

making sense



dialectical behaviour
therapy

Making sense of dialectical behaviour therapy

This booklet explains what dialectical behaviour therapy is, who it can help, what happens during therapy and how to access it.

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What is DBT?

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is a type of talking treatment. It's based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), but has been adapted to help people who experience emotions very intensely.

It's mainly used to treat problems associated with borderline personality disorder (BPD), but it has also been used more recently to treat a number of other different types of mental health problems (see *Is DBT right for me?*).

What's the difference between DBT and CBT?

- CBT focuses on helping you to change unhelpful ways of thinking and behaving.
- DBT also helps you to change unhelpful behaviours, but it differs from CBT in that it also focuses on accepting who you are at the same time. DBT places particular importance on the relationship between you and your therapist, and this relationship is used to actively motivate you to change.

●● *I had bounced in and out of mental health services for a long time and nothing had helped, my condition had just worsened... Then I started DBT. Now I know what helps me, I have strategies when life is tough. Not everything is plain sailing, but when things go a bit wrong, I bounce back rather than spiralling.* ●●

What are the goals of DBT?

The goal of DBT is to help you learn to manage your difficult emotions by letting yourself experience, recognise and accept them. Then as you learn to accept and regulate your emotions, you also become more able to change your harmful behaviour. To help you achieve this, DBT therapists use a balance of acceptance and change techniques.

What does 'dialectics' mean?

In a nutshell, 'dialectics' means trying to balance opposite positions and look at how they go together. For example, in DBT, you will work with your therapist to find a good balance between:

- **Acceptance** – accepting yourself as you are.
- **Change** – making positive changes in your life.

You might eventually come to feel that these goals are not as conflicting as they first seem. For example, coming to understand and accept yourself, your experiences and your emotions, can then help you learn to deal with your feelings in a different way.

Acceptance techniques

Acceptance techniques focus on understanding yourself as a person, and making sense of why you might do things such as self-harm or misuse drugs. A DBT therapist might suggest that this behaviour may have been the only way you have learned to deal with the intense emotions you feel – so even though it's damaging to you in the long-term, and may be alarming to other people, your behaviour actually makes sense.

●● *Finally someone is saying 'yes, it makes sense' rather than 'no, that's wrong'. ●●*

Change techniques

DBT therapists use change techniques to encourage you to change your behaviour and learn more effective ways of dealing with your distress. They encourage you to replace behaviours that are harmful to you with behaviours that can help you move forward with your life. For example, you can learn to start challenging your unhelpful thoughts and develop a more balanced way of looking at things.

👉👉 *To get the most out of DBT requires a certain leap of faith and willingness to have your thinking and behaviours challenged. It is totally different to any other type of therapy I have ever had. It's hard work, but over time and with effort, life starts to get better.* 👉👉

(You can find out more about the development of DBT on the official DBT website, BehavioralTech.)

What is the treatment like?

The way that DBT is delivered can vary between different providers and across different areas. However, there are typically three different types of DBT sessions that you might have and these are likely to be run alongside each other:

- individual therapy
- skills training in groups
- telephone crisis coaching with a therapist

DBT pre-treatment

Some therapists may offer you an assessment or pre-treatment phase of DBT. This is where the therapist will look at how suitable DBT is for you. You will typically be offered several sessions where you will learn about the DBT model and, if you decide it is the right therapy for you, you will be asked to make a commitment to the treatment. (See our page on who DBT can help for more information.)

Individual therapy

Individual therapy typically involves weekly one-to-one sessions with a DBT therapist. Each session lasts approximately 45–60 minutes.

The individual sessions have a hierarchy of goals, including:

- **To help keep you safe** – by reducing suicidal and self-harming behaviours.

- **To reduce behaviours that interfere with therapy** – by addressing any issues that might come in the way of you getting treatment.
- **To help you reach your goals and improve your quality of life** – by addressing anything that interferes with this, such as other mental health problems like depression or hearing voices, or problems in your personal life such as employment or relationship problems.
- **To help you learn new skills** to replace unhelpful behaviours and help you achieve your goals.

Your DBT therapist is likely to ask you to fill out diary cards as homework which you can use to monitor your emotions and actions. You will be asked to bring these cards with you to your therapist each week to help you look for behaviour patterns and triggers that occur in your life. You then use this information to decide together what you will work on in each session. You can find some sample diary cards on the DBT self-help website.

●● *I've learned that emotions are not the enemy. They are useful and have functions. I still feel emotions intensely, but I can now identify them and know how to manage them without using harmful behaviours.* ●●

Skills training in groups

In these sessions DBT therapists will teach you skills in a group setting. This is not group therapy, but more like a series of teaching sessions. There are usually two therapists in a group and the sessions typically occur every week. The room is sometimes arranged like a classroom where your skills trainers will be sat at the front. The aim of these sessions is to teach you skills that you apply to your day-to-day life.

There are typically four skills modules:

1. **Mindfulness** – a set of skills that help you focus your attention and live your life in the present, rather than being distracted by worries

about the past or the future. The mindfulness module may be repeated between modules and sessions may often start with a short mindfulness exercise. (See our pages on mindfulness for more information.)

2. **Distress tolerance** – teaching you how you can deal with crises in a more effective way, without having to resort to harmful behaviours such as self-harm.
3. **Interpersonal effectiveness** – teaching you how to ask for things and say no to other people, while maintaining your self-respect and important relationships.
4. **Emotion regulation** – a set of skills you can use to understand, be more aware and have more control over your emotions.

In these group sessions you may be asked to do group exercises and use role-play. You are also given homework each week to help you practise these skills in your day-to-day life. By completing the homework weekly, you might find that these skills gradually become second nature and you become better at dealing with difficult situations.

👉👉 *I was really nervous about the group aspect of DBT. When I started group I wouldn't speak or make eye contact, but everyone was supportive and by the end I was much more confident and even taught a skill session to the other group members.* 👉👉

Telephone crisis coaching

DBT often uses telephone crisis coaching to support you in using new skills in your day-to-day life. This means that you can call your therapist between your therapy sessions when you need help the most, such as in the following situations:

- When you need help to deal with an immediate crisis (such as feeling suicidal or the urge to self-harm).
- When you are trying to use DBT skills but want some advice on how to do it.
- If you need to repair your relationship with your therapist.

However, you can expect your therapist to set some clear boundaries. For example, calls are usually brief and the hours that you can call them will be agreed between you and your therapist. They may also agree some other rules with you where, in particular circumstances, you may be asked to wait 24 hours before contacting your therapist.

●● *At first I didn't think DBT was for me, but I quickly learnt you really do get out of it what you put in, and after a few months I found that although how I felt and a lot of my symptoms did not change, I was managing them all so much better. I could actually get through days without a crisis and without the support of the crisis coaching.* ●●

(To find out more about how DBT is delivered you can visit the official DBT website, BehavioralTech.)

Who can benefit from DBT?

DBT was originally developed as a treatment for borderline personality disorder (BPD) and you are most likely to be offered DBT through the NHS if you have a diagnosis of BPD.

Some NHS services also offer DBT to children and adolescents, people with drug and alcohol problems, eating problems and offending behaviour. Research shows that DBT can be also helpful in tackling problems such as:

- self-harming
- suicide attempts
- depression

●● *Before DBT, I felt like the only solution was suicide... Now that I have completed my treatment I am now able to look forward. My thoughts and emotions used to control me; now I can control them.* ●●

What factors should I consider?

Some people can find DBT difficult in the beginning, as it requires accepting your problems and working hard to change them. However, after a while you might come to feel that your efforts were worthwhile.

If you are wondering whether DBT is right for you, it might be helpful to think about these questions:

- **Is DBT relevant to me?** If you're mainly interested in talking about your problems in general and trying to understand where they came from, then DBT might not seem relevant to you. In this case, there are various other talking therapies you might like to consider. (See our pages on talking treatments for more information.)
- **Is changing my behaviour my priority?** DBT therapists focus very much on enabling you to change your problematic behaviour. If changing your behaviour isn't the main thing you want to get out of treatment, then you might feel that your therapist doesn't accept you, or is being critical of you.
- **Am I able to put the work in?** DBT can sometimes be hard work, and you will be asked to do homework between your individual sessions. If you don't like doing homework or feel that you don't have the time, you might find a course of DBT too rigid or demanding, which might be demoralising.
- **Is group therapy right for me?** Group therapy can be really helpful for some people and you may find it helps to work alongside people who are experiencing similar problems. Group therapy is not for everyone though as it can be quite daunting and sometimes triggering. It is important that you think about whether group therapy is right for you or whether you prefer to just work with a therapist one-to-one.

In some areas, you may be offered DBT pre-treatment to help you decide whether it is the right therapy for you.

●● *My personal experiences of DBT were very mixed. At first it was really tough, and I wondered what the point of it was going to be. Some of the DBT skills seemed silly to me, but I had committed myself to the process and as time passed, it started to make more sense. ●●*

What if DBT doesn't work for me?

It's important to remember that everyone experiences therapy differently. Some people may find DBT helpful, but others may find it isn't right for them. If you don't get along with DBT then you could:

- talk to your therapist about any changes that can be made to make you feel more comfortable with the therapy.
- talk to your doctor about different treatment options that might be better suited to you.

●● *DBT isn't for everyone. There is very definitely a right time and a wrong time to do it. It's something you have to be ready for because it's very hard work... It's not a short term thing... you have to work at it every single day. It's hard to do, and even now, some 2 years after I completed the therapy, I'm still having to work at it. ●●*

(See our pages on seeking help for a mental health problem for more information about how to access treatment.)

How can I access DBT?

The main ways you can seek DBT through the NHS are:

- **Your GP or community mental health team (CMHT).** They may have information about the best ways to access DBT in your local area and may be able to tell you about local services.
- **Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT).** This is an NHS programme which can provide DBT as a treatment for various mental health problems. However, IAPT is not available in all areas and the waiting lists can be very long. You can search for IAPT services in your local area on the NHS Choices website. Some services will also accept self-referrals but this will depend on location.
- **Specialist therapy services** provided by some NHS Trusts (your local NHS Trust website may give details).

Unfortunately, many people find that accessing DBT can be quite difficult depending on the area you live in. If you're on a long waiting list you could ask your doctor if there is any other local support that you can get while you are waiting for your therapy to start. It may also help to have an advocate who can support you in accessing treatment. (See our pages on advocacy for more information about advocacy services.)

👤👤 *I was referred to a Personality Disorder clinic but found out only group DBT is available in this area and the waiting list was approximately 6 months long... I'm left here with no hope of ever receiving individual DBT therapy.* 👤👤

At Mind we believe everyone with a mental health problem should be able to access excellent care and services, when they need them. See our campaigns page to read about the issues we're currently campaigning on, and find out how you can make your voice heard by getting involved with us.

Can I access DBT through the private sector?

Some private therapists offer DBT, although they will charge a fee so this is not an option for everyone. There is currently no official, comprehensive register of DBT therapists in the UK, but specialist organisations such as Refer self counselling psychotherapy practice (RSCPP) provide details of some DBT teams and therapists on their websites.

(See our page on private sector care for more information.)

Can I do DBT by myself?

Unlike some other therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), it can be difficult to learn DBT techniques by yourself. You might find that doing it by yourself is not as effective as going to individual and group sessions run by trained therapists. It can also be very overwhelming when you start doing DBT, so having the support of a therapist can be really helpful.

There are many benefits to working with a trained therapist, for example:

- Individual therapy sessions can help you to stay motivated if you have a difficult patch and feel like giving up.
- Talking to your therapist can help you highlight potential situations where you can practise DBT skills.
- Being with other people in skills training groups who experience similar problems can be very supportive. It can be helpful to realise that you are not alone – that there are others who understand how you are feeling and go through the same difficulties, and your successes are acknowledged and congratulated in the group.

You may be able to find DBT self-help materials such as diary cards, exercises and behavioural analysis sheets freely available online for you to use to brush up your DBT training alongside or after finishing a formal course. The DBT Self Help website offers these resources.

Useful contacts

Behavioral Tech

web: behavioraltech.org

The official DBT website. It provides information on BPD and DBT.

DBT Self Help

web: dbtselfhelp.com

Service-user-led website with information on DBT and relevant material, such as diary cards.

Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk

Mind's safe, supportive online community where you can listen, be heard and share your experiences with others.

Lifesigns

web: lifesigns.org.uk User-led self-harm guidance and support network.

Middle path

web: middle-path.org

Service-user-led website with information on BPD and DBT.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

web: nice.org.uk

Provides guidelines for DBT treatment within the National Health Service.

NHS Choices

web: www.nhs.uk

Provides information on how you can self-refer to IAPT services

Refer self counselling psychotherapy practice (RSCPP)

web: rscpp.co.uk

List of private counsellors and psychotherapists, including DBT therapists.

Samaritans

web: samaritans.org

tel: 116 123 (freephone)

email: jo@samaritans.org

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK Chris PO Box 90 90 Stirling FK8 2SA

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web: mind.org.uk/donate

This information was written by Lydia Grace.

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Mind

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