT addresses emotional regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness skills, and mindfulness skills simultaneously, creating a more holistic approach. Sustained treatment gains: Research indicates that many clients maintain improvements after completing DBT 5. Effectiveness across populations and conditions: Studies demonstrate DBT's efficacy across diverse populations and comorbid conditions 7. Despite its proven effectiveness, it's important to recognize that DBT, like any treatment approach, comes with practical limitations that should be considered when evaluating its suitability for individual needs, including: Significant time commitment: Standard comprehensive DBT typically requires a one-year commitment with multiple weekly sessions, which may be prohibitive for some individuals with work or family obligations. Therapist expertise may be hard to find: The effectiveness of DBT depends heavily on providers having specialized training and adhering to the model's principles, yet many practitioners may have limited formal training in the approach. Not one-size-fits-all: Some conditions may require modified DBT approaches or integration with other treatments, particularly for complex trauma, severe psychosis, or certain personality disorders. Medication considerations: While DBT focuses on behavioral skills, many clients with conditions like bipolar disorder or severe depression benefit from combined medication management alongside DBT. Accessibility challenges: Comprehensive DBT programs can be expensive, with limited insurance coverage, and are often unavailable in rural areas or regions with limited mental health resources. Resource-intensive approach: DBT requires substantial resources to implement properly, including specialized therapist training, weekly individual sessions, group skills training, and therapist consultation teams, making it less accessible for many healthcare settings with limited budgets or staff. DBT has faced some controversy as a therapeutic modality due to several practical challenges: it requires intensive resources and significant time commitments from both patients and providers, it may lack flexibility for certain individuals' needs, and it can be difficult to implement across all clinical settings. Additionally, some question whether its effectiveness extends beyond BPD treatment and whether its clinical benefits justify the substantial resources required for proper implementation. To find qualified DBT treatment, search for therapists certified through resources like Psychology Today's directory, university hospital referrals, or recommendations from your primary care doctor or your insurance company. When evaluating providers, ask about their specific DBT training, consultation team participation, and experience treating your mental health concerns to find the right therapist. Consider whether a comprehensive or a less intensive approach best suits your needs and financial situation. Insurance companies and websites typically have sliding scale fees, or if it's deemed too expensive for you, check out community mental health centers for affordable alternatives. At Neuro Wellness Spa, we have a team of therapists that are trained to treat mental health concerns with DBT in a compassionate, effective, and personalized approach. Our care integrates evidence-based dbt techniques with individualized plans to help clients develop practical skills for managing emotions and improving their overall quality of life. At Neuro Wellness Spa, we offer comprehensive DBT as a cornerstone of our integrative approach to mental health treatment. Our specially trained DBT therapists help clients develop essential skills in emotional regulation, distress tolerance, mindfulness, and interpersonal effectiveness within a supportive therapeutic environment. We recognize that lasting healing involves addressing both psychological and physiological aspects of mental health, which is why our DBT program can be seamlessly combined with other evidence-based treatments such as TMS therapy, medication management, and CBT. This multidimensional approach allows us to create personalized treatment plans that address the unique needs of each client while providing practical tools for long-term emotional resilience. Contact Neuro Wellness Spa today to discover how our DBT program can be part of your comprehensive path to improved mental wellbeing and a more fulfilling life. Hernandez-Bustamante, M., Cjuno, J., Hernández, R. M., & Ponce-Meza, J. C. (2023). Efficacy of dialectical behavior therapy in the treatment of borderline personality Disorder: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. Iranian Journal of Psychiatry. Harned, M. S., Chapman, A. L., Dexter-Mazza, E. T., Murray, A., Comtois, K. A., & Linehan, M. M. (2008). Treating co-occurring Axis I disorders in recurrently suicidal women with borderline personality disorder: A 2-year randomized trial of dialectical behavior therapy versus community treatment by experts. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76(6), 1068–1075. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based talk therapy that originated from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) but more directly focuses on the needs of those prone to suicide or self-harm. The primary goal of DBT is to help people build a mentally healthy life by improving their ability to manage emotions. DBT places a priority on acceptance and change. It helps people with intense emotions to move away from rigid thinking and to better tolerate uncertainty and upset. Talk with your healthcare provider if you're experiencing thoughts of suicide or other distress, and ask about DBT and your treatment options. Illustration by Julie Bang for Verywell Health During the 1980s, psychologist Dr. Marsha Linehan noticed that cognitive behavioral therapy was not working well for people who experienced suicidal behaviors and self-harm tendencies. The success of CBT treatment for borderline personality disorder, a mental health diagnosis often linked to self-harm, was limited. CBT's focus on improving feelings by changing thoughts and behaviors overwhelmed these patients. People felt invalidated, misunderstood, and criticized, which led many to drop out of therapy. Realizing that some people needed a different kind of emotional support and skills training, Linehan created dialectical behavioral therapy. In DBT, the term "dialectical" means two opposing ideas can be true at the same time. People who think in rigid, all-or-nothing patterns may benefit from new approaches that allow for these tensions and new skills for those who think in more limiting ways. DBT emphasizes the dialectic of acceptance and change. If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988 for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911. DBT requires a fundamental shift in thinking. DBT therapists work to teach the necessary skills, such as mindfulness and distress tolerance to help balance someone's emotions and change their thinking. DBT creates shifts in thinking by teaching acceptance of the present moment and acknowledging the feelings a person may be currently having, while still working toward the change that is needed to improve their life. Here are some examples of DBT thinking: Instead of: I can't get out of bed. I'm too tired. I can't go to work today. In DBT: I don't feel like getting out of bed (acceptance). Or: I can still get up and go to work. My thoughts don't control my life—I do (change).Instead of: I am a failure. I am worthless. I will never be successful. In DBT: Sometimes I may fail (acceptance). Or: Sometimes I succeed, and I'm sure I will do better next time (change).Instead of: I'm an idiot. I never get anything right. In DBT: I made a mistake (acceptance). Or: I can learn from my mistakes and do better next time. This mistake doesn't define me as a person. Nobody's perfect (change). There are four main core skills with DBT. These include distress tolerance, mindfulness, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness. Often, when people are overwhelmed with emotions, they may deal with the distressing feelings in ways that help them feel better in the moment. This can include substance abuse to numb the feelings or some type of immediate self-destructive action. But in the long term, these methods may cause even deeper emotional pain. Distress tolerance is about learning to manage those overwhelming feelings in healthier ways. DBT skills to improve distress tolerance include: Distraction: Distracting yourself from unhelpful thoughts and emotionsRadical acceptance: Accepting what you cannot change and focusing on what you can changeSelf-soothing strategies: Relaxing and soothing yourself using your five sensesSafe-place visualization: Imagining a safe, peaceful place, such as the beach or mountainsSpirituality: Empowering yourself with your own sense of spirituality The practice of mindfulness is to be aware and focused on the present moment instead of the past. Some DBT skills to practice mindfulness include: Focusing more fully on this present moment Observing your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without judgment Mindful breathing exercises, which can bring you into the present moment Being kind and compassionate to yourself during mindful meditation Some people experience emotional extremes they cannot regulate, often when there is a history of trauma or when they feel threatened or abandoned. This is known as emotional dysregulation. When they become triggered or emotionally overwhelmed, they may become highly reactive and self-destructive. Studies suggest DBT is effective for people with severe levels of emotional dysregulation. Some DBT emotion regulation skills include: Recognizing your emotionsRecognizing how your thoughts and behaviors influence your emotionsRecognizing self-destructive behaviorsIncreasing positive emotions Extreme reactive emotions are quite effective when a person is facing imminent threat or danger, but not as helpful in relationships or at work. DBT was developed in large part to help people gain the skills to manage their emotions and improve their lives. Interpersonal effectiveness is about improving relation