

MASTERING DBT ESSENTIALS



A QUICK GUIDE
TO DIALECTICAL
BEHAVIOR
THERAPY IN
5 SIMPLE STEPS

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The Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) Quick Guide

Master DBT Essentials in 5 Easy Steps

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Introduction

This DBT Quick Guide is a shortcut to learning the most important aspects of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Whether you're new to this philosophy or just want a quick recap, this guide will give you the basic ideas and valuable skills you need to navigate life's difficult moments better. This guide is divided into five (5) simple steps:

In **Step 1: DBT 101**, you'll learn the basic principle of DBT: using *dialectics* or two seemingly opposing points of view. In DBT, this is the coming together of **Acceptance** and **Change**.

In Steps 2-5, you'll discover the four (4) DBT skills you need to develop to apply Acceptance and Change in your life. To help you learn them more effectively, a few exercises are provided for you to try after each skill.

Step 2: Mindfulness is the basis of all DBT skills. It fosters present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance of one's thoughts and emotions. It's that crucial "mental pause" between trigger and response.

Step 3: Distress Tolerance is about learning how to survive moments of crisis or distress. This skill is important because it teaches you how to "live through" challenging moments instead of reacting to them and potentially making an unpleasant situation worse.

Step 4: Emotion Regulation is when you actively try to "move on" from difficult emotions by adapting healthier coping mechanisms.

Step 5: Interpersonal Effectiveness is the final piece of the puzzle in DBT, focusing on building and maintaining healthier relationships through effective communication and showing empathy.

By completing these five steps, you will have mastered all of the essential theories underpinning DBT, allowing you to deal with life's challenges more effectively and with greater resilience.

However, it's important to note that this quick guide is not a quick fix. Mental health healing takes time[1], and it's never a linear process. As such, please be kind and patient with yourself. If you need professional help, please get in touch with a therapist or mental health professional.

DBT 101

Dialectical Behavior Therapy, or DBT, was developed by Dr. Marsha Linehan in the 1980s.[2] It is based on the principle of *dialectics*, which is finding the balance between two different or contradictory points of view. Regarding DBT, **Acceptance** and **Change** are the opposing ideas that seem to go against each other.

DBT's Two Core Principles

At first glance, it seems impossible for **Acceptance** and **Change** to co-exist. However, in DBT philosophy, it's believed that to feel better and heal from mental and emotional suffering, you need both. That is, you must first practice acceptance of your situation (reality). Only when you practice acceptance can you change how you can effectively address your reality.

Picture this: Suppose you have a toxic relative (TR) who just loves to drop by unannounced even though you've already mentioned that you prefer they call first. Worse, they critique you from head to toe while "visiting."

You have endured this for years, but it's always the same: they arrive, you get stressed and emotionally beaten up, and they leave. But when they do, they don't take the weight of all the negative emotions you feel with them.

You feel drained and traumatized. Somehow, you feel "less" after their visit. You want to fold, hide in a corner, and be in this dark funk for days. Finally, you get into this "routine argument" with your partner about your TR.

With DBT, this is what Acceptance + Change may look like to help you with this situation.

Acceptance

You accept that your TR exists and their behavior and actions are NOT on you.

They are who they are. This is not on me.

You accept, without judgment, the emotions that arise during and after TR's visits.

I feel enormous stress and feel a lot of emotional pain when TR visits.

Change

Realize that although you don't control others, you have control over yourself.

TR behaves in a toxic manner, and while I can't control their actions, I can control MY response and mindset while they're here and when they're gone.

Realize that you're worthy of "better."

Just because this is my reality today doesn't mean it will be my reality tomorrow.

So, in summary:

What you're accepting: the reality is that you have a TR and that they cause you emotional suffering.

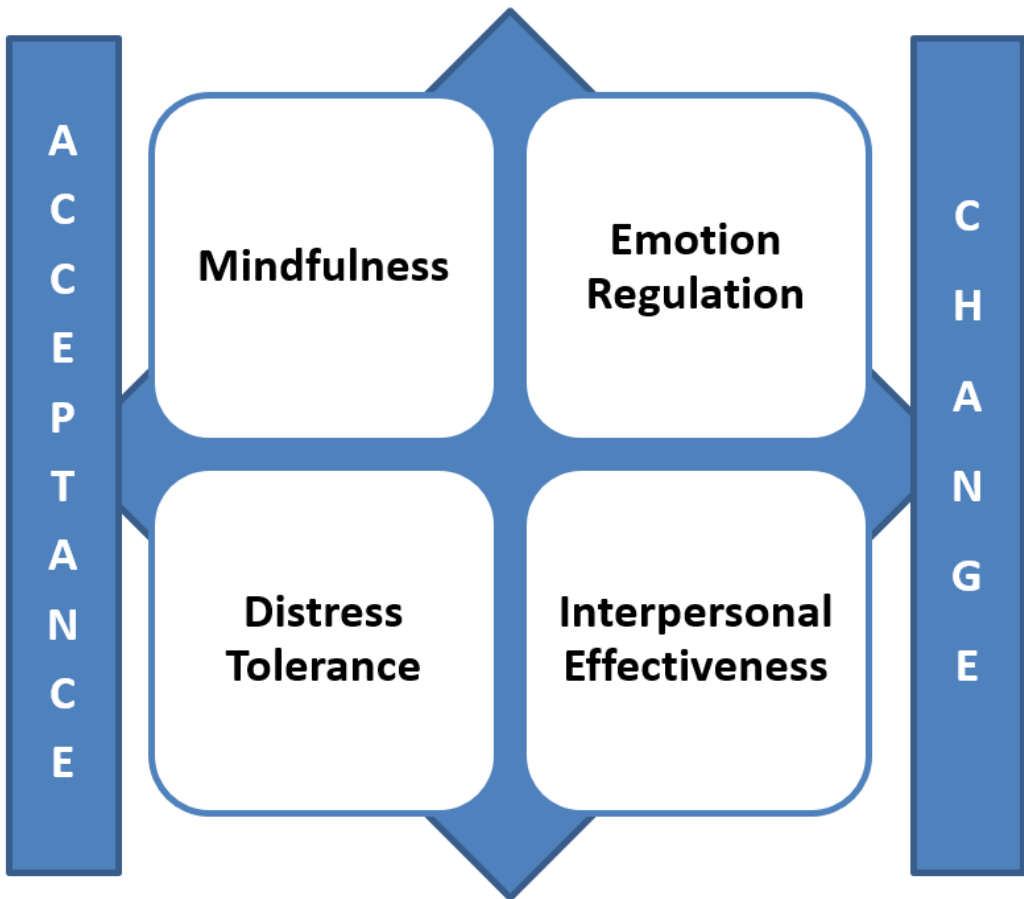
What you're changing: how you handle your TR and their visits so that the whole affair DOES NOT cause you emotional suffering.

As you read this, you may think, "Why not just cut off TR from my life?" Of course, you can do this if this is the change you need. However, in many cases, the cause of our emotional suffering can't just be "cut off." The secret that DBT imparts is how to address the source of our anguish in new and different ways so that it doesn't cause so much suffering.

DBT's Four Core Skills

Acceptance and Change can be developed by practicing four primary DBT skills: **Mindfulness**, **Distress Tolerance**, **Emotion Regulation**, and **Interpersonal Effectiveness**.^[3]

In the following sections, you'll get an understanding of each skill plus exercises to actively practice them in your life.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness = NOW.[4] That is, your attention is focused solely on what's happening in the present moment. You're not thinking about what happened (past) or what should happen next (future). Your sole preoccupation is what's happening around and inside you now—*without judgment*.

"Without judgment" means not assigning any labels. When it comes to emotions, we often criticize our feelings as "good" or "bad." Why can't we just feel? There's nothing wrong with that.

For example, when you're sad, accept your sadness without feeling bad about it or blaming something or someone for it. Doing so will help you observe your thoughts and emotions without getting caught up in them.

Consider mindfulness as a "mental pause." You're slowing down your mind to observe what's happening so that you DO NOT react in a knee-jerk manner to the situation.

You see, there's often TRIGGER (T) and then our immediate REACTION (R). But what if R makes the situation worse?

For example, say John kicks a ball, and it hits his brother Joe right smack on the chest. Joe feels pain and sees red, and his knee-jerk reaction to this trigger is to go over and push John back. A fight ensues, and by the time Mom arrives and pulls them apart, they're both bloodied and bruised. Now, they're grounded, too! Imagine if Joe was mindful, took that "mental pause," and realized that John didn't mean it. It was an accident, and if he'd only given his brother a few seconds to register what had happened, John would have run to him and apologized.

This is what mindfulness helps us with. It gives us that opportunity, that moment to think before we act.[5]

Following are a few exercises to help you develop mindfulness.

Exercise: Mindful Listening

Mindful listening is focusing your attention entirely on what you hear around you. It could be the chirping of birds, the clacking of keys on a keyboard, or the hum of silence.

Important: Avoid labeling, judging, or analyzing the sounds you hear; just observe them with an open mind. For example, when you hear a bird chirp, don't try to figure out where the sound is coming from or what type of bird is making the sound. Chirp is chirp.

1. Find a peaceful and relaxing space with few distractions. (You don't want to be disturbed)
2. Start with a short mindfulness breathing exercise to center yourself. Inhale deeply while counting to four, hold your breath for four counts, and exhale for four counts. Repeat this for a minute or two to bring awareness to the present moment.
3. Set yourself up for a mindset of openness and curiosity. You can tell yourself any of the following:
 - *I welcome any and all sounds I hear.*
 - *I will just listen.*
 - *I will let whatever sound come and go as they please.*
4. With your eyes closed, shift your attention to the sounds around you. Be open to both near and distant sounds, whether they are natural or artificial.
5. Spend the next few minutes actively identifying different sounds in your environment. Try to observe "deeper" by noticing subtle sounds you might

normally overlook. For example, perhaps you never noticed that you could hear passing cars in your neighborhood.

6. As you identify what you hear, remember to observe without judgment. Allow each sound to come and go naturally without clinging to or resisting any particular noise.
7. Next, shift your attention to more subtle or ambient sounds, such as the rustling of leaves or the hum of appliances. Allow these softer sounds to come into your awareness.
8. Now, practice deep listening. Concentrate on one sound. Follow its subtleties, fluctuations, and any sensations or feelings it evokes from you. Again, don't judge your reaction to the sound. Just let everything come and go. If the sound fades, shift your attention to the next sound you hear.
9. Slowly bring your attention back to your breath. Imagine yourself tuning out other sounds as you slowly "come back" and hear your breathing. Open your eyes.

As you finish this practice, reflect on your experience. For example, consider what you heard for the "first time." Could it be that a sound you noticed was always present, and you just weren't hearing it?

Exercise: Mindful Nature Observation

Nature offers a powerful and calming anchor for your attention and awareness. This exercise will help deepen your mindfulness by fostering a sense of presence and appreciation for the natural world.

1. Choose a peaceful and tranquil outdoor space that appeals to you. It could be a park, garden, nearby woods, or trail. See if you can select an environment with a variety of natural elements.
2. As you enter the natural setting, pause for a few minutes to transition from everyday thoughts to the present moment. Take a few deep breaths and let go of any mental clutter. You can tell yourself any of the following:
 - *I'm going to enter nature now and leave the noise behind me.*
 - *I'm ready for some nature, green, and peace.*
 - *I will welcome whatever I see or hear without judgment.*
3. Find a comfortable spot to sit or stand. If sitting, choose a position that allows you to be at ease, whether on the ground, a bench, or a rock.
4. Next, actively engage your senses by shutting your eyes.
 - *What do you hear?*
 - *What can you smell?*
 - *What can you feel?*
5. Slowly open your eyes and take in the visual elements of the natural space. Observe the colors, textures, and shapes. Allow your gaze to wander. See and accept without fixating on any particular object.

6. Next, pick a specific natural element to focus on, such as a tree, a rock, a big stone, or even a leaf. Examine it closely, noticing intricate details. Pay attention to its colors, patterns, and any signs of life.
7. If possible, engage in mindful walking. Move slowly and deliberately, paying attention to each step. Feel the solid ground beneath your feet and observe the changing landscape. Truly experience the sense of each step meeting the ground.
8. Find another quiet spot to sit or stand, or return to where you started. Close your eyes and spend a few minutes in silent reflection. Allow the experiences of nature to settle within you.
9. Take a couple of deep breaths, and as you do, express gratitude for the time spent in nature.
10. Get up, and as you leave, carry this sense of mindfulness and connection with you into your day.

Exercise: Focusing

You may not realize it, but your body reacts physically to your feelings. For example, if you're extremely angry, you might notice the beginning of a headache. If you're very sad, you may sense heaviness in your chest. Sometimes, you may be feeling strong emotions without fully understanding why.

The following exercise, based on the work of psychologist Eugene Gendlin, is a body-focused approach to mindfulness. It's giving yourself time to truly listen to what your body is trying to tell you about your emotional state.

1. Pick a tranquil and peaceful environment where no one can interrupt you. Sit in a relaxed posture.
2. Start with a few minutes of deep breathing to center your being. Take a deep breath through your nostrils. Pause briefly, then exhale slowly through your mouth, gradually releasing any tension.
3. Bring your attention to different body parts, starting from your toes and moving up to the top of your head. Notice any areas of tension or discomfort and allow them to soften as you breathe.
4. As you pay attention to different parts of your body, think about an issue or feeling you would like to explore. It could be a vague sense of unease, a specific concern, or an unresolved emotion.
5. Begin to gently ask yourself open-ended questions. For example, "Why am I feeling nervous?" or "What does this situation remind me of?" Allow your mind to wander without judgment.

6. Pay attention to your body sensations as you explore the issue. Notice if there are any specific bodily responses or feelings associated with your thoughts and questions. Remember, your body often holds clues to deeper insights.
7. As you explore your body and ask questions, notice anything that stands out. This is often called the "felt sense," a vague bodily awareness related to the issue. This may be a tightness or stiffness on your shoulders you haven't noticed before, a cramp on your foot, a dull ache in your chest, etc.
8. Whatever you're feeling, try to give a name or description to this "felt sense." It could be a color, shape, or an image. Trust your intuition in finding a word or phrase that resonates with the felt sense.
9. Start a dialogue with your "felt sense." Ask it questions and listen for any responses that arise. Be patient and open to whatever insights or feelings emerge. Important: DO NOT get discouraged if nothing comes to you. Focusing takes practice. Feeling and understanding the "felt sense" is not an ability you can turn on, so please be patient with yourself.
10. Conclude the focusing exercise with a few minutes of mindfulness. Focus on your breath, slowly bringing awareness back to the present moment.

Take a moment to reflect on any insights you might've gained from this exercise. For example, suppose exploring your felt sense reveals that you're always anxious around a specific person. In this situation, you might want to consider any action steps or changes that may be aligned with your newfound understanding. For instance, you might like to establish and communicate specific boundaries with this person or avoid them altogether.

Distress Tolerance

Distress Tolerance is all about surviving moments of extreme stress, anxiety, anguish, grief, pain, and other unpleasant emotions and events we may experience in life.[6] As mentioned, we usually go through life by reacting in a knee-jerk way to triggers. Usually, this does not result in the best outcomes.

Trigger + Knee-Jerk Reaction = Worse Situation

Mindfulness is the mental pause we take to avoid doing that knee-jerk reaction.

Trigger + Mindfulness = Alternative Reaction -> Better Outcome

However, accepting and acknowledging an unpleasant emotion doesn't make it go away. So, we must first endure or survive those hard moments. This is what distress tolerance is: *crisis survival*.

Distress Tolerance teaches us how to endure moments of anguish and "ride out" any urge to perform our usual knee-jerk reaction to life's stressors. Why? Because we don't want to make a bad situation worse—for ourselves or others.

Following are a few exercises to help you develop distress tolerance.

Exercise: Safe Space Visualization

This visualization exercise is intended to assist you in creating a mental safe space—a place of comfort and peace whenever you need it.

1. Pick a tranquil and peaceful environment where no one can easily interrupt you. Sit or lie down comfortably.
2. Start with a few minutes of deep breathing to center your being. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold for a moment, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Allow each breath to release whatever tension you may be feeling.
3. Close your eyes and imagine a safe and serene place. This could be a beach, a forest, a meadow, or any location that brings you a sense of peace. Picture your safe space in vivid detail; identify colors, textures, the quality of light, etc.
4. Engage your senses in this imagined safe space. For example, notice the temperature, the feeling of the ground beneath you, and any scents in the air. Pay attention to the sounds around you, whether it's the rustling of leaves or the gentle lapping of waves.
5. Personalize your safe space. Add elements that bring comfort, like a cozy blanket, a comfortable chair, or any item with positive significance.
6. Next, visualize a boundary around your safe space, creating a sense of containment and protection - a soft light, a bubble, or any imagery that makes you feel secure.
7. If you want to, you can envision the presence of a comforting figure within your safe space - a person, an animal, or a symbolic representation of support and warmth. Feel their calming presence.

8. As you feel more secure and at peace in your safe space, connect with the emotions that arise in this space. Embrace the feelings of peace, comfort, and security you feel.

9. Gently return to the present moment. Wiggle your fingers and toes, and slowly open your eyes when ready. Carry the sense of calm and safety you feel with you for the rest of the day.

Exercise: The Mental Box

When you're in distress, you often feel "scattered," as if your thoughts are chaotic, making it challenging to focus or find a sense of calm. You may also feel as if you're unraveling during overwhelming moments. So much so that you may feel like you're losing control.

The exercise below is a distress tolerance technique aimed at helping you manage overwhelming emotions by mentally containing highly stressful thoughts, feelings, memories, events, etc. This exercise is particularly useful when your emotions are intense, and you just need to survive the next few seconds or minutes.

1. Find a peaceful and relaxing space with little distractions. (You don't want to be disturbed.) Sit in a relaxed position.
2. Start with a few minutes of deep breathing to center yourself. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold your breath for a moment, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Imagine each breath bringing a sense of calm.
3. Identify the distressful thoughts or emotions you want to contain. Acknowledge them without judgment. Consider naming each emotion or thought to give it recognition.

Examples:

I feel very panicky.

I'm soooo mad right now.

4. Next, imagine a box or any vessel that feels right to you. Picture it in vivid detail, noting its color, size, and unique features. This container represents a safe space to store distressing thoughts temporarily.

5. Symbolically represent each distressful thought or emotion as an object in your mind. For example, imagine the word **RED** to describe anger. Imagine **RED** as a piece of paper you're crushing into a ball and placing in your mental box. As you put these representations into the container, imagine separating them from your immediate awareness.
6. Keep mentally placing items in your box until you feel better and more in control of your emotions.
7. Next, mentally close and seal your box securely. Visualize locking it or putting a protective cover on it. This action signifies your intention to revisit these thoughts and emotions at a later, more manageable time.
8. Now, shift your focus to a positive and calming image - a serene landscape, a comforting scene, or any imagery that brings peace. Hold this positive image in your mind.
9. Acknowledge that you have control over when and how you want to revisit what you put in your mental box. Remind yourself that you are actively choosing to contain them for now, allowing yourself a respite.
10. Bring your attention back to your breath. Focus on the sensation of breathing, grounding yourself in the present moment.

After doing this exercise, take a moment to reflect on your experience. Acknowledge your amazing ability to contain distress and create a mental space for future exploration.

Exercise: The Gratitude Experience

When you're in distress, you tend to focus on what's going wrong and forget whatever else may be going right in your life. The Gratitude Experience is a distress tolerance exercise designed to shift focus from distressing thoughts to positive aspects of your life. It encourages you to cultivate gratitude, even during challenging moments, to enhance emotional well-being.

1. Find a peaceful and relaxing space with little distractions. (You don't want to be disturbed.) Sit or lie down comfortably.
2. Begin with a few minutes of deep breathing to center yourself. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold for a moment, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Allow each breath to bring a sense of calm.
3. Identify any distressing thoughts or emotions currently present. Acknowledge them without judgment, recognizing that you are intentionally choosing to shift your focus.

Examples:

I feel sad and lonely.

I'm dreading my first day of work.

4. Choose to shift your perspective by reflecting on three things you are genuinely grateful for. These could be small or significant, recent or from the past. Focus on the positive emotions associated with each gratitude item.

Examples:

I'm grateful for my mom, who I know I can always go to and lean on. She always brings me a sense of peace and makes me believe that everything will be alright.

I'm grateful for that wonderful vacation I had last summer. Remembering the sun on my skin gives me energy.

I'm grateful for the cup of coffee in front of me right now, a small thing that never fails to give me a sense of pleasure.

5. Create a positive affirmation related to gratitude. Repeat this affirmation silently or aloud, reinforcing the connection between positivity and distress tolerance.

Example:

I choose to see the good things in my life today and be thankful for the little things that make me happy.

6. Bring your attention back to your breath. Inhale deeply, exhale slowly. Focus on the sensation of breathing, grounding yourself in the present moment.

After doing this exercise, reflect on the shift in your emotional state after engaging in this Gratitude Experience. Consider how intentionally focusing on positive aspects can contribute to distress tolerance and emotional well-being.

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation is deliberately taking steps to lessen the intensity of an emotional experience.[7] It's different from distress tolerance because it's more active in nature.

That is, while distress tolerance is surviving the moment, emotion regulation is understanding your emotions, healthily managing your feelings, and not letting them take over.

For example, suppose Billie suffers from feelings of isolation and loneliness. These emotions are intense and get magnified every Friday night. As a coping mechanism, Billie has developed the habit of binge-watching on Netflix every Friday for hours while consuming vast amounts of soda, pizza, cookies, and chips.

Emotion regulation in this situation may mean developing alternative coping strategies to address the emotional triggers *behind* Billie's Friday night binge-eating habit. Instead of turning to food and extended screen time as a way to cope with emotions, Billie could acknowledge that their emotional eating is triggered by extreme loneliness. And instead of eating to cope with this loneliness, they can explore alternative activities (e.g., reading, taking a walk, engaging in a new hobby, etc.) or establish a new Friday night routine (e.g., visiting a family member, volunteering, etc.).

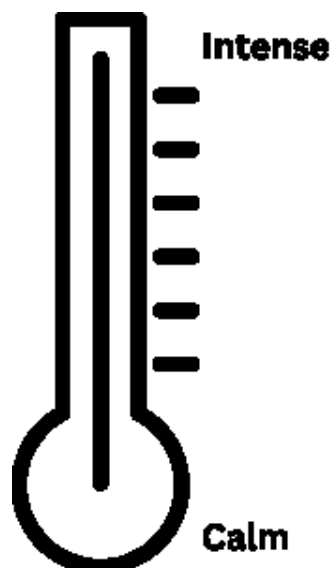
So, emotion regulation is about breaking the cycle. It's about doing something to manage extreme and unhelpful emotions so you can change the way you react to them.

Following are a few exercises to help you develop emotion regulation.

Exercise: Emotion Thermometer

The following exercise will help you recognize, understand, and control your emotions by having you picture them on a scale. It gives you a concrete way to measure how intense your feelings are and use the right coping techniques.

1. Find a peaceful and relaxing space with little distractions. (You don't want to be disturbed.) Sit or lie down comfortably.
2. Begin with a few minutes of deep breathing to center yourself. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold for a moment, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Allow each breath to bring a sense of calm.
3. Reflect on your current emotional state. Identify the primary emotion(s) you are experiencing. For example, *I feel extreme sadness*.
4. Next, take a piece of paper and draw a vertical line representing your Emotion Thermometer. Label the bottom as "Calm" and the top as "Intense." Create several intervals along the line to represent the varying degrees of emotional intensity. For example:



5. Identify each emotion you are feeling and place them at the appropriate point on your Emotion Thermometer. Use colors or symbols to differentiate between emotions. This visual representation helps you acknowledge the intensity of each emotion.

Example:

I'm filled with sadness.

6. Next, reflect on the factors or situations that triggered each emotion. Reflect on whether these triggers are caused by something in your present or if it's rooted in past experiences. (Understanding the context can contribute to better emotional regulation.)

Example:

Sadness trigger: I tend to feel sad whenever I see happy couples because it reminds me of my failed marriage.

7. For each emotion you registered on your emotion thermometer, brainstorm and write down coping strategies that align with its intensity. These strategies can range from simple deep breathing for lower intensities to more involved activities for higher intensities (e.g., painting, dancing, running, etc.)

8. Bring your attention back to your breath. Inhale deeply and exhale slowly. Focus on the sensation of breathing, grounding yourself in the present moment.

Look at the Emotion Thermometer you created and reflect on the insights you gained. Consider how the visual representation of your emotions can be a practical tool for identifying and regulating your feelings. And don't forget to explore implementing the coping strategies in your daily life!

Exercise: Expressing Emotions

Often, when you're feeling intense emotions, it's hard to find the words to express what you feel and what you want out of a situation. This can lead to misunderstandings, disagreements, and conflict, which is unhelpful, to say the least.

So, the following exercise is designed to help you figure out how to talk about your emotions healthily and constructively. It encourages self-awareness and effective communication of your feelings.

1. Find a quiet and comfortable space where you won't be interrupted. Bring a pen and paper with you for note-taking.
2. Start with a few minutes of deep breathing to center yourself. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold for a moment, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Allow each breath to bring a sense of calm.
3. Reflect on your current emotional state. Identify the primary emotion you are experiencing. Be specific—for example, *anxiety*.
4. Next, get your pen and paper and write your thoughts as they come to you. DO NOT censor or judge your thoughts. Just write them down as they arrive in your consciousness. Describe your feelings and look into any thoughts or causes that accompany them. For example, *I'm anxious about presenting a report at work tomorrow. I don't know why. I think I'm prepared enough. I'm afraid of any questions. What If I can't answer them? People might think I'm a fool.*
5. Dive into the potential triggers for your emotions. Reflect on past or present events, interactions, or thoughts influencing your feelings. Understanding the context can provide valuable insights. For example, *I remember a time in my*

previous job when I was so nervous presenting a project that people started laughing. I think this is triggering my anxiety now.

6. If you feel comfortable, share your feelings and thoughts with a trusted friend, family member, or therapist. Discussing your feelings with others can provide additional support and perspective. If this is not possible or available to you right now, consider different ways to express your emotions. This could include creating art, writing a letter, or engaging in physical activities. Choose the outlet that feels right for you.

After this exercise, reflect on the process of expressing your emotions and what you discovered about yourself. Consider the impact of articulating your feelings and how it influences your emotional state.

What I discovered:

Exercise: Coping Strategies List

This exercise is designed to help you identify and compile a personalized list of coping mechanisms that you can use to regulate your emotions and navigate challenging situations effectively.

1. Find a quiet and comfortable space where you can reflect without distractions.
2. Begin with a few minutes of relaxation breathing. Inhale deeply through your nose, hold for a moment, and exhale slowly through your mouth. Allow each breath to bring a sense of calm.
3. Identify specific situations or triggers that usually make you very emotional or lead to heightened emotions. Consider both everyday stressors (e.g., being stuck in traffic) and major challenges (e.g., the illness of a loved one).
4. Reflect on your current coping strategies. What do you typically do when faced with challenging emotions or situations? List any existing techniques you use, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Examples:

Stuck in traffic -> Grind my teeth and semi-rant in the car.

Illness of a loved one-> Cry, and then cry some more.

5. Next, start brainstorming a variety of coping strategies. Think broadly, including activities that address emotional, physical, and mental well-being.

Examples:

Physical: Stretching, deep breathing, running, cardio boxing.

Emotional: Journaling, talking to a friend, doing self-care activities, listening to feel-good music.

Mental: Yoga, meditation, saying positive affirmations out loud.

6. After compiling a list of coping strategies, prioritize them based on their relevance to your daily life and the intensity of emotions they address. Identify those you can easily incorporate into different situations.

For example:

When stuck in traffic, the coping strategies I can do and help me are:

Physical: Deep breathing.

Emotional: Listening to feel-good music.

Mental: Saying positive affirmations out loud.

Situation:

My coping strategies:

Physical: _____

Emotional: _____

Mental: _____

Note: You don't need a complete list of physical, emotional, and mental coping strategies. If a list of mental coping strategies is enough for you to regulate your emotions, that's perfectly fine as well.

7. In various situations over the next few weeks, consciously test different coping strategies from your list. Keep track of their effectiveness and make adjustments as needed.

8. If you feel comfortable, share your coping strategies list with a friend, family member, or therapist. Discussing it with others can offer additional insights and support.

Reflect on the process of creating your own coping strategies list. Express gratitude to yourself for proactively addressing stressful events and heightened emotions in the future.

Interpersonal Effectiveness

You are not alone. Even when you may not feel "close" to someone, you're always dealing with others. One of the most important lessons in DBT is this: you directly affect your situation; you influence your reality.

As such, if you want positive conversations where you and others walk away from the conversation both happy and content, you must improve how you communicate (talk + listen) with others.[8]

Following are a few exercises to help you develop interpersonal effectiveness.

Exercise: The Five Love Languages

In the early 1990s, author Gary Chapman developed the Five Love Languages as a way for people to know how to express and receive love effectively.

For example, imagine that your partner is an avid coffee drinker. They have this habit of handing a cup of coffee to you in the morning because, in their minds, they're expressing their affection by sharing this passion for coffee with you. Here's the problem: you're a tea drinker. You mention this, but they often forget. So, instead of feeling happy and appreciative whenever your partner hands over a cup of coffee, you're annoyed and frustrated with them.

So this is the main point of the Five Love Languages: to receive love the way you want to and express it the way they want you to. Before we start with the exercise, here's a quick rundown of Chapman's Five Love Languages:

1. **Words of Affirmation** are using words to show love and appreciation. Examples: Compliments, words of encouragement, expressing love verbally, etc.
2. **Acts of Service** are doing things for others to show love. Examples: Cooking a meal, helping with chores, performing thoughtful actions, etc.
3. **Receiving Gifts** is expressing love through tangible gifts. Examples: Giving or receiving thoughtful presents, even small gestures.
4. **Quality Time** is showing love by spending meaningful time together. Examples: Actively listening, doing activities together, etc.

5. **Physical Touch** is communicating love through physical contact. Examples: Hugging or cuddling, holding hands, exchanging kisses, and other physical gestures of affection.

The following exercise will now help you discover your love language (i.e., how you want to receive love).

1. Find a quiet and comfortable space where you won't be interrupted. Be sure to have a pen and paper with you.
2. Recall past experiences in your relationships where you felt particularly loved or appreciated. Consider specific actions, words, or gestures that made you feel valued. Write down these instances in detail.

Examples:

I feel loved whenever my partner comes home from work and seeks me out.

I feel loved whenever my husband gives me flowers, even though there's no occasion.

I feel loved when my wife scoots over to me for a cuddle while watching Netflix after dinner.

3. After identifying your love language, consider how it aligns or clashes with the love languages of loved ones. For example, if your partner is not expressing love how you want to receive it, communicate it to them.

Babe, I did this Five Love Languages exercise, and I figured out that my love language is _____ . So, I appreciate it the most when you _____ .

Of course, don't forget about your partner's needs, too! For example, say something like:

How about you? I think you feel most loved and appreciated when I _____ . What do you think?

Reflect on the insights you gained from this exercise. If you have more than one love language, that's okay. (Although, it might be good to assess which one you value the most)

Now, consider how you can integrate this understanding into all your relationships, not just romantic ones, to enhance communication and foster deeper connections.

For example, say you often express love through *Physical Touch*. However, this may not be appropriate in your work environment. You can still stick to this love language but may need to modify it. For example, go for fist bumps or high fives instead of quick hugs.

Of course, if your love language is not how colleagues want to be appreciated, switch to *their* love language. For example, say a co-worker helped you with a report. Instead of giving a fist bump or high five, perhaps Acts of Service in the form of offering to assist them with their work would be more suitable and appreciated.

So, what have you learned?

My primary love language is: _____

My secondary love language is (optional): _____

Are you receiving love the way you want to receive it? Y/N

If your answer is "Yes," share this with your partner.

Example:

Babe, I realized that I love it best when you spend Quality Time with me. Thank you!

If your answer is "No," discuss this with your partner.

Example:

Babe, I realized that I love it best when you spend Quality Time with me. However, I feel that we're making time for that lately. What do you suggest to address this?

My partner's primary love language is: _____

My partner's secondary love language is (optional): _____

Are you expressing love the way your partner wants to receive it? Y/N

If your answer is "No," discuss this with your partner.

Example:

Babe, I realized that I'm not really spending enough Quality Time with you. I'm sorry about that, and I want to change it. How about we have a date once a week?

Other notes:

Exercise: I Before You

This exercise is designed to help you practice and understand the effectiveness of "I" instead of "You" statements when communicating. You see, "I" statements express your feelings, thoughts, and experiences. "You" statements address the other person's behavior, potentially sounding accusatory.

Unfortunately, most of us are in the habit of using "You" statements. For example, "You're not listening," "You're always late," or "You don't understand." The following exercise will help you use "I" statements to better express yourself instead of labeling someone else's actions or behavior.

1. Find a peaceful and relaxing space with little distractions. (You don't want to be disturbed.) Bring pen and paper with you.
2. Reflect on any recent interaction where communication may have been challenging. Try to recall the exact statements you used.

Example:

Situation: Last night, I had a conversation with my Dad that quickly became an argument even though I didn't intend it.

Statements I used:

You never listen to me, Dad.

You ignore every idea I have.

You just don't get it.

My Situation:

Statements I used:

3. Thinking about the situation you mentioned in step #2, mentally go back and practice using "I" statements. For example, instead of saying, "You never listen to me, Dad," try, "I feel unheard when I share my ideas with you."
4. Choose another situation and practice transforming potentially accusatory "You" statements into more constructive ones. Here are some examples:

"You" Statements	"I" Statements
You stress me out!	I feel stressed when certain things happen, like when our schedule changes when we already agreed on something.
You always interrupt me.	I feel upset when interrupted. I would appreciate it if I could have the time to fully express my thoughts.
You're unreliable.	I feel frustrated when plans change unexpectedly.
You just love to criticize me.	I feel hurt when I receive criticism.
You make me angry.	I feel angry right now.
Feel free to add more "You" statements below and how you can change them to more helpful "I" statements.	

5. If possible, engage in role-play scenarios with someone you trust. Ask them to call your attention whenever you start your sentences with the word "You."

As you switch to using "I" statements in conversations, reflect on how it influences the tone of the conversation and the other person's receptiveness to what you're saying.

Exercise: Empathy Building

When communicating, we often focus on getting our message across and forget to try to understand the other person's point of view. The following exercise enhances your ability to understand and connect with others better. It focuses on developing empathy, a key component of effective interpersonal relationships.

1. Find a peaceful and relaxing space with little distractions. (You don't want to be disturbed.) Bring pen and paper with you.
2. Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the concept of empathy. Understand that empathy involves understanding and sharing the feelings of another person. It goes beyond sympathy by actively putting yourself in someone else's shoes.
3. Reflect on your current level of empathy. Recall a recent misunderstanding or argument.

Example:

I had a BIG argument with my mom.

Going back to that misunderstanding or argument, ask yourself these questions:

What was the message of the other person?

What were they trying to tell me?

Was I able to connect with how they felt about the situation, even if I disagreed with their opinion?

4. Choose a specific person with whom you'd like to deepen your connection. Choose a recent situation *they* experienced and commit to understanding it from their perspective.

Example:

My friend was upset they were not invited to someone's birthday party. I wasn't invited either, but I truly couldn't care less, so I couldn't empathize with them. But now, I'm trying to understand why they were so upset. I think it's because they were closer to each other than I was with the birthday celebrant, so the "snub" hurt them more than it did me. My friend is also more socially active than I am, which could be another reason.

5. After gaining more insight into the situation, contact the other person. Mention that you've thought more about your conversation and want to share your understanding of *their* perspective. Encourage them to share more about their experience and practice reflective listening by validating their feelings and thoughts.

Example:

I was thinking about our previous conversation and realized that I wasn't really "hearing" you. I'm sorry about that; I want you to know I'm here now, and I believe I understand better what you were going through. But do you mind sharing more? I really want to know.

6. If you're comfortable and if it's helpful to the conversation, discuss the difference(s) between your initial response and the person's actual experience. Explore how your understanding has evolved and ask clarifying questions to gain further insight.

Example:

The last time, I was more preoccupied with MY reaction to the situation than trying to understand your point of view. Now that I've had time to think, I understand you more. I suppose you were upset about not being invited to [friend]'s birthday because they really mean a lot to you. Am I right?

7. If you're comfortable, share your feelings and thoughts about the event or situation. This fosters a reciprocal exchange of empathy and deepens mutual understanding.

Example:

For me, [friend] and I are not close, so I wasn't too bothered by the birthday snub. And as such, I wasn't feeling what you were feeling.

8. Identify opportunities in your daily life to practice empathy. Whether with friends, family, or colleagues, consciously strive to understand and validate the emotions and experiences of others.

Reflect on the entire empathy-building process. Consider the impact empathy has on your conversations and relationships.

Conclusion

In this quick guide, you've learned DBT principles in five simple stages. You've looked into the fundamental ideas of Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, and Interpersonal Effectiveness and how they can help you and your relationships.

However, please remember that mastering DBT is an ongoing journey, with each step contributing to a more balanced and meaningful life. So, whether you downloaded this DBT Quick Guide because you're new to DBT or need a refresher, know this: the path does not end here.

I encourage you to dive deeper into DBT to truly experience its transformative potential.

Still, it's important to remember that DBT, as well as any form of therapy, is most effective when undertaken under the guidance of a licensed professional. So, if you feel the need, please don't hesitate to contact one.

Further Reading



Be sure to check out my other bestselling DBT books in the ‘Mental Health Therapy’ series. Here are some of the titles you can find:

- [DBT Workbook for Adults](#)
- [DBT Workbook for Kids](#)
- [DBT Workbook for Teens](#)
- [The DBT Anger Management Workbook](#)
- [DBT Workbook for PTSD](#)
- [DBT Workbook for BPD](#)
- [DBT Workbook for Depression](#)
- [DBT Workbook for Emotional Eating](#)

You can get them here:

<https://tinyurl.com/mental-health-therapy>



About the Author

Barrett Huang is an author and businessman. Barrett spent years discovering the best ways to manage his OCD, overcoming his anxiety, and learning to embrace life.

Through his writing, he hopes to share his knowledge with readers, empowering people of all backgrounds with the tools and strategies they need to improve their mental wellbeing and be happy and healthy.

When not writing or running his business, Barrett loves to spend his time studying.

He has majored in Psychology and completed the DBT skills certificate course by Dr. Marsha Linehan. Barrett's idol is Bruce Lee, who said, "The key to immortality is first living a life worth remembering."

Learn more about Barrett's books here:

<https://barretthuang.com/>

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