LEARNING MADE EASY

DBT

for dummies®

A Wiley Brand

Use DBT to manage overwhelming emotions

Discover the power of mindfulness in everyday life

Transform relationships with the magic of validation

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Contents at a Glance

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Introduction

In our professional experience, at no other time have we seen more of a demand for compassionate, effective, and comprehensive mental health care than we did in the strange year of 2020. The mental health toll caused by the isolating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial uncertainties of the economy, the divisive polarization of social justice causes, and the doubt and suspicions magnified by political extremes has impacted those without mental health issues, significantly impacted those with mental health issues, and even affected mental health practitioners. We are, after all, human beings whose brains respond to stress, strong emotions, and lack of connection.

We all need to take care of ourselves, and we don't have time to spend years contemplating our lives. The changes you make today will reverberate throughout the rest of your life. Now is the time to start behaving in ways that are consistent with your values and your aspirations. Of course, you need the help of others — even the most powerful of quarterbacks cannot win without a supportive team — but you can also take charge of some of your own self-care. You don't need the blessing of others to start changing your behaviors, by eating healthier food, exercising more regularly, getting to bed on time, reducing your alcohol intake, and practicing some meditation every day. And then, when you're a healthier person, you bring a more skillful version of yourself to your life and to the relationships that you care about.

We have told our patients, friends, families, and colleagues that DBT — dialectical behavior therapy — is not just for our patients but is also a life enhancer for everyone. When we practice DBT, we are better able to take care of ourselves and our relationships, we are more compassionate, and we make less judgmental assumptions. We don't say these things simply because we authored this book, but because we have seen the benefits of DBT in our personal and professional lives.

About This Book

DBT For Dummies is a book for our time. The world in 2020 — when we wrote this book — was full of the most unexpected of challenges. There was a global pandemic, a contentious election, and demonstrations that highlighted significant

divisions within our communities. These are experiences that demand the most of us, and yet can also bring out our weaknesses and struggles.

For those who already fight against underlying mental health conditions, the need to be able to regulate, connect effectively, tolerate difficult moments without sinking deeper into despair, and pay attention to the present moment, each other, and ourselves makes the need for the skills in this book timely and essential. These are skills that, if learned, used, and practiced on a regular basis, will get us not only through this moment but through all future moments, whether or not they are filled with uncertainty.

Almost everything you need to know about DBT is in this book, whether you're new to the therapy or an expert practitioner looking for new ideas. We want to be very clear that this book is no substitute for expert therapy. Reading it will inform you and give you some good ideas as to what to do, but it takes a therapist skilled in DBT to help you if you're struggling.

Along our own journey with DBT, we've had many patients tell us that they did DBT before and that although we use many similar terms and practices, what we did was different. Many of our protocols will be identical to those of other DBT therapists. However, because DBT is not only protocol-based but also principle-driven, there is also an art to DBT, and that is the way in which it is delivered. Many of the ideas in this book come directly out of our own clinical practice, and different therapists may apply the therapy differently.

As with all *For Dummies* guides, you won't have to read this book from start to finish as you would so many other books. If the only thing you're interested in is how to practice emotion regulation, how to use mindfulness to improve your relationships, or how to apply DBT to a specific mental disorder, the information is here, easily found, and ready to be read and comprehended in minutes.

A quick note: Sidebars (shaded boxes of text) dig into the details of a given topic, but they aren't crucial to understanding it. Feel free to read them or skip them. You can pass over the text accompanied by the Technical Stuff icon, too. The text marked with this icon gives some interesting but non-essential information about some of the more technical procedures in DBT.

One last thing: Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it appears in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to go directly to the web page.

Foolish Assumptions

Dear reader, we make a few assumptions about you. No, you're no dummy; however, you're reading this book because you want a clearer, less jargon-filled understanding of dialectical behavior therapy. You may have some basic knowledge about the therapy, and you may have heard that it's useful to treat certain conditions, but this book will offer a much clearer picture of this fascinating therapy.

We also recognize that no book is a substitute for expert therapy, and we assume that anyone who is in need of help will seek it out, even if they use this book as a guide for understanding. Finally, we assume that readers who are suffering might do so in ways that make it hard to learn new approaches. We value you tremendously and support you in your efforts to improve, despite the obstacles that life may have thrown at you.

Icons Used in This Book

We include some handy icons that you may notice in the margins of this book. They point you to certain types of information, so be sure you know which is which.


TIP

We include some text that tips you off into certain directions — this icon makes sure you notice. These aren't substitutes for practicing the skills as they are intended, but they are reminders that might make it easier to remember a skill.


REMEMBER

Although we'd like you to remember everything we say, we have seen time and again just how easy things are to forget. We will repeat things, because we know that repetition is a great way to learn, and if you tend to forget, if you see this icon, be sure to ingrain this information in your brain.


WARNING

Just as we want you to remember everything we say in this book, and that we'd love for you to *do* everything we recommend, it's possible (okay, highly likely) that you'll only do half (okay, a quarter) of what we suggest. But to truly stay away from pitfalls that can create significant obstacles to your healing, you should heed any warnings that you see associated with this icon.


TECHNICAL STUFF

Just like any expert, we do have nuggets of knowledge that only some of our most persistent patients and DBT junkies could love. But we know that you may want to know more and delve deeper into subjects like neural pathways and brain chemicals. If these excite you rather than putting you to sleep, we welcome you to dive

in with us. However, if you prefer, you can skip the information associated with this icon. This is *the only* icon that points you to information that you can skip if you prefer to.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading now, this product comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet for interesting information on what to expect from DBT, the components of DBT, and useful skills you'll discover. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to `www.dummies.com` and search for "*DBT For Dummies* Cheat Sheet" in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

At this point. . .browse! Check out the detailed table of contents and go straight to those chapters that grab your interest. This isn't a novel that you need to read from start to finish. It's more like when our children open up the fridge and take the things they want. If you're totally new to DBT, though, we do recommend starting with Chapter 1.

As you understand more and more about DBT, and maybe even teach your therapist a thing or two, keep coming back to this book and discover more information, which will increasingly be accompanied by "aha" moments, and do let us know. We thank you for including us on your journey.

1 The Nuts and Bolts of DBT

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover how DBT (dialectical behavior therapy) was developed.

Understand the components of a comprehensive DBT treatment.

Recognize the elements of a contemplative mindfulness practice as a core part of DBT, and figure out how to accept multiple points of view.

Interweave behaviorism into mindfulness practices to develop a complete therapy.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Looking at the pillars, modes, and functions of DBT
- Getting a handle on the DBT theoretical framework
- Stepping through DBT's stages of treatment
- Considering core DBT skills
- Seeing the mechanics of DBT
- Using DBT to treat specific conditions

Chapter 1

Entering the World of DBT

Entering the world of DBT (dialectical behavior therapy) is entering into a world that focuses on the philosophical process of dialectics, while also attending to the psychological process of behaviorism and change. Imagine entering into a therapy that tells you that everything is composed of opposites, that these opposites are all true, that everything changes except for change itself, and that the way out of suffering is to start by accepting that all of these things are true. This chapter introduces the basics.

Looking at the Main Pillars of DBT

REMEMBER

DBT stands on three big philosophical and scientific pillars. These pillars are specific assumptions that hold the treatment together:

- **All things are interconnected.** Everything and everyone is interconnected and interdependent. We are all part of the greater tapestry of all things, a community of beings that supports and sustains us. We are also connected to our family, friends, and community. We need others; others need us.
- **Change is constant and inevitable.** This is not a new idea. The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus said, "The only constant in life is change." Life is full of suffering, but because change happens, change being the only thing of which you can be certain, your suffering will change as well.
- **Opposites can be integrated to form a closer approximation of the truth.** This is at the core of dialectics. A dialectical synthesis combines the thesis (an idea) and the antithesis (its opposite). In coming up with the synthesis of the two ideas, the process never introduces a new concept not found in either the thesis or the antithesis. Strictly speaking, the synthesis incorporates one concept from the thesis and one from the antithesis.

Check out Chapter 2 for more about DBT's main pillars.

Getting an Overview of DBT's Treatment Modes and Functions

DBT was originally developed by Dr. Marsha Linehan for the treatment of people who struggled with self-destructive and suicidal behavior, and it subsequently became the gold-standard treatment for the condition known as borderline personality disorder (BPD), which we review comprehensively in Chapter 20. The treatment appeals to many therapists and patients, not only because it is very helpful, but because it integrates four essential elements in a comprehensive treatment by addressing the biological, environmental, spiritual, and behavioral elements of a person's struggle. It's also unique in its focus on balancing the need for a person to change while being completely accepted for who they are in the present moment.

As you find out in Chapter 2, DBT delivers the treatment through four modes, and these four modes address the five functions of a comprehensive treatment.

The four modes of therapy

REMEMBER

There are four modes of therapy, which are detailed completely in Chapter 14:

- **Individual therapy:** In this mode, a trained therapist works with you to apply newly learned skills to your personal life challenges.
- **Group skills training:** In this mode, together with a group of other patients, you're taught new behavioral skills, you complete homework assignments, and you role-play new ways of interacting with others.
- **Phone skills coaching:** In this mode, you can call your therapist between sessions to receive guidance on coping with difficult situations as they arise.
- **Therapist consultation team meetings:** In this mode, your individual therapist meets with other therapists who are also providing DBT treatment. These meetings help therapists navigate difficult and complex issues related to providing therapy, and give them new ideas for what to do when they are stuck. Chapter 17 goes into more detail on the consultation team.

The five functions of treatment

REMEMBER

As you see in the previous section, DBT is a comprehensive treatment program. In this way, DBT is a collection of treatments, rather than a single treatment method conducted by a single therapist and a single patient. Any program, whichever you choose to do, should address five key functions of treatment (which are fully reviewed in Part 4):

- **Increasing your motivation to change:** Changing self-destructive and maladaptive behaviors can be very difficult, and it can be easy to become disheartened. Your individual therapist will work with you to make sure you stay on track and reduce any behaviors that are inconsistent with a life worth living. Within individual and group therapy, your therapist will ask you to track your behaviors and use skills coaching in order to achieve this goal.
- **Enhancing your capabilities:** DBT assumes that people who struggle either lack or need to improve several important life skills, including skills that help you regulate emotions, pay attention to the experience of the present moment, effectively navigate interpersonal situations, and finally, be able to tolerate distress.
- **Generalizing what you've learned in therapy to the rest of your life:** If the skills you've learned in group and individual therapy sessions don't transfer to your daily life, then it's going to be difficult to say that the therapy was successful for dealing with your problems.

- **Structuring your environment in order to reinforce your gains:** An important function is to make sure that you don't slip back into maladaptive or problematic behaviors or, if you do, to make sure that the impact isn't enduring. Structuring the treatment in a manner that promotes progress toward your goal is a way to do this. Typically, your individual therapist will make sure that all of the elements of effective treatment are in place for you. At times, they may intervene for you if you aren't yet skilled enough to do so for yourself, with the understanding that such intervention is temporary until you have acquired the skills to manage.
- **Increasing your therapist's motivation and competence:** Although helping people who come to therapy with multiple problems can be very rewarding for both patient and therapist, the behaviors that people present with can be very taxing for the therapist, and so the therapist needs help to stay in the game of DBT. This is where the DBT consultation team that you read about in the previous section comes in.

Focusing on the DBT Theoretical Framework

The practice of DBT relies on three central theories:

- **The biosocial theory:** Dr. Linehan's biosocial theory essentially states that people who struggle in regulating their emotions do so because of an enduring interaction between that person's biological makeup — one that makes them more emotionally sensitive, more emotionally reactive, and slower to return to their emotional baseline — and what she termed the invalidating environment.

  An *invalidating environment* is one where a child's emotional experiences aren't recognized as valid or tolerated by significant people in the child's life. When this happens, and a child's emotional experiences aren't validated until the child has escalated emotionally and with high intensity, the child effectively learns that they have to escalate to be heard. When they get punished for expressing high emotions, the child might take their difficulties underground and try to regulate by using maladaptive behaviors such as self-injury. This, in turn, leads to even greater emotionality, as the child experiences shame and guilt. Flip to Chapter 2 for more about the biosocial theory.
- **Behavioral theory:** The behavioral theory seeks to explain human behavior by analyzing the antecedents of the behavior. *Antecedents* are the events, situations, circumstances, emotions, and thoughts that preceded the

behavior — in other words, the events that were happening before the behavior occurred — and the *consequences* of the behavior are the actions or responses that follow the behavior. It's in understanding the elements that are causing behaviors to manifest — and then further understanding what keeps the behaviors going — that the behavioral theory is applied in order to reduce maladaptive behaviors and increase adaptive responses.

An important element to this theory is that maladaptive behaviors are maintained because a person lacks the skills for more adaptive functioning due to problems in processing emotions and thoughts, which is why there is such an emphasis on teaching helpful emotion regulation skills. We discuss regulating your emotions in Chapter 10.

- **The philosophy of dialectics:** Essentially, *dialectical theory* states that reality is the tapestry of interconnected and interwoven forces, many of which are opposing one another. It is the continuing synthesis of opposing forces, ideas, or concepts that defines dialectics. Chapter 15 has more information on dialectics.

Checking Out the DBT Stages of Treatment

REMEMBER

DBT consists of five stages of treatment, one of which is pretreatment:

- **Pretreatment:** This is the period of time when the person is making a direct commitment to themselves and their therapist to do DBT therapy. In this stage of pretreatment, the patient also creates a hierarchical list of problem behaviors that interfere with their living the life they want to live.
- **Stage 1:** In this stage, the main goal is to reduce the most severe behaviors that greatly impact a person's life. These include life-threatening behaviors such as suicide and self-injury, therapy-interfering behaviors such as being late to therapy or not completing homework assignments, and quality-of-life-interfering behaviors such as substance misuse and hurtful relationships. Finally, they want to increase behavioral skills that are done in the skills-group format.
- **Stage 2:** In this stage, the person focuses on emotional experiencing and attending to the trauma in their life, trauma that has often led to misery and desperation.
- **Stage 3:** In this stage, residual problems such as boredom, emptiness, grieving, and life goals are addressed.
- **Stage 4:** In this final stage, the person works on deepening their self-awareness and their sense of incompleteness, becoming more spiritually fulfilled, and recognizing that most of happiness lies within the self.

Surveying DBT Skills

DBT assumes that many of the problems that people experience occur because they don't have, or can't effectively use, the skills to manage emotionally charged situations. More specifically, the failure to use effective behavior when it's needed is often a result of not knowing skillful behavior or, if known, how to use it. Consistent with this idea of skills deficit, the use of DBT skills during standard treatment — in group, individual therapy, and coaching — has been found to lead to a reduction in suicidal behavior, non-suicidal self-injury, and depression, and to improve emotion regulation and relationship problems. In Part 3, we thoroughly review these skills:

- **Mindfulness:** In part derived from Zen and mystical meditative practices, DBT teaches people the importance of how to be mindful. It involves reflecting on two considerations: "What do I do in order to practice mindfulness?" and "How do I practice these mindfulness skills?"
- **Interpersonal effectiveness:** DBT teaches more effective ways for people to get what they need and what they want, how to reduce interpersonal conflict, how to repair relationships, and how to say "no" to unreasonable requests. The focus is on helping a person build self-respect, improve their self-advocacy, and recognize their needs as valid.
- **Distress tolerance:** Whereas many approaches to mental health treatment focus on changing stressful situations, DBT focuses on teaching people skills that allow them to tolerate these situations, which are often fraught with emotional pain or distress. Within the skills, there is also a recognition of the importance of distinguishing between accepting reality as it is and approving of this reality.
- **Emotion regulation:** Central to many of the problems in which DBT is effective is the finding that people who struggle with regulating their emotions lack the ability to do so effectively. The focus of this skills module is to get people to know what emotion they are experiencing, what the vulnerability factors are to dysregulated emotions, what the functions of emotions are, and then how to deal with the emotions when they are disproportionate to the situation.

Walking through the Mechanics of DBT

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a comprehensive DBT treatment goes beyond individual therapy and includes group skills training, phone coaching, and a consultation team for the therapists. The group sessions are typically held once per