

Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional and behavioral problems.

TRENDS

DBT AND ADOLESCENTS: THERAPEUTIC STRATEGIES THAT WORK

The remarkable brain development that occurs in adolescence results in an increased intensity of emotional experience (fear, aggression, excitement, sexual attraction). These changes in brain activity often result in the decreased ability to “hit the brakes” in responding to these feelings, leading teens to express strong emotions, make impulsive decisions and develop unhealthy habits. The adolescent brain also has a heightened sense of self-consciousness, making these young people feel like everyone is watching them. These cognitive and emotional experiences put adolescents at risk for a range of behavioral consequences, including self harm, substance abuse, relationship problems, and school failure. Dialectic Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is a set of therapeutic approaches that have demonstrated success in helping teens adapt to an increasingly challenging social-emotional environment.

DBT is a type of cognitive behavioral therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy tries to identify and change negative thinking patterns and promotes positive behavioral changes. DBT may be used to treat suicidal and other self-destructive behaviors. It teaches adolescents skills to cope with, and change, unhealthy behaviors. A unique aspect of DBT is its focus on acceptance of a person's experience as a way for therapists and educators to reassure them, and collaboratively accomplish the work needed to change negative behaviors.

What skills does DBT teach?

DBT training is very structured; for adolescents, it consists of a focus on the following essential skills :

- **Mindfulness skills:** Being present in the moment and understanding the signs of unregulated emotions
- **Emotion regulation skills:** Coping with difficult situations by building pleasant, self-soothing experiences to protect from emotional extremes. In treating

adolescents DBT focuses on the physical body: eating properly, getting enough sleep, taking their medicine and avoiding drug use.

- **Interpersonal effectiveness skills:** In adolescence, often interactions with others act as negative triggers for impulsive behaviors. The purpose of DBT interventions is teaching adolescents how to interact more effectively with others, and enable them to feel more supported by others.
- **Distress tolerance skills:** DBT focuses on helping youth to recognize and consciously control urges to do things that would be ineffective, such as hurting themselves or engaging in other risky/self-destructive behaviors.
- **Walking the middle path skill:** Youth, parent/caregivers, and educators learn how to validate one another, how to compromise and negotiate, and how to see the other person's side of things. →



“Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment.”

Dialectic Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is a set of therapeutic approaches that have demonstrated success in helping teens adapt.

To learn more:

- *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder* by Marsha M. Linehan, 1993: This text includes all of the skills handouts for each module and guidelines for implementing a psychoeducational skills group.
- *Dialectical Behavior Therapy With Suicidal Adolescents* by Alec L. Miller, Jill H. Rathus and Marsha M. Linehan, 2007

DBT AND ADOLESCENTS - CONTINUED

The following DBT strategies can be implemented by clinicians and educators working in a school setting.

Mindfulness

One of the main facets of DBT is mindfulness. In DBT, mindfulness is used so clients can activate their “wise mind”, the dialectic between their emotional mind (where all thoughts and behaviors are controlled by emotions) and their reasonable mind (the thinking, logical side). The wise mind is often considered intuition, and activating the wise mind via mindfulness is the key to effective decision-making. Mindfulness is not necessarily limited to sitting quietly and controlling one’s thoughts. Any activity can be considered mindful as long as the person is in the moment, observing, describing and participating — mindfully, nonjudgmentally and effectively. Therapists and educators can use group or individual activities to assist teens to learn to activate their wise mind.

DEAR MAN

Another skill that can be particularly helpful for adolescents is the use of an acronym, DEAR MAN. Adolescents can put this skill to use when they wish to ask for something they want or when they need to say “no.”

The acronym is as follows: **D**escribe the facts of the situation; **E**xpress your feelings and opinions surrounding the situation; **A**ssert what you want; and **R**einforce to the other person why this will be helpful to both parties or to the relationship. Clients will do this by staying **M**indful and ignoring any verbal attacks; **A**ppearing confident while doing so; and being willing to **N**egotiate if needed.

Radical acceptance

One of the essential skills in DBT is radical acceptance. This skill can help young people cope with a situation they find particularly upsetting so they can then determine what they have control over in the situation. When people do not accept the “reality” of a situation that

is particularly upsetting or painful, the result is suffering. All individuals need to learn to accept reality, even when it is difficult. For adolescents, this reality might be receiving a bad grade on a test, finding out a friend said something bad about them behind their back or being grounded for what they consider to be an unreasonable amount of time.

Adolescents may have difficulty “accepting” reality, especially when the event is particularly hurtful or sad, or if they feel it is unfair. It is important to emphasize to teens that accepting the situation is not the same thing as agreeing with it or saying it is “right.” Rather, they are simply reducing their suffering by accepting reality as it is instead of how they wish it was or how it “should” be.

Conclusions and Resources

DBT is a complex and multifaceted treatment, allowing clinicians and educators to choose the aspects of DBT they believe will be most effective with adolescents based upon the situations they experience as difficult and the severity of their presenting problems.

