

Understanding Dialectical Behaviour Therapy

Information for parents at McMaster Day Hospital

As you take part in the Day Hospital Program, it can be helpful to learn about the type of therapy your child is receiving. This booklet describes Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and the skills you and your child will be learning.

If you would like more information, please talk with a member of the health care team. We welcome your questions at any time.

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Introduction to DBT

What is DBT?

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy helps people:

- ✓ Understand the thoughts and beliefs that influence their behaviour. It is a type of cognitive behaviour therapy.
- ✓ See that truth is constructed based on many viewpoints, and that multiple truths can coexist. For example, the need to accept oneself and the need to make changes in one's life. This is a 'dialectical' philosophy or way of thinking.
- ✓ Learn skills that will help them manage difficult situations in daily life.

DBT is based on sound scientific research. It has proven to be effective in helping people develop coping skills that reduce self-destructive behaviour and unhelpful ways of thinking.

**We have found DBT to be helpful for patients and parents.
They leave the hospital not only feeling better, but also more prepared.**

DBT helps patients regulate their emotions

Challenging behaviours such as self-harm, restricting food, bingeing or vomiting are symptoms that teens are struggling with how to manage their emotions.

Young people with eating disorders often feel that their symptoms provide relief from emotions that are overwhelming, threatening or exceed their ability to cope.

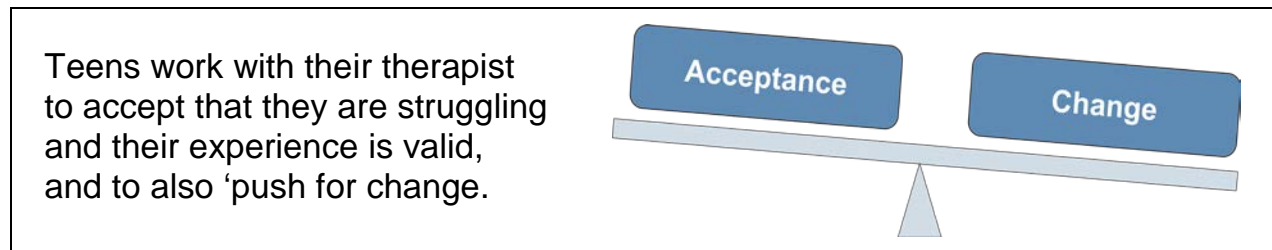
These teens need extra support to:

- Accurately identify their feelings
- Communicate their needs
- Tolerate difficult emotions
- Make healthy changes

How does DBT work?

Through individual and group sessions, therapists work with patients to help them:

- Accept that they are struggling and their experience is valid.
- Identify behaviours that are harmful and discover the types of feelings and situations which 'trigger' these behaviours.
- Become aware or 'mindful' of their feelings in certain situations, and learn to control their reactions instead of acting in a self-harmful way.
- Learn skills that will help them effectively manage difficult moments and situations in their daily life.
- Plan for contingencies – what may happen. Knowing what to do when 'stuck' or unable to move beyond their distress helps teens work towards behaviour change.



What skills are taught in DBT?

We teach the skills that are most effective for teens wanting to move to recovery from an eating disorder.

Teens will attend daily therapy groups to learn these skills:

1. Mindfulness
2. Distress tolerance
3. Walking the middle path
4. Emotional regulation
5. Interpersonal effectiveness

Although we teach them separately, in daily life these skills interact and support each other.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of becoming being aware of your emotions and immediate surroundings. Mindfulness helps you focus on the present rather than the past or the future. The purpose is to observe without judging or trying to “fix” what you notice. While meditation can be a form of mindfulness; mindfulness skills can be used independently.

Mindfulness helps you become aware of your thoughts, emotions, and urges, and gradually learn to manage them more effectively.

We teach mindfulness skills to help teens learn to:

- ✓ Be aware of their emotions
- ✓ Lower the intensity of emotions
- ✓ Tolerate destructive urges
- ✓ Focus and concentrate
- ✓ Bring attention back when distracted
- ✓ Experience a sense of calm
- ✓ Slow down their emotional reactions so they can respond in ways that are more effective

By using mindfulness skills in daily life, teens can:

- Tolerate the thoughts, emotions, and urges that they can't do anything about.
- Realize that thoughts, emotions and urges don't have to be acted upon, but can simply be acknowledged, and that these experiences will gradually dissipate.

Distress tolerance

We teach this set of DBT coping skills to help teens:

- Purposefully distract themselves from painful emotions or soothe themselves until they are able to address those emotions safely and effectively.
- Get through difficult situations without damaging their self, goals, or relationships.
- Accept the reality of their lives 'in the moment' and recognize that acceptance does not mean 'giving up' or that they 'like' the situation. Instead, it enables them to solve problems more effectively.

Accepting what 'is' allows teens to:

- ✓ Develop awareness of themselves and their surroundings.
- ✓ Relax their bodies so that they can feel more accepting.
- ✓ See things in a different way.
- ✓ Become willing to accept painful realities.
- ✓ Increase the ability to self-soothe and distract effectively to manage difficult situations.
- ✓ Accepting the reality of situations to minimize suffering and solve problems when possible.

Walking the middle path

The “middle path” teaches teens to:

- ✓ Welcome seemingly incompatible truths (such as the need to accept oneself and the need to make changes in one’s life).
- ✓ Find new ways to behave that accommodate these different perspectives.

We teach teens to:

- Accept opposing perspectives or alternate possibilities and reduce ‘all-or-nothing’ thinking.
- Validate themselves to reduce negative effects of their environment.
- Validate others so that relationships can be more reciprocal (shared).
- Be more skillful in influencing the behaviour of others.
- Synthesize contradictory information or emotions (dialectical thinking).
- Acknowledge the impact of life experiences in self and others.
- Reinforce skillful behaviours and not reinforce unskillful behaviours.

Understanding the concept of the ‘middle path’ helps parents:

- Find balanced responses.
- Look for valid aspects of their child’s responses and acknowledge very real emotions without dismissing their child’s feelings.

Emotion regulation

We teach this set of DBT coping skills to help teens:

- ✓ Understand that emotion 'drives' many of their behaviours.
- ✓ Learn how to safely manage emotions.

The goal is to decrease negative emotions and increase positive ones.

Teens benefit from learning:

- What emotions are, where they come from and why they have them.
- How to recognize and name emotions.
- How to be aware of vulnerabilities and triggers.
- How to use alternative responses to emotional urges.
- How to develop a lifestyle that increases positive emotions.

DBT is most effective for teens who:

- Under-regulate behaviour – as shown by purging, yelling, breaking things or feeling out of control.
- Over-regulate behaviour – as shown by restricting food intake, trouble recognizing and expressing difficult emotions effectively, or avoiding conflict or distress.

Learning to effectively regulate emotions can take a lot of practice.

Interpersonal effectiveness

Teens who have intense emotions often have difficult interpersonal interactions. For example:

- They may desperately want to hold onto a friendship, while sacrificing their own needs, or
- They may be so focused on their own needs that they are not aware of the needs of others.

We teach this set of DBT coping skills to help teens work with others to reach goals without sacrificing personal values or damaging relationships.

Interpersonal effectiveness skills help teens to:

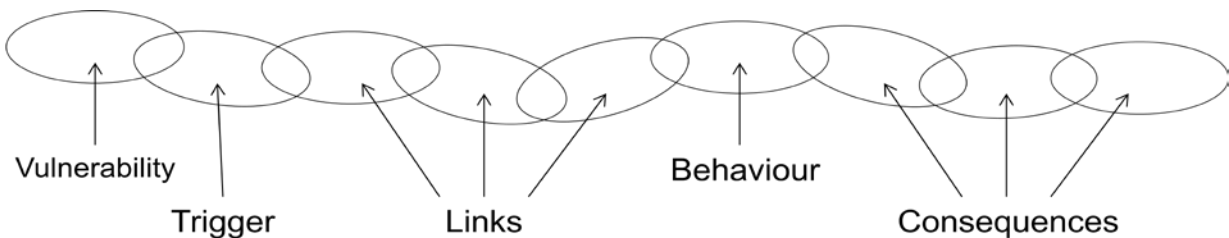
- ✓ Balance their own needs with the needs of others.
- ✓ Get their requests, or refusal of requests taken seriously.
- ✓ Respond to others in ways that respect the other person.
- ✓ Respond to others in ways that increase their own self-respect.
- ✓ Skillfully ask for what they want.
- ✓ Maintain healthy relationships.
- ✓ Maintain their own self-respect.
- ✓ Use effective social skills.

Understanding DBT terms

Behaviour chain analysis

This is a way of studying a problem behaviour so you can understand:

- a) the 'triggers' that set off the behaviour
- b) the consequences of the behaviour
- c) what may have made you more likely to behave that way (vulnerable) for example, a lack of sleep that day
- d) other ways to cope with the triggers



Understanding each 'link' in the chain helps you:

- ✓ understand what might get in the way of behaving more effectively
- ✓ make different choices when a similar situation occurs

We ask patients to fill out a behaviour chain worksheet whenever they engage in problem behaviours such as restricting food, purging or self-harm.

A copy of a behaviour chain analysis is in your package.

Dialectics

- Dialectics is a philosophy or way of understanding reality.
- It is based on the notion that truth is constructed based on many viewpoints, and that multiple truths can coexist.

Diary card

- A diary card is used to record and track specific items of interest each day. Reviewing the card can give you insight into your thoughts and actions.
- Diary cards vary, depending on the user's needs and goals.
- Patients at Day Hospital may use diary cards to track their ratings of symptoms, moods, positive feelings, suicidal urges, sleep, medication use, and use of coping skills.
- A copy of a diary card is included in your package.

Where to get more information

Talk with your child's therapist or registered nurse. They can answer your questions and help you find more information.

Read other educational materials we have developed for parents. They are available online and as handouts.

We have videos that show the DBT skills that your child is learning. Please ask your child's therapist if you would like to borrow them. YouTube also has videos about DBT skills.

We recommend this book if you have a younger teen or child:

Parenting a child who has intense emotions: Dialectical Behaviour Therapy skills to help regulate emotional outburst and aggressive behaviours.

By P. Harvey and J. Penzo

Published in 2009 by New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.

We recommend these books if you have an older teen:

(They are available from the Hamilton Public Library)

Parenting a teen who has intense emotions: DBT skills to help your teen navigate emotional and behavioral challenges.

By P. Harvey and B. Rathbone.

Published in 2015 by New Harbinger Publications., Oakland, CA.

The Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Skills Workbook for Bulimia.

By E. Astrachan-Fletcher and M. Maslar

Published in 2009 by New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.

Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life.

By S. Van Dijk

Published in 2011 by New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.