



**UW PACC**

Psychiatry and Addictions Case Conference

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# MANAGING DISTRESS TOLERANCE - HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY PATIENT'S DISTRESS TOLERANCE?

KARI A. STEPHENS, PHD

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



# GENERAL DISCLOSURES

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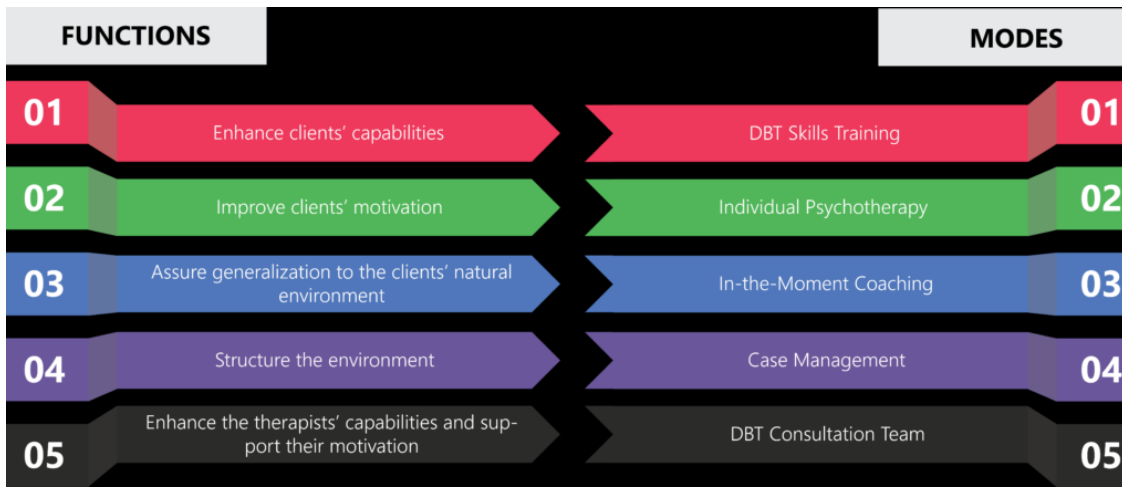
# SPEAKER DISCLOSURES

- ✓ Any conflicts of interest?

# OBJECTIVES

1. Describe DBT's Distress Tolerance skills.
2. Identify techniques you can use in your practice with distressed patients.

# DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY



CBT therapy with individual psychotherapy and group skills training classes

<https://behavioraltech.org/>

## Skills

- Mindfulness
- Emotion Regulation
- Distress Tolerance
- Interpersonal Effectiveness

## Target Populations

- \*\*Borderline Personality Disorder
- Substance dependence, depression, PTSD, and eating disorders
- Emerging for:
  - ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, anger issues
  - Improved effectiveness of pharmacotherapy (naltrexone) for OUD
  - Perinatal women with emotion dysregulation

# WHAT IS A CRISIS?

A crisis is when you have a serious problem but you can't solve it (at least not now).

In a crisis, there is a pressure to solve the problem and it is difficult to stop trying.

In a crisis, emotions are high so the problem is distressing and having high emotions generally makes things worse.

A crisis is short-term.

- If it is happening all the time, it isn't a crisis, *it's your life!*

# DISTRESS TOLERANCE SKILLS ARE FOR...

## Patients


face many stressors

- Housing
- Money
- Drugs and alcohol
- Dangerous neighborhoods or bus lines
- Trouble finding and keeping work
- Long waits for social services
- Medical problems and chronic pain
- \*\*Feeling acutely suicidal

## Clinicians

face many stressors

- Large caseloads
- Difficult patients
- Hearing many traumatic stories
- Inability to help their patients
- Lack of time or resources to help their patients
- Frustrating interactions with social services
- Unhelpful rules or regulations
- Paperwork



How can  
you make a  
crisis  
worse?

Yelling at  
someone

Giving up on  
leading their  
life

Using drugs  
or alcohol

Complaining  
so much folks  
don't want to  
talk to you

“Retail  
therapy” with  
money you  
can't afford to  
spend

Eating too  
much or too  
little



# DISTRESS TOLERANCE IS SURVIVING WITHOUT MAKING THE SITUATION WORSE.

Tolerating distress is not solving the problem.

- There are other skills for problem-solving.



Remember

- Don't hit your head on a brick wall by trying to solve a crisis that can't be solved now.
- Figure out another way to solve the problem.
- Then practice distress tolerance until that other way can work.

# DISTRESS TOLERANCE IS SURVIVING WITHOUT MAKING THE SITUATION WORSE.

Tolerating distress is not removing – or sometimes even reducing – distress.

- There are other skills for reducing emotions.



Don't expect distress tolerance skills to make you "feel better".

- The fact is that you often may feel better, but that is not the purpose of the skill.
- The skills are so you won't make the situation worse.
- If the skills prevent the crisis getting worse but don't make you feel better, **DON'T STOP!** If you do, things may get worse.

# STEPS FOR USING DBT DT SKILLS

- Do a good behavioral assessment
- Pitch using DT skills
  - Emphasizing the goal is to be skillful, which doesn't necessarily mean feeling better
- Iterate a small target for homework with the patient
- Follow-up and practice, practice, practice
  - Recognizing distress when it happens
  - Choosing to be skillful – trial and error
  - Using Pros/Cons if ambivalent about using the skills

# HOW TO DO A GOOD ASSESSMENT

1. What triggers the distress? What caused the patient to feel distressed?
  - Be behavioral (i.e., a talk with a family member, looking at mail, thinking a thought).
2. How did the patient respond? What did he/she do while distressed?
  - Be behavioral (i.e., yelled and started a fight, went to their room and ruminated, laid in bed all day, used substances, avoided tasks)
3. How did their response make things worse?
  - From the patient's perspective!! (not the provider's)

# So what are the Distress Tolerance skills

- Distract
- Self-Soothe
- IMPROVE the moment
- Pros and Cons

# DISTRACTION IS DELIBERATELY TURNING YOUR ATTENTION AWAY FROM THE CRISIS.

Remember,  
wise mind  
**ACCEPTS**

**A**ctivities

**C**ontributing

**C**omparisons

opposite **E**motions

**P**ushing away

**T**houghts

**S**ensations

# SELF-SOOTHE WITH FIVE SENSES

Vision

Decorate your space, go somewhere inspiring

Sound

Music, soothing voices, nature sounds

Smell

Cooking, lavender, the beach

Touch


Comfortable clothes, pet animal, foot massage

Taste

Favorite food, hard candy or mint, good cup of coffee

# IMPROVE the moment

Skills to  
accept pain  
and reduce  
suffering



Imagery

Meaning

Prayer

Relaxation

One thing in the moment

Vacation

Encouragement



# PROS AND CONS

	Pros	Cons
Making it worse by: _____		
Tolerating distress by: _____		

# SCENARIO: 10PM SUN NIGHT AND YOU FOUND AN EVICTION NOTICE ON YOUR DOOR

	Pros	Cons
Making it worse by: <i>getting drunk</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-get to relax</li><li>-won't have to think about it</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-won't be able to function tomorrow when have to call guy back</li></ul>
Tolerating distress by: <i>self-soothing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-get some relaxation</li><li>-will be clear minded tomorrow</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-will be worried all night</li><li>-probably won't sleep</li></ul>

# SCENARIO: THURS AFTERNOON, LAST APPT, AND YOU HAVE A TOUGH NEW REFERRAL

	Pros	Cons
Making it worse by: <i>just go through the motions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-don't have to focus when tired</li> <li>-don't get my hopes up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-self-fulfilling prophecy</li> <li>-person will think you don't care</li> </ul>
Tolerating distress by: <i>IMPROVE with meaning, self-sooth, and encouragement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-feel proud of the quality of my work</li> <li>-have hope</li> <li>-treatment more likely to work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-takes a lot of effort</li> <li>-may be disappointed (again)</li> </ul>

**SO THOSE ARE THE DBT  
DISTRESS TOLERANCE SKILLS.**

***NOT NEW IDEAS –  
JUST CONCEPTUALIZED AND  
ORGANIZED IN SYSTEMATIC  
WAY.***

# FEW TIPS

Make sure the distress tolerance skill is close to the intensity of the distress

- If you have the urge to die, ironing is probably not going to help!

Make sure the timing of the skill matches the situation

- Distracting with Sensations is a great way to get started but doesn't last; so if crisis is long, pair with Activities or Contributing
- Distracting with Thoughts lasts for minutes to maybe an hour – good for the bus, traffic, staff meetings, or the line at the DMV
- Take a “vacation” for as long as time allows

# FEW TIPS

Any Distress Tolerance skills overused can make things worse

- Soothing by taste is not a good idea if you are a compulsive eater or are gaining weight
- Take too many vacations, you don't get anything done
- Distracting by watching a DVD TV series or reading novels can take over your life

Avoid Distraction when it is avoidance

- Often people see distraction as the only way to cope when you can't do anything about the problem
- Sometimes you need to stay with the problem such as staying in class or on the worksite or with your children (or with your clients)
- Be sure to learn Self-Soothing and IMPROVE as much as Distract for this

# INTERESTED IN READING MORE?

- Marsha Linehan's *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*  
<http://behavioraltech.org/products/details.cfm?pc=GP04>
- Lots of on-line resources and handouts by searching for "DBT distress tolerance"

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