Dialectical Behavior Therapy with Parents, Couples, & Families

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Why extend DBT to couples, parents, and families?

Almost everyone “knows” how to communicate effectively & constructively...at least when not in the middle of an argument.

What happens?
What gets in the way?
Family Distress and Treatment Mediation

High Emotional Arousal or Emotion Dysregulation

Emotion Dysregulation ≠ Being Upset
What is this process?

Emotion Dysregulation

- Person focuses on immediate reduction of aversive tension or negative emotional arousal
- Most often occurs in the context of important relationships
- Behavior is reactive, impulsive
- Either attacking or withdrawing in the relationship
Heightened emotional arousal
Inaccurate self-expression
Invalidating responses

Parent Responses to Adolescent Children (~BPD)

*P<.05

Shenk & Fruzzetti, in press
Transactional Model for Emotion Dysregulation

High Emotion Vulnerability

Event

1. Judgments

Heightened Emotional Arousal

Dysregulated Behaviors:
- Self-harm
- Suicide attempt
- Substance use
- Eating disorder
- Angry outbursts
- Withdrawal
Transactional Model for Emotion Dysregulation

High Emotion Vulnerability

Event

↓

Judgments

↓

Heightened Emotional Arousal*

↓

“Inaccurate” Expression

Invalidating Responses
**Transactional Model for Emotion Dysregulation**

High Emotion Vulnerability

Event

↓

Judgments

↓

Heightened Emotional Arousal*

↓

“Inaccurate” Expression

Judgments

↓

Invalidating Responses

↓

Emotional Arousal

Vulnerabilities

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**Transactional Model for Emotion Dysregulation**

High Emotion Vulnerability → Event

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Judgments

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Heightened Emotional Arousal

↓

“Inaccurate” Expression

↓

Invalidating Responses

Pervasive History of Invalidating Responses → Event

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**Validating vs. Invalidating Responses**

![Graph showing stress and negative emotional arousal over time.](image)

Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011

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Validating vs. Invalidating Responses

- Validation
- Invalidation

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(c.f. Fruzzetti, Shenk, & Hoffman, 2005)
The Target

Accurate expression

Validating responses

Overall Intervention Program:
1. Establish safety
2. Assess/orient/commit to treatment
3. Build skills (ongoing)
4. Identify and reduce invalidation
5. Rebuild relationships
6. Accurate expression
7. Increase validation
8. Problem management
9. Transform conflict into closeness via acceptance & engagement
Treatment Modes are Flexible

Parent, couple, family groups
(with or without the identified patient)

or

Family therapy

Therapist Strategies

• Dialectical
  – Assessment: What is missing
  – Thinking: Both/And (rather than either/or)
  – Synthesize polarizations
  – Acceptance AND Change
  – Communication style (e.g., warm & confrontive)
  – Metaphors and stories
  – Reason AND emotion

• Acceptance and validation

• Change and problem solving (push)

Fruzzetti & Fruzzetti, 2009
Therapist Strategies, continued

• Acceptance and validation (support)
  – Model, teach, practice validation
• Change and problem solving (push)
  – Double chain
  – Teaching skills
  – Lots of blocking, redirecting
  – Coaching
  – Generalization: practice in session and out
• Revolving door strategy

Key Points

• Emphasize emotion self-management (emotion regulation) before trying to “communicate”
  – Talking, problem solving start much later
• Skills are lacking
  – Skills as solutions
    • Mindfulness & accurate expression
    • Relationship mindfulness & validation
• Understanding, mutual support are goals
  – Conflict is the side effect
More therapeutic issues

• Finding a way to like the client(s)
  – Allows early blocking, while still liking him/her
  – Allows playfulness, irreverence
• Be able to “see” the chain leading to the present, or problem, behavior
• Understand dysfunctional behavior IN the model…don’t be judgmental or reactive
• Make the partner or parent look good; don’t undermine or show him or her up
  – Speaking for the partner can help
  – Validating the partner, his/her wise mind

Treatment Program
Step 1: Establish safety

- Eliminate violence & aggression
- Remove reinforcers for suicidal behavior

Violence & Aggression

- Physical Aggression
- Sexual Aggression
- Damage to Property or Pets
- Threats of Aggression

See Fruzzetti & Levensky, 2000
“Moving” Positive Reinforcers for Self-Harm/Suicidal Behavior

- Identify likely positive reinforcers from individual chain analysis
- Orient client and family member to transactional model, role of attention
- Problem solve *moving* attention, soothing:
  - Fixed schedule
  - Following normative/skillful behavior
- Problem solve reactions to family member
  - Ensure reinforcement, not punishment

Example: Chain Analysis of Self-Harm

VULNERABILITIES: LONELY, TIRED, REACTIVE

TRIGGER: INVALIDATION

JUDGMENTS or SELF-INVALIDATION “I’M WORTHLESS”

PRIMARY EMOTION: SADNESS

RELIEF or SOCIAL REINFORCER

SECONDARY EMOTION: SHAME
Removing Negative Reinforcers

- Identify likely negative reinforcers from individual chain analysis
- Orient client and family member to transactional model, role of aversives in escape conditioning
- Focus on reducing aversives on the antecedent end of the chain
- Problem-solve reinforcing family member, and/or eliminating the function of the aversives

Behavioral Chain Analysis:
Changing Behavior &
Breaking the Old Pattern

VULNERABILITIES

PROMPTING EVENT

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

REINFORCING CONSEQUENCES

SKILLFUL BEHAVIORS

Step 2:
Brief assessment, orienting, and commitment to treatment
Multimodal Assessment of Families

- Self-report
  - pre/post treatment battery
  - daily/weekly monitoring (diary cards)
    - make assessment match targets
- Therapist Observation in Session
- Video/audio Samples
  - formal coding
  - informal target identification informed by coding
- Chain Analysis

Accurate Expression:
Primary Emotion,
Description
Identifying Invalidating Responses

**Validating**
1. Paying attention; relationship mindfulness
2. Acknowledging & describing
3. Benefit of the doubt
4. Normalize ("of course") the normative
5. Respectful, not condescending
6. "Positive" control strategies dominate

**Invalidating**
1. Not paying attention; closed
2. Judgmental, minimizing
3. Assume the worst
4. Invalidate the normatively valid
5. Condescending, disrespectful
6. "Aversive" control strategies dominate

**Double Chain**

- Individual's history, especially w/ family member
- Thoughts & emotions
- Verbal/public behaviors
- Situation
- Non-mindful/reactive/judgmental
- PROBLEM BEHAVIOR
- Individual's history, especially w/ family member
Orienting/Psychoeducation

- Emotion dysregulation/BPD
- Transactional model
- No blame
- Reciprocity/dialectical balance, dialectics
- Role of accurate expression
- Role of validating & invalidating responses vis-à-vis emotion, accurate expression
- Family skill approach
- See *Family Connections* for more details
- Child development education for parents of young children or teens

Balance in Relationships
We are linked, like it or not:

What I do ← → What you do
3. Teach Family Skills

- Mindfulness
- Accurate Expression
- Relationship Mindfulness
- Relationship Activation
- Validation
- Problem Management
- Acceptance & Closeness
- Parenting

Step 4:
Reduce invalidating responses using mindfulness skills
Stop Making Things Worse!

Session Management Strategies

- Revolving door
- Relationship mindfulness
- Talking (expressing accurately, or validating) “for” the partner
- Involve others
- Blocking, blocking, blocking…
Getting to Blocking

• Need to know the partner has a wise mind about the other person
• Look deeply, understand his or her primary emotion(s)...look for sadness, disappointment, worry, shame, and so on
• Be the person’s wise mind: “I know you are worried about your partner b/c you love him/her...” (connect with him/her)
• Block: “It is hard to see the worry and the love when anger comes out and you attack.”

Judgments

Heightened emotional arousal
Inaccurate self-expression

Invalidating responses
Secondary Emotional Reactions

Sadness
Fear
Guilt
Jealously
etc.

Anger (if it includes judgment) is corrosive in relationships, even when justified.
Emotion Self-Management

• Letting go of invalidation requires
  – Notice rising arousal (anger as a signal)
  – Inhibit ineffective responding
  – Identify the PRIMARY emotion (accurately)
  – “Treat” the primary emotion
    • Reduce vulnerabilities (biol, timing, etc.)
    • Acceptance or Change of the emotion (or both)
  – Self-validation of the primary emotion
  – Relationship mindfulness of the other

• Then, you can say something to him or her

Open your mind before you open your mouth.
Awareness of Self and Others: Mindfulness and Relationship Mindfulness

Relationship Mindfulness

- Observing and describing another
- Letting go of judgments about him or her
  - Judgments are concepts, not reality
- Stay with facts, minimize interpretations
- Interpretations should be benign (or let go)
- Recognize how we are in the same boat or nest, will sink or survive together
- Find your connection
Exercises

- ET
- Holding hands
- Shoes
- Breathing together
- Describing while the other is occupied

Mindfulness

- Lowered emotional arousal
- Accurate expression

- Relationship mindfulness
- Lowered emotional arousal
- Validating responses
Summary: Decrease Reactivity

• Let go of judgments
• Use anger as a signal to be skillful, not to attack or defend
• Stay mindful of relationship, goals
• Be aware of the timing of your requests
• Reduce vulnerabilities
• Reactivate your relationship

Step 5: Rebuild relationships (relationship reactivation)
Reverse the Balance of Positive and Negative Interactions

- Increase non-negative time together:
  - Conditioning positive emotion (exposure, letting go of negative emotion)

Step 6: Accurate expression
Accurate Expression

• Knowing the current goal of your communication
  – Emotional goals vs. instrumental goals
  – Get the other to agree with your goal
  – Solve a problem
  – Information exchange
• Accurate identification of emotions & wants
• Choosing an appropriate strategy, time
• Being skillful in expression

Accurate expression includes the expression of primary emotions, and an overall descriptive approach to communication (without judgments or interpretations, and with no or only benign assumptions).
Steps in Identifying Emotions

- Notice, describe events (internal & external)
- Notice vulnerabilities, context
- Notice interpretations
- Be aware of previous experiences, history
- Remember your brain works outside awareness to some extent
- Facial expressions, body posture
- Accurate labeling

Lowered emotional arousal
Accurate expression
Validating responses
Step 7: Validate

Validation Increases Positive Affect and Decreases Negative Affect
Why is validation important?

• Core communication response to disclosure
• Soothes emotion, reduces arousal
• Builds trust and slows reactivity
• Reduces anger, judgments
• Enhances self-respect
• The key to getting through conflict
• Enhances the relationship
• Makes problem solving, closeness, etc. possible

What makes it difficult to validate?

1. Severe individual distress and disorder
2. Bad habits, patterns, etc: forgetting that this is a person you love
3. Judgments (right/wrong; should/shouldn’t)
4. Anger (it is toxic in families)
5. Poor (inaccurate) self-expression
6. Lack of understanding
7. Poor conflict management skills
8. Lack of acceptance
Validating Responses

• Listening, paying attention
• Acknowledging the other’s experience
• Working to understand; asking questions, making hypotheses
• Understanding his/her problems in context
• Normalizing his/her responses when they are normative (“of course”)
• Extending, matching with your own vulnerability
• With actions that convey understanding

Basics

• Um-hmm.
• I know.
• What happened?
• Of course.
• Me, too.
• Let’s go.
It’s tricky…

• Validate only the valid…often!
• Try not to invalidate valid things
• Try not to validate invalid things
• But…OK to invalidate invalid things*
  – Only occasionally
  – Only after validating the valid many times
  – Accompanied by soothing

*This is what gets us in trouble often

Step 8: Manage conflict
Problem Management

vs.

Problem Solving

Re-choreographing the dance, using the double chain

Individual's history, especially with family member

Thoughts & emotions

Situation

VERBAL/PUBLIC BEHAVIORS

Non-mindful/reactive/judgmental

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Thoughts & emotions

Individual's history, especially with family member

Verbal/public behaviors

Double Chain
Problem Management

• Timing
• Match strategies to goals
  – Emotion focus
  – Problem focus

After Invalidation:
Recovery, Not Revenge

• Same skills, situation is more challenging
• Mindfulness (goals, awareness, non-judgmental, descriptive)
• Relationship mindfulness; reciprocity
• Self-validation (primary emotion)
• Self-soothing
• Accurate expression
• Repair (if needed)
• Validation “Rule of 3”
Step 9: Transform conflict into negotiation and closeness

Increase acceptance of the other person, including the very behavior that drives you crazy (reduce suffering and engage your life)
Acceptance & Closeness Skills

• *Behavioral tolerance:* cease & desist
• *Problem/pattern mindfulness:* awareness of how attention to the problem creates a context for less-than-optimal relationship functioning
  – Grieving is necessary to go to next step
• *Synthesis:* true radical acceptance through recontextualization and practice

When you understand, you cannot help but love. You cannot get angry. To develop understanding, you have to practice looking ... with eyes of compassion. When you understand, you love. And when you love, you naturally act in way that can relieve the suffering of people.” — Thich Nhat Hanh