

# Practical skills for Helping clients:

DBT inspired techniques for  
working with clients – DT skills

---

B. NILAJA GREEN, PHD

LICENSED CLINICAL & COMMUNITY  
PSYCHOLOGIST

EMORY UNIVERSITY MHTTC

2023



# Objectives

---

- Review homework
- Re- introduce 5 options for responding to a problem
- Introduce meanings of distress
- Introduce several distress tolerance skills
- Introduce Reality acceptance skills & Radical Acceptance



# Homework review

---

- Partner share out
- Discuss one of the situations where you used the mindfulness what and how skills
- What felt challenging about using the skills, what felt easy or less challenging?



# Skill #1: The Problem Solving Framework

---

## **1. Solve the Problem**

- be able to identify the actual problem

## **2. Feel better about the Problem**

- use emotion regulation skills

## **3. Tolerate the Problem**

- use distress tolerance skills

## **4. Stay Miserable**

- use no skills

## **5. Make things worse!**

- use ineffective skills



# What kinds of situations call for “tolerance” in the context of DBT?

---

- Situations that feel overwhelming, triggering or disorienting (these can be internally or externally generated)
- Can include urges And emotions
- Crises or emergencies
- Situations that are unwanted and also unavoidable, (i.e. the death of a loved one)
- Situations that may impact the client significantly about which the client does not have control, (i.e. a job layoff)
- Situations that the clients cannot improve right away

---

*Fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself.*  
*- Paulo Coelho*



# The Problem

---

- Many clients do not have the skills to effectively manage crises or significantly distressing situations.
- Many clients manage crises or distressing situations by using ineffective skills (i.e.. self harm or substance use), which ultimately make situations worse.
- When clients use judgment, avoidance or blaming as a way of managing a crisis, these actions often make a crisis even more overwhelming.
- Crisis situations can make accessing skills that much more difficult due to their overwhelming nature and the tendency to remain hyper reactive (think of “flooding) or under reactive (disassociation or shutting down).
- When clients feel urges that will make things worse, if they do not have alternative skills, they may act on those urges.
- Crisis situations often activate the body, mobilizing a fear response.



# Solution: Growing client capacity to tolerate distress

---

Therapists need to help clients manage distress because:

- Pain is a normal part of human experience but how we manage the pain can create the difference between “normal pain” vs suffering.
- Clients can learn to confront and skillfully maneuver crises rather than avoid them.
- Clients can become more confident and competent navigating crises when they see that they can survive them without making things worse.
- If clients can learn to manage their body and their emotions during a time of crisis, they can lessen their reactivity to the crisis.
- When clients find themselves in crisis, we often see the use of risky or dangerous behaviors.



# What clients gain from better distress tolerance

---

- More adaptive coping is an example of improved emotion regulation
- Lower levels of distress tolerance have been associated with both poorer life quality & reduced life satisfaction (Hu et al., [2014](#)).
- Low distress tolerance seems to be a risk factor in the onset and maintenance of various psychopathologies, including borderline personality disorder (Iverson et al., [2012](#)), (PTSD) (Vujanovic & Zegel, [2020](#)), SUD (Bornovalova et al., [2008](#)), anxiety disorders (McHugh & Otto, [2012](#)), and disordered eating (Juarascio et al., [2016](#)).
- Research has shown that low DT significantly predicts the use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies including suppression of feelings, avoidance, rumination and substance use (Jeffries et al., [2016](#); Lass et al., [2020](#); Zegel et al., [2019](#)).
- Poorer DT has been associated with an increased use of unhelpful self-regulation strategies such as substance use, binge eating, or non-suicidal self-injury (Lass et al., [2020](#); McHugh & Otto, [2012](#)).

# When to use (and not use) distress tolerance skills

---

Do use skills when situations are:

- Short –term
- Highly stressful
- Need immediate attention
- Causing intense emotional responses that need attention
- Acting on urges would make things worse
- Emotion mind is overwhelming but skills are needed
- Clients are overwhelmed but they have tasks to complete
- Clients are overwhelmed

Don't use skill for:

- Everyday problems
- Solving all problems
- Feeling more connected to and fulfilled by life



# Goals of distress tolerance

---

- Survive crisis effectively
- Practice accepting reality as it is
- Recognize choice regarding giving into urges and overwhelming emotions
- Can also allow clients to develop their own goals for why learning distress tolerance skills might be important for them





“ In the space between stimulus and response, there is freedom.”



# Crisis Survival skills

---

Surviving Crisis without making things worse

- These skills are not about addressing the crisis directly, necessarily, they are designed to increase coping skills for successful survival of the crisis
- The next skill set will be for accepting reality “as is,” which can be a more difficult skill to learn the crisis survival skills

## **Skills Overview:**

STOP

TIPP

Distract w/ACCEPTS

Self soothe

Improve the Moment

***“Helping clients to manage normal misery (pain) effectively without it turning into suffering.”***



# Pain vs. suffering

---

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=N-7UZCJOC60](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-7UZCJOC60)

# Skill # 2: STOP skill

---

This skill is useful for encouraging clients to give themselves some distance between a situation and their reaction.

In this space, they may have the chance to access Wise Mind.

S = Stop doing whatever you are doing.

T = Take a step back literally or figuratively.

O = Observe what is happening inside and outside of you. Utilize the mindfulness skills of observing one-mindfully in order to have a more complete picture of the situation.

P = Proceed mindfully

# Skill #3: Pros & cons

---

- What are the urges in the moment based on the present emotions?
  - Identify these urges
- Consider the pros of acting on the emotions
  - short and (if present) long term positive consequences
- Consider the cons of acting on the emotions
  - Short and long term consequences
- Requires the clinician to practice principles in their own life to some extent



# Skill # 4: Distract with ACCEPTS

---

Although we do not want to suggest avoidance to our clients unless they are really in danger, distraction can be a useful skill in certain situations when clients are experiencing high reactivity.

Of course, we differentiate distraction from avoidance as eventually, the client will have to return to the reality of the situation, urge or emotions.

***Distraction can be a tool.***

# ACCEPTS

---

A – Activities – focus on tasks at hand, watch TV, play games, go out for a meal, call a friend, DO something

C-Contribute to the life of another in some way – show support for someone or do something kind, volunteer, do something thoughtful

C- Compare yourself to another time when you felt differently, compare yourself to others who are less fortunate, consider others who are experiencing similar situation to you

Emotions – engage with emotional material – read emotional books, watch emotional shows, listen to emotional music

P – Push away thoughts of the situation, when you notice them coming up, try to block them, imagine putting the situation down for now, imagine putting a barrier between yourself and the situation or use other imagery to encourage clients to see themselves moving away from the situation

T – Engage with your thoughts – read books, do a puzzle, count, do Sudoku, memorize something, repeat songs in your head.

S- Sensations – change or add different body sensations – go out in rain or snow, hold ice in your mouth or hand, take a shower

# Skill # 5: TIPP

---

This skill helpful because:

Overwhelming situations often activate the body in ways that make accessing Wise mind and skills more difficult.

Teaching clients that they can manage their physical reactivity can help them grow in confidence and competence.


Clients can learn that changing the body's reactions can in fact change emotional intensity.

T - Temperature- Change your temperature

I - Utilize intense exercise

P - Engage in paced breathing

P - Paired muscle relaxation



mindfulness

## Practicing Paired Muscle Relaxation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G97zCvE6BIU>





# Skill # 6: Self soothe with the 5 senses

---

Engage the five senses:

**Smell** – notice potent, compelling or pleasant scents, i.e.. essential oils such as lavender, cinnamon, tea tree, peppermint

**Sight** – look at a beautiful scene, look at pictures, a candle flame,

**Sound** – become aware of sounds, create your own sounds by singing or playing an instrument, listen to music

**Taste** – eat some of your favorite foods, treat yourself to a dessert, suck on something with a strong taste like a mint such as an Altoid

**Touch** – have a massage or massage yourself, pet an animal, touch the texture of something, notice the temperature of the air on your skin or the way the wind/sun feels on your body

# Skill # 7: IMPROVE The Moment

---

I: Imagery – engage in the imagination to soothe distressing emotions such as through visual imagery

M: Meaning – consider the possible meanings of the difficult situation

P: Prayer – utilize prayer to ask for strength/seek support

R: Relaxation – engage in relaxing activities such as taking a hot bath or shower

O: One thing- focus on doing one thing at a time and bring all of your attention to that task

V: Vacation- temporarily distract yourself from the problem – actually take a short trip somewhere, spend an hour in the park, or temporarily remove yourself from your responsibilities

E: Encouraging & Rethinking- encourage yourself and work on reframing the situation: “you are doing a great job,” “all will be well,” “ you have survived hard things before”

# Reality Acceptance Skills

---

SKILLS FOR ACCEPTANCE WHEN CHANGE IS NOT POSSIBLE



# Mindfulness & distress tolerance

---

- Radical acceptance
- Turning the Mind
- Willingness - Willing Hands



# Break Out Group

---

# Skill # 8: Accepting Reality as it Is

---

- Compassion (usually not a skill listed in Distress tolerance, but often an important component of acceptance.

- “to suffer together”
- To have compassion **means to empathize with someone who is suffering and to feel compelled to reduce the suffering.**
- For the self and others
- Often interrupted by judgment, hindsight bias (“hindsight is 20/20)
- Is a practice

- Radical Acceptance

- Often accepting those truths we resist the most
- Accepting reality as it is fully
- Accepting in mind. Body and heart
- Requires accepting: the past is what it was, the future has some limitations, everything (mostly) has a cause, “tantrums” because we are not getting what we want do not change reality

# Notes on acceptance:

---

Sometimes our thoughts about the meanings of acceptance interfere with our ability to engage with this concept, additionally, if we do not have practice with acceptance, doing so can present challenges.

- Acceptance is not agreement
- Acceptance is not defeat or “giving in” “it is what it is”
- Acceptance is not minimizing the significance of an event
- Acceptance does not mean that you do not want/believe in/are fighting for change
- Acceptance often allows a more honest exploration of available options and examination of limitations
- Acceptance can allow clients to tell the truth

# Skill # 9: Turning the Mind

---

Actively choosing to Accept

Choosing to accept is NOT THE SAME as acceptance

1. Notice the ways you are fighting against acceptance.
2. Create an internal commitment to accept reality as it is.
3. Practice choosing acceptance and practice accepting.
4. Create a plan to notice and adjust when you have moved out of acceptance.

# Skill # 10: Willingness

- Willingness allows you to do only what is needed in the moment, nothing more or less.
- Requires acceptance of the situation.
- Listening and then responding to the situation from Wise Mind.
- Observe the Willingness
- Practice Turning your mind
- Involve the body with Half Smiling or willing Hands





*“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”*

*- James Baldwin*

---