



# Practical skills for Helping clients:

DBT inspired techniques for  
working with clients – Emotion  
Reg

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# Objectives

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- Review homework
- Re- introduce 5 options for responding to a problem
- Introduce meanings of functions of emotions from DBT perspective
- Introduce purpose of emotion regulation skills
- Introduce several emotion regulation skills

# Homework review

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- Partner share out
- Discuss one of the situations where you practiced a distress tolerance skill. Which of those skills might be most useful for your clients?
- What felt challenging about using the skills, what felt easy or less challenging?

# Skill #1: The Problem Solving Framework

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## 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



# Emotions from a DBT informed perspective

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- Emotions are not random
- Emotions are communicators
- Emotions are connectors
- Emotions organize our behavior for action
- No value judgment on Emotion Mind, but making all of our decisions from Emotion Mind is likely not effective
- Area largely impacted by the invalidating environment





# A Feelings Wheel



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*Instead of resisting any emotion, the best way to dispel it is to enter it fully, embrace it and see through your resistance.*

- *Deepak Chopra*



# The Problem

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- Many clients do not have the skills to effectively manage their emotions or manage their emotions ineffectively using avoidance, self-harm or substance use which can escalate or worsen situations
- Many clients may label emotions as “good” or “bad” and try to avoid the “bad” or negative emotions without realizing that avoiding the “bad” emotions also impedes their ability to feel the other emotions
- Many clients, especially those with a trauma history, (but not only), also have trouble allowing themselves to feel “positive” emotions:
  - they don’t “trust” the emotions;
  - are often “waiting for the other shoe to drop” which prevents them from truly being present with the desired emotions
- Many clients have not had healthy models for managing emotions and thus lack skills for emotion management
- Many clients find their emotions to be unbearable, overwhelming and/or confusing
- Emotion dysregulation is one of the hallmarks of BPD

# The Problem

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- Many clients see their emotions as facts – emotions are valid, but they are not facts
- Some trauma survivors – especially those living with PTSD may have trouble differentiating between discomfort and danger – helping them make this distinction is key
  - the appropriate responses to danger keep us safe whereas the natural responses to anxiety may make things worse
- A client's emotion dysregulation may be present in the session which can also impact therapy – a therapist needs to be able to hold the frame of the work while also empathizing with client
  - therapist can use this as an opportunity to help client practice ER skills in the moment

# Barriers to emotion regulation

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- Biology – some of us are hardwired to feel more intensely than others
- Lack of effective skills
- Clients act according to fluctuating mood rather than Wise Mind
- Emotional overwhelm
- Emotion Myths

# Emotion Myths

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- Powerful, sometimes subconscious “scripts” we live by
- These scripts influence behavior even when they are outside of our awareness
- Teaching clients to identify these scripts can aid them in gaining clarity about their emotional lives and subsequent behaviors
- Identification of these scripts can also allow clients to create challenges to unhelpful or untrue statements
- Can be, and often are, culturally influenced
  - i.e. norms about the appropriateness of showing particular emotions
  - Norms about the meanings of vulnerability
- Sometimes these myths are reinforced by family/loved ones/community i.e. the Strong Black Woman

# Poll #1

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1. Identify the myth:

- a. If I feel something, it must be true/accurate.
- b. If I allow myself to feel strong feelings, I will lose control.
- c. In every situation, there is a right way and a wrong way to feel.
- d. We should always look “on the bright side” and avoid negative feelings.

## Myths about Emotions

1. There is a right way to feel in every situation.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

2. Letting others know that I am feeling bad is a weakness.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

3. Negative feelings are bad and destructive.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

4. Being emotional means being out of control.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

5. Some emotions are stupid.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

6. All painful emotions are a result of a bad attitude.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

7. If others don't approve of my feelings, I obviously shouldn't feel the way I do.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

8. Other people are the best judges of how I am feeling.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

9. Painful emotions are not important and should be ignored.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

10. Extreme emotions get you a lot further than trying to regulate your emotions.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

11. Creativity requires intense, often out-of-control emotions.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

12. Drama is cool.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

13. It is inauthentic to try to change my emotions.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

14. Emotional truth is what counts, not factual truth.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

15. People should do whatever they feel like doing.

*Challenge:* \_\_\_\_\_

16. Acting on your emotions is the mark of a truly free individual.

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# Solution: Growing client competence and confidence in managing inevitable ebb and flow of emotional experience

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Goals of emotion regulation skills:

- Help clients to understand and name their emotions.
- Decrease the frequency of unwanted emotions – even though we want to increase client capacity for emotional variance – we do want to help them reduce distress in their lives.
- Decrease vulnerability to Emotion Mind by developing resilience and increasing effective coping skills.
- Decrease emotional suffering by using skills to not make things worse.

# What clients gain from improved emotion regulation

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- Increased emotion regulation is associated with more positive wellbeing overall.
- Skills of acceptance and “reappraisal” or reframing have shown particular improvements in well being.
- Improved emotion regulation is positively associated with mindfulness.
- Emotional avoidance entails an unwillingness to sit with the physical and psychological discomfort of particular emotions + avoiding acting in ways to alleviate the emotions.
- Some researchers have suggested the importance of attending to the mind- body connection as chronic emotion dysregulation can contribute to physical illness and also become exacerbated by physical illness (i.e. chronic pain).



How many emotions  
can you name in 1  
minute?



# Skills for Changing Emotional Responses

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# Overview

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- Check the Facts
- Opposite Action
- Problem Solving

# Skill # 2: Check The Facts

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When to use this skill:

- When you want to change your emotions because they are:
  - Inappropriate for the situation
  - Too intense for the situation
- Changing beliefs about a situation can change your emotional response to it
- We can think of emotional responses 2 main ways

Event Thoughts Emotions

OR

Event Emotions Thoughts

# Steps for Checking the Facts



1. Identify the emotion you want to change.



2. Identify the event prompting the emotion (describe the facts non-judgmentally, challenge assumptions, absolutes, “should” statements).



3. Identify any thoughts, assumptions and interpretations about the event.

What are other possible interpretations  
Consider all possibilities  
Do any of the other possibilities fit the facts?



# Check the Facts

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## 4. Are you assuming a threat?

- Identify the threat specifically
- Consider other possibilities
- Determine the probability that the threat will occur.

## 5. What is the catastrophe?

- Imagine the catastrophe happening
- Imagine coping well with catastrophe

## 6. Does my emotion or its intensity fit the facts?

- Check the facts out with the facts – Use Wise Mind

If the emotions do not fit the facts – consider Opposite Action

# Possible barriers to Checking the Facts

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- Client may be too emotionally dysregulated to access the skills
- Clients did not practice the skill enough
- May practice part of the skill but not move all the way through to end – thinking about alternative emotions
- Very important to check on the client's practice because this skill can be complicated – especially when clients have trouble accessing the facts because they get stuck in the “should,” or “if only”
- The clinician has to balance between validating emotion and prompting change because clients can feel invalidated when encouraging them to use this skill
- This is where referencing the functions of emotions can be VERY helpful – helps clients to determine which emotions are most appropriate to which kinds of facts, i.e. fear communicates threat, so the fear response of fight, flight or freeze is appropriate





# But what if the emotion is appropriate?

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- Ask a few questions:

- Is it effective to act on emotions? If yes – use Mindfulness to act intentionally and engage problem solving
- If not effective to act on emotions – do not act, but engage another ER skill – Opposite Action

We want to encourage clients to learn to trust their own perceptions of their experiences and to give them opportunities to align their reactions appropriately to the experience they are having, rather than what they may be telling themselves for example or reacting to their triggers



# Skill #3: Opposite Action

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Use Opposite Action when emotions do NOT fit the facts or acting on emotions would be INEFFECTIVE.

- This skill brings in understanding of the urges associated with particular emotions, i.e. we have the urge to run away or fight when we feel fear; we may have the urge to fight also when we feel anger; we may have the urge to hide when we feel shame.

**EVERY EMOTION HAS AN ACTION URGE.**

**CHANGE THE EMOTION BY ACTING OPPOSITE TO ITS ACTION URGE.**

Consider these examples:

**EMOTION**

**ACTION URGE**

**OPPOSITE ACTION**

Fear

Run away/avoid

Approach/don't avoid

Anger

Attack

Gently avoid/be a little nice

Sadness

Withdraw/isolate

Get active

Shame

Hide/avoid

Tell the secret to people who will accept it

# How to do Opposite Action

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After you have determined that acting on the emotion would be ineffective or inappropriate:

1. Identify and name the emotion you want to change
2. Check the facts to see if your emotions fit the facts
3. Identify and describe your actions associated with the emotions you are feeling
4. Ask Wise Mind about the effectiveness of acting or not acting on your emotions
5. Identify Opposite actions to the emotion urges
6. Act opposite all the way (participate FULLY)
7. Continue with Opposite Action until the emotion changes



# Common Physical Opposite Action Responses

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- Anger – unclench fist, relax jaw
- Disgust – engage in paced breathing, relax stomach muscles, unclench teeth
- Fear – adopt as assertive body posture, look up
- Jealousy – willing hands, half smiling
- Love – no leaning in; not getting close enough to touch the other person; no gazing at the other person

# Some barriers/considerations

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- Maladaptive reactions may have been reinforced and clients may not buy into the idea that Opposite Action will yield results they want.
- Clients may not have a lot of practice with those opposite emotions and the subsequent behaviors, i.e. if your client usually identifies feeling anger or irritability most of the time, they may need help in accessing urges associated with peacefulness.
- Clients may feel like they are responding in a disingenuous manner.
- Clients may only partially engage in Opposite Action, which may make it less effective which can reinforce their reasons for not using it.
- Can be very difficult because this skill really pushes against default emotional responses.

# Skill #4: Problem Solving

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1. Describe the problem – have to correctly identify the problem, whether or not it can be solved, whether or not you can solve it.
2. Use Check the Facts to make sure you have figured out the correct problem.
3. Identify your goal in problem solving. – identify a goal that can actually happen.
4. Brainstorm as many solutions as possible.
5. Choose the solution that is most likely work and try that one first.
6. Put solution into action, step by step.
7. Evaluate the results – if it didn't work, refer to previous step.

# Reducing vulnerability to Emotion Mind

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# Skill # 5: ABC PLEASE

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1. *Accumulate* Positive emotions – short term accumulation contributes to long term experiences of positive emotions (includes value identification, goal clarification and taking action).
2. *Build* Mastery - Intentionally plan to engage in activities that contribute to a sense of accomplishment and gradually increase the challenge.
3. *Cope* Ahead – anticipate challenging emotionally distressing situations (involves identifying specific situations, choosing problem solving and coping skills and imaginal rehearsal of coping effectively with event before it occurs).



# PLEASE

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4. PL – Treat physical illness
5. E – Balanced eating – not too much or too little
6. A – Avoid mood altering substances (use in moderation if at all)
7. S – Balance sleep – at least 7-9 hours or enough to feel rested – keep a consistent schedule
8. E – Exercise daily – aim for at least 20 minutes

# Some considerations

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- Clients should not expect that engaging in these behaviors means that they will no longer experience emotional distress
- Clients struggling with depression and motivation may have trouble with actually doing any action – consider keeping the goals very doable and accessible and gradually move towards more challenging actions
- Clients may underestimate the importance of sleeping and eating well for managing mood and cognitive well being – may need psychoeducation here and specific planning such as sleep hygiene
- When looking at eating behaviors – this may also be an opportunity to bring in other skills as you may find the clients use food in unbalance or unhelpful ways and might need to pay attention to some of their urges to eat when they are not hungry, for example
- Some clients, especially those with trauma may actively avoid treating physical illnesses or seeking medical care, could be due to triggers, negative self beliefs, etc.

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“Knowing others is intelligence. Knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.”

—Lao Tzu