

Understanding DBT: A Beginner's Guide

An evidence-based introduction to Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), emotional regulation, and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD).

What is Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)?

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based psychotherapy originally developed by psychologist Marsha Linehan to help people who experience intense emotions, chronic emotion dysregulation, self-destructive behaviours, and difficulties in relationships. Today, DBT is used worldwide for many concerns including Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), anxiety, depression, ADHD with emotional dysregulation, trauma-related difficulties, eating disorders, and substance use when emotional regulation is a central challenge.

What does 'dialectical' mean?

The word dialectical refers to holding two seemingly opposite ideas at the same time. In DBT, two core truths can both exist: you are doing the best you can, and you also need to learn new skills. Acceptance and change work together rather than against one another.

What is Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)?

Borderline Personality Disorder is a mental health condition characterized by significant difficulties regulating emotions. Common symptoms include rapidly changing emotions, fear of abandonment, unstable relationships, impulsive behaviours, identity disturbance, chronic feelings of emptiness, anger that feels difficult to control, and periods of dissociation or paranoia during high stress. BPD is treatable, and many people experience meaningful recovery with evidence-based treatment such as DBT.

Common Questions People Search Online

- What is DBT therapy?
- How does DBT help Borderline Personality Disorder?
- Can DBT help anxiety or ADHD?
- Is DBT only for BPD?
- What are the four DBT modules?

- How long does DBT take?
- What is the difference between CBT and DBT?
- Can I practise DBT skills on my own?

The Four DBT Skills Modules

Mindfulness

Learning to notice thoughts, emotions, and experiences without immediately reacting.

Distress Tolerance

Surviving crises without making the situation worse while accepting reality as it is.

Emotion Regulation

Understanding emotions, reducing emotional vulnerability, and responding effectively.

Interpersonal Effectiveness

Building healthy relationships, setting boundaries, asking for needs, and maintaining self-respect.

DBT Myths

Myth	Reality
<i>DBT is only for people with BPD.</i>	<i>DBT benefits many people who struggle with overwhelming emotions.</i>
<i>Acceptance means approval.</i>	<i>Acceptance means acknowledging reality so you can respond effectively.</i>
<i>Strong emotions mean something is wrong with me.</i>	<i>Emotions provide information; learning how to respond is the goal.</i>

What Happens in DBT?

Comprehensive DBT often includes individual therapy, a structured skills group, between-session coaching when appropriate, and consultation for therapists. Skills are practised repeatedly because lasting change develops through consistent practice rather than insight alone.

Is Recovery Possible?

Yes. Research consistently shows that DBT reduces suicidal behaviours, self-harm, psychiatric hospitalization, emotional dysregulation, and interpersonal conflict while improving quality of life. Recovery does not mean never feeling intense emotions again. It means developing the ability to respond to those emotions more effectively.

Practical First Steps

- Pause before reacting.
- Name the emotion you are experiencing.
- Notice urges without acting on them immediately.
- Look after sleep, nutrition, movement, and physical health.
- Practise one DBT skill every day rather than waiting for a crisis.

Reflection

What situations most often overwhelm you?

What strengths have helped you cope so far?

Which DBT skill would you most like to learn?

Further Support

If emotional dysregulation, BPD symptoms, anxiety, or relationship difficulties are significantly affecting your life, consider working with a psychologist or other qualified mental health professional trained in DBT. Learning these skills with guidance often accelerates progress.

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