

Finding The Balance in Opposing Forces: Dialectical Behavioral Therapy



We can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.
~ Pema Chodron

A central concept of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is **mindfulness**. The principle and practice of mindfulness springs from both Western and Eastern Contemplative practices.

Mindfulness is the capacity to pay attention, non-judgmentally, to the present moment. Mindfulness is about living in the moment, experiencing one's thoughts, feelings, and senses fully, yet with perspective and discernment. It is considered a foundation for the other skills taught in DBT, because it helps us accept and tolerate the powerful emotions we may feel in the midst of challenging and upsetting situations. With the use of mindfulness, stress producing habits can be solidly replaced with stress relieving habits.

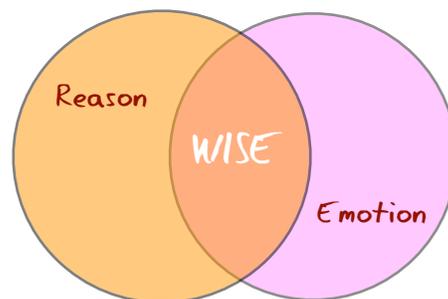
Three States of Mind

Reasonable Mind

Emotion Mind

Wise Mind

STATES OF MIND DIAGRAM



Wise Mind is the coming together, the overlap of Reasonable Mind and Emotion Mind.

When Emotion and Reason merge, the sum is greater than the parts. The greater sum is **intuition**, a feeling of "knowing" what's right, a felt sense or a shift in the body - bringing with it a sense of greater presence, openness, peace, and clarity.

Wise Mind: Experiencing Integration & Intuition

Wise Mind assumes that we are capable of experiencing wisdom in our lives.

Wise Mind is supported by learning and practicing DBT skills.

Skills are learned abilities.

With skills, one is able to change behaviors, emotions, and thinking patterns associated with circumstances and conditions (inner and outer) that cause suffering and extreme emotional distress/triggering.

DBT supports the process of learning acceptance and changing skills - which in turn changes habits and behaviors.

The FOUR MODULES (containing specific skills training) for developing Wise Mind are as follows:

1. Mindfulness
2. Distress Tolerance
3. Emotion Regulation
4. Interpersonal Effectiveness

Mindfulness and distress tolerance develop **serenity and equanimity**.

Emotion regulation and interpersonal effectiveness develop **courage and self-control**.

To understand Wise Mind, we must first understand two states of mind:

- **REASONABLE MIND**
- **EMOTION MIND**

Reasonable mind

Facts and common sense are the framework of reasonable mind. We are in reasonable mind when we think logically and rationally. This intellectual state of mind defines reality in terms of linear cause and effect. There is a calm clarity to reasonable mind.

Reasonable mind is important to learning skills, understanding how each skill works, and how to call them forth and utilize them when needed. For example, to regulate emotions skillfully, we must be able to name them, understand what events and personal interpretations prompt certain emotions, know what emotions feel like, what emotions compel us to do, and their aftereffects. The more we know and the more we practice, the stronger reasonable mind becomes.

Reasonable mind is much easier to access when we are not emotionally triggered. Yet with practice, reasonable mind can be accessed in the midst of the most powerful emotional triggers.

Emotion mind

If reasonable mind runs "cool" then emotion mind runs "hot." Passionate, extreme, and intense reactions in emotion mind make reasonable, logical thinking difficult. When an emotional state controls our thinking and behavior, emotion mind has taken over. Acting the way we feel is how emotion mind behaves. Emotion mind can flood our system (anger, fear, anxiety) or zap our energy (sadness, depression, despair, hopelessness). Impulsively acting the way we feel can lead to out of control behavior, which creates chaos, hurt feelings, and a momentum of suffering. Strong emotions cloud our vision of what is actually happening and cause us to go into code red (stress response - fight/flight/freeze).

Of course, a certain amount of emotion mind can be beneficial. Intense love is a motivation for intimate relationships. Intense devotion or desire motivates staying with very hard tasks and selflessly attending to the needs of others. When we are high in emotion mind we connect to our passions and interests. Emotion mind is not bad - it is just a powerful force for us to befriend and mediate with awareness and presence. The goal is to learn to use emotion and logic together, in harmony, to improve our quality of life. This is the goal of Wise Mind.

Wise Mind

Wise Mind is the active integration of Emotional Mind and Reasonable Mind.

Wise Mind brings together the logic of reasonable mind and the sensitivity of emotional mind into a serene state of mind. When we relate what we know (our smarts) to our problems (what hurts) we are being skillful and in Wise Mind.

Wise Mind lovingly and confidently tends to our worries, concerns, and fears. Our effort to link our experiences of emotional distress with our reasonable, logical abilities is the basis of skillfulness and Wise Mind. But Wise Mind is more than this. **The magic of Wise Mind is intuition.**

Intuition understands the meaning, significance, or truth of an event, without having to analyze it. Such intuitive knowing combines emotional experiencing and logical analysis, yet goes beyond both.

Sometimes raw emotion can masquerade as intuition. We feel certain we "know." If this 'knowing' is raw emotion and it has a quality of rigid urgency about it.

If this "knowing" is intuitive it has a quality of peace and quietness about it. A calm certainty validates our intuition, helping us discern whether our certainty is emotionally biased or truly intuitive.

Intuition has qualities of direct experience and immediate recognition, with the roots of reason and experience.

As we use our skills, we learn to act intuitively out of Wise Mind.

Acting intuitively out of Wise Mind, we feel confident and grounded.

This takes flexibility, imagination, and open-heartedness/open mindedness.

Awareness and presence, in general, nurtures Wise Mind.

Polarized thinking, contraction, reactivity, and rigidity interfere with Wise Mind.

Fear is the basis for these states of mind.

Wise Mind tames fear and softens our approach to ourselves and others.

In order to soften - we must be dedicated to learning the skills that support the ongoing process of naming and taming our emotional triggers.

We all experience emotional triggers.

Emotional triggers are not something to judge; but something to befriend and tend.

Part of befriending involves understanding what we can and cannot change (especially in reference to outer circumstances and the behavior of others).

Intuition is a powerful tool in knowing what we can and cannot change.

Wisdom and confidence (to navigate the most heated of emotional triggers) grows, as we bring experience, knowledge (learned skills), and intuition to the process of befriending and tending our emotional triggers.

Wisdom takes work.

Within the DBT model, this work is begun by learning:

- Core mindfulness skills
- Interpersonal effectiveness skills
- Emotion regulation skills
- Distress tolerance skills

Wisdom, Wise Mind, or wise knowing depends on the integration of all ways of knowing something:

- Knowing by observing, learning, experiencing
- Knowing by analyzing logically
- Knowing by what we experience in our body (kinesthetic and sensory experience)
- Knowing by intuition

Knowing in these ways develops with awareness and awareness expands as we hone our capacity to observe, analyze, experience, learn, and intuit. By exploring the various ways of knowing and becoming more aware, we develop a sense of wholeness, resiliency, and balance.

Wise Mind is like riding a bike, which takes effort, balance, and steering. We can learn Wise Mind, just as we learned to ride a bike, only by experience. Just as we must pedal to start a bike rolling - we must be willing to expend a little extra effort to initiate Wise Mind. Just as we must find balance in order to not fall off a bike - we find Wise Mind by making the effort to find the balance of our emotions and thinking. Intuition steers us toward Wise Mind. The onslaught of uncomfortable emotions (anxiety, depression, anger, shame, guilt, etc.) is like speeding out of control and losing our balance. We can learn to activate Wise Mind and do the best we can to maintain and regain balance.

As we bring Wise Mind skills to our emotional activation, we naturally and gradually develop a sense of inner confidence to move through the challenging moments. Confidence does NOT mean we won't make mistakes or lose our balance.

Confidence is trusting our capacity and willingness to use (on the spot) our learned skills to tame our emotional triggers.

When we access Wise Mind we are able to:

- Regain calmness when attacked or confronted
- Intuitively sense what will calm emotions when in the heat of an interpersonal eruption or internal crisis/conflict
- Find clarity of choice when confused
- Move from contraction (fear-based) to expansion (love-based)

The skills of DBT help us to develop [self-agency](#) and [self-awareness](#) as we practice and hone mindfulness, regulate our emotions, interpersonal effectiveness, and tolerate distress.

[Self-agency](#) is the feeling we have when we are mindful, present, and can mediate our own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Rather than feeling our behavior just happens; self-agency owns the behavior and takes responsibility for it.

[Self-awareness](#) is the sense we have that our different roles, feelings, attitudes, and mental states work in harmony.

Self-description, a core mindfulness skill, helps us to know ourselves and listen to our personal truth. At the same time, we are strong enough not to be defensive when presented with alternative views that warrant our consideration. We can see more clearly who we are and what we need when we are quiet and peaceful.

Self-observation develops self-understanding and accurate perception. The opposite of “automatic pilot” or doing something without thinking. Wise Mind is *“being in the present on purpose.”* Through mindfulness, we can develop the skills to access our Wise Mind.

Meditation and Wise Mind

Mindfulness exercises develop inner calm, emotional control, perseverance, and a solid sense of a compassionate witnessing self (self-in-presence). Meditation is like training wheels.

Self-in-Presence (aka Wise Mind) supports us to contact our capacity for:

- Curiosity
- Calmness
- Confidence
- Clarity
- Creativity
- Compassion
- Connectedness
- Courage

Meditation elicits the "**Relaxation Response**," which is the physiological opposite of stress and anxiety.

Meditation heals the damage of stress and trauma.

One of the simplest meditation exercises is to follow our breathing. When we focus on our breath, we can find Wise Mind in our physical core (found at the bottom of our inhalation). We can develop the ability to find our center during meditation and get to know this calm centered place. If we learn where our center is and how it feels, we can go to this place when under stress or emotionally activated. Although meditation may be unfamiliar, with practice it can be a powerful tool in cultivating the ability to be mindful and **push the pause button** during emotionally activating experiences.

Meditation and mindfulness develop our ability to observe what is going on within ourselves - in any situation. The practice of meditation helps us grow in our capacity to reflect on our thinking and feeling, independent of the circumstances, observing what is going on in our minds and bodies. This is the cultivation of awareness and presence, which serves us well when wild emotional weather systems rip through us.

Qualities of Wise Mind

Wise Mind is:

- **CALM**

It is almost always quiet and peaceful. When change or acceptance is necessary Wise mind is the poise of knowing which course to take. Wise Mind is not trapped in all-or-nothing thinking, good/bad, for or against, and can focus on what is effective and functional.

- **NAMES AND TAMES EMOTIONAL MIND**

Behavior is not mood dependent (controlled by our emotions); it is at the service of our inner wisdom. Eventually, objective self-observation and self-description are attainable from this slightly detached point of view. In fact, we can learn to experience extreme emotions like anger, despair, or fear while staying in Wise Mind. This takes lots of practice for everybody. Similarly, in Wise Mind, we are able to access the knowledge of reasonable mind.

- **COURAGEOUS**

We can experience fear or the beginnings of freaking out, yet nonetheless we can push the pause button and do what is calming, skillful, and effective in even the most challenging of circumstances.

- **WILLING**

Willingness is doing what is needed to create the most peace in each situation. Willingness requires courage and discipline.

- **CONFIDENT**

Self-confidence is knowing we can handle whatever comes our way. Wise Mind uses learned skills and has confidence that we are doing the best we can under the circumstances.

- **SUPPORTS A CLEAR AND INTEGRATED SENSE OF SELF**

In Wise Mind, we can honor our own feelings, opinions, and decisions when with others who are triggering our self-questioning and/or fear.



SKILLS TRAINING

Encouragement

While these skills may at first seem daunting to master - with practice they will become second nature.

THE FOUR MODULES

1. Mindfulness

Mindfulness begins by bringing awareness and focused attention to current experience by observing and attending to the rapidly and challenging onslaught of thoughts, feelings and sensations moment-to-moment. A stance of acceptance, curiosity, compassion, self-honesty, and openness is taken toward each moment of one's experience.

Skills Within the Mindfulness Module

The WHAT Skills

OBSERVE

Non-judgmentally observe our environment (internal experience or external circumstances). This skill is helpful in understanding our subtle personal truth (intuitive felt-sense) of what is going on in any given situation.

DESCRIBE

Express what we have observed - without judgment.

We can either describe our observations to ourselves or to another.

PARTICIPATE

Fully focusing in the moment to what we are doing, feeling, sensing, and thinking.

The HOW Skills

NONJUDGMENTAL

This is the action of describing the facts, and not thinking about what's good or bad, fair or unfair. These are judgments about what we feel but not factual descriptions. Being non-judgmental helps to get our point across in an effective manner without adding subtle

criticism (shame/blame) that will trigger emotional activation, disagreement and/or power struggles in others.

ONE-MINDFULLY

This is used to focus on one thing. One-mindfully is helpful in keeping the mind from straying into **emotion mind** due to a lack of focused and compassionate presence.

EFFECTIVELY

This is simply doing what works and results in an effective outcome. It is a very broad-ranged skill and can be applied to any other skill to aid in being successful with each skill.

To call upon effectiveness - it is helpful to ask oneself: *Will this way of relating to myself and others result in an effective outcome, i.e., the most peaceful route toward naming what is going on, tending to strong emotions, and respectfully communicating feelings and needs; listening to the feelings and needs of the other?*

2. Distress Tolerance

This is a powerful tool toward accepting, finding meaning for, and tolerating distress and emotional activation. The emphasis is on learning to be with our suffering in a skillful way.

Distress tolerance skills constitute a natural development from mindfulness skills.

They have to do with the ability to accept oneself, others, and the current situation, in a non-evaluative and nonjudgmental fashion. Although this is a nonjudgmental stance, this does not mean that it is one of approval or resignation. The goal is to become capable of calmly recognizing highly charged situations and emotions and their impact, rather than fighting, fleeing, and/or freezing (stress response).

Distress tolerance allows us to make wise decisions about when and how to take action, rather than falling into the intense, desperate, and often destructive emotional reactions and behaviors that can happen when strong and difficult beliefs and emotions are triggered.

Skills Within the Distress Tolerance Module

Distract with ACCEPTS

This is a skill used to distract oneself temporarily from unpleasant emotions.

The acronym stands for:

Activities: Push the pause button and turn to positive activities that center, ground, calm, and reconnect us to our strengths and wholeness.

Contribute: Acknowledge our strengths and gifts and offer them to others.

Comparisons: Practice seeing ourselves in the greater clan of humankind. We all suffer; we all feel challenged by our suffering; we all have the capacity to extinguish our suffering.

Emotions (evoking alternate emotions): Shift into humor and lightheartedness with activities that produce positive emotional states.

Push away: Put our heated situation on the back-burner for a while. Put something else in the forefront of our minds. This is not suppression; it is **pushing the pause button and taking a breather.**

Thoughts (evoking alternate thoughts): Direct our mind to think about something else which brings us a sense of safety and ease.

Sensations (evoking alternate sensations): Do something positive that has an intense feeling other than what we are feeling, i.e., taking a cold shower, putting on music, screaming into a pillow, dancing, etc.

Self Soothe

Being comforting, nurturing, kind, and gentle to ourselves. We use this skill by doing something that is truly soothing to us. It is used in moments of extreme stress or upset. This is a vital skill and often a hard one to master in the midst of strong emotional activation. Self-compassion is key to mastering this skill.

It is helpful to imagine ourselves as our own cherished child and offer the soothing that a child would need.

IMPROVE the Moment

This skill is used in moments of distress to help us relax.

The acronym stands for:

Imagery: Imagine relaxing scenes or other experiences that are pleasing and calming.

Meaning: Find purpose or meaning in what we are feeling.

Parenting Oneself: Talk to ourselves in a nurturing and comforting fashion. Coming up with a personal mantra or statement that is soothing.

Relaxation: Relax muscles, breathe deeply. This is also a self-soothing tool.

One thing in the moment: Focus our entire attention on what we are doing right in the moment. Coach ourselves to stay in the present moment (out of past and future thinking).

Vacation: Another form of pushing the pause button. Take a break from whatever is happening for a short period of time. Whatever is feeling urgent - is not as urgent as we might think. When we clear a space to pause - we interrupt the momentum of thoughts and feelings that cause a sense of urgency (code red).

Encouragement: Loving self-talk. See ourselves as our own cherished and vulnerable child. Be gentle and loving toward ourselves. This allows us to offer ourselves a deep and abiding acceptance and encouragement to get through the difficult moments.

Pros and Cons

Think of the positive consequences of tolerating the distress without acting/reacting emotionally. Imagine the positive outcome when we achieve our goals of regaining calm and balance when we don't act impulsively. Think of all of the negative consequences of not

tolerating our current distress. Remind ourselves what happened in the past when we did not act impulsively or try to escape the moment.

Radical Acceptance

As we let go of fighting *what is*, we are able to accept the situation for what it is and bring love and acceptance to the experience. This frees the mind to be creative in responding to the challenges of the situation.

Turning the Mind

Turning the mind towards an acceptance stance is another form of Radical Acceptance.

Willingness vs. Willfulness

When we are willing and open to **do what is effective** it supports us to let go of a willful stance which goes against acceptance. Willingness is a powerful tool for staying focused on the goal of creating inner ease and acceptance.

3. Emotion Regulation

At some point in our lives, we all experience intense emotions and act out these emotions in ineffectual and self-sabotaging ways. Anger, frustration, despair, self-hatred, sadness, and anxiety can be experienced in ways that feel uncontrollable and overwhelming. Learning the skill of regulating our emotions can help us to tame the fire of these challenging inner states.

DBT skills for emotion regulation include:

- Identifying and labeling emotions
- Identifying obstacles to shifting out of challenging emotions
- Reducing vulnerability to *emotion mind*
- Increasing self-supporting emotional responses
- Increasing mindfulness to current emotions
- Applying distress tolerance techniques

Skills Within the Emotion Regulation Module

Unpacking the Story of Emotional Activation

After an emotional eruption has happened, we can unpack the sequence by focusing on the following:

- Identify the triggering event or circumstance.
- Recall the Felt-Sense in the body.
- Name the Core Belief or Interpretation of the event/circumstance (Name the Trigger).
- Track the Action Urge > Action Taken > Result.
- Determine if the action taken resulted in creating peace or more emotional activation.

- Determine which action would have created more peace and reduction in emotional activation.

Three A's Method of Naming and Taming Emotions (On the Spot)

- **Acknowledge** the Emotion without judgment.
- **Attend** to the Emotion by asking: “What is needed to calm this emotion?”
- Take **Action** that creates the most peace for all involved

4. Interpersonal Effectiveness

Interpersonal response patterns taught in DBT skills training are very similar to those taught in many assertiveness and interpersonal problem-solving classes. They include effective strategies for [asking for what one needs, saying no, and coping with interpersonal conflict](#).

We all possess good interpersonal skills in a general sense. The problems arise in the application of these skills to situations where primitive and frightening emotions are triggered. We often lose sight of what will be most effective (calming, centering) when caught in the heat of our own emotional activation.

The interpersonal effectiveness module focuses on situations where the objective is to change something (e.g., [requesting that someone do something](#)) or to resist changes someone else is trying to make (e.g., [saying no](#)).

The skills taught are intended to maximize the chances that our goals in a specific situation will be met, while at the same time not damaging either the relationship or our self-respect.

Skills Within the Interpersonal Effectiveness Module

DEARMAN - Receiving Something (Requests)

Acronym used to aid us in getting what we want/need:

Describe our situation.

Express why this is an issue or need and how we feel about it.

Assert ourselves by sharing clearly what we feel and asking kindly and directly for what we want/need.

Reinforce our position by offering a positive outcome if we were to get what we are requesting.

Mindful of the situation by focusing on what we are requesting and not getting sidetracked with other issues.

Appear Confident even if we don't feel confident. This does not mean pretending as much as digging deep for our confidence when feeling shaky. Feeling shaky is part of being human. **Negotiate** with a hesitant or argumentative person and come to a peaceful compromise of needs. Stay with this process. Share and listen. Negotiations of strong emotions and needs often take patience. Continuing to return to the simplicity and clarity of our core request and listening to the core request of the other - supports the negotiation process.

GIVE - Giving Something (Offers)

This is a skill that can aid us with mending and strengthening our relationships.

When we feel that we are digging in our heels and shutting down to the other (me against you/ you against me) and find ourselves in code red - we can open just a little, offer our hand in peace. Even a little of this offering can go a long way to taming the power struggle and conflict that is being enacted.

It is to be used in challenging conversations.

The **GIVE** acronym stands for the following:

Gentle: No verbal or physical attacks, no put downs. Avoid sarcasm, judgment, blame, accusation, and criticism.

Interested: When the person we are speaking to is talking, be interested in what they are saying. Maintain eye contact, ask questions, etc. Be present and open.

Validate: Show that we understand a person's situation and sympathize with them. Validation can be shown through words, touch (when safe), and body language.

Easy Manner: Keep returning to a focus on the breath in order to call upon calmness. Use humor.

FAST - Maintaining self respect

This is a skill to aid in maintaining self-respect. It is to be used in combination with the other Interpersonal Effectiveness skills.

The **FAST** acronym stands for the following:

Fair: Be fair and kind to ourselves and others.

Apologies: Humbly offer apologies without falling into blame and shame of ourselves.

Stick to Your Values: Stay true to what we believe in and stand by it. Refrain from allowing others to throw us off our truth with imposed rights/wrongs/shoulds. When this is done with self-confidence and self-acceptance (feeling one's worth), rigidity and power struggle are reduced.

Truthful: Even when shaky, speak our truth with self-supporting courage.



The beneficial results of embracing the DBT skills as a daily practice:

- A more peaceful and pleasurable participation in life.
- Increased capacity to identify, understand, and tame self-sabotaging beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and habits.
- The elimination of patterns that seed future suffering.
- The reinforcement of patterns that seed future happiness.
- Ongoing effective emotion-regulation (especially during times of extreme crisis and challenge).
- Increased capacity to tolerate painful life events.
- Emotional resiliency.
- Enhanced interpersonal and emotional intelligence.

DBT offers a model of effectively reducing emotional suffering.

Whole-hearted committed to the principles and practices of DBT can transform self-judgment into self-acceptance and nurture a genuine compassion for all living beings (even ourselves!).

References

- Linehan, M. M. & Dimeff, L. (2001). Dialectical Behavior Therapy in a Nutshell, *The California Psychologist*, 34, 10-13.
- Linehan, Marsha M. (1993). *Cognitive behavioral Treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Linehan, Marsha M. (1993). *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Schwartz, Richard. (1997). *Internal Family Systems Therapy*. Guilford Press.

Recommended Reading

- The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh.
- When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron.
- Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha* by Tara Brach.
- Fatal Flaws: Navigating Destructive Relationships with People with Disorders of Personality and Character* by Stuart C. Yudovsky.
- The High Conflict Couple: A Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy; & Validation* by Alan E. Fruzzetti.
- Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life: How Dialectical Behavior Therapy Can Put You in Control* (New Harbinger Self-Help Workbook) by Scott E. Spradlin.
- Depressed and Anxious: The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Workbook for Overcoming Depression & Anxiety* by Thomas Marra.

Great site: <http://www.dbtselfhelp.com/>