

Strategies for Putting Identity-Affirming Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) Skills into Practice

All information provided are considered working/flexible definitions. Labeling and categorizing these constructs is intended to encourage open and supportive dialogue around complex and multifaceted categories. Examples of identities and the strategies suggested are by no means exhaustive and are included to provide a range of potential examples. If you have a strong response to any of these suggestions (e.g., feeling intensely validated or intensely invalidated) consider “where is this coming from?”

Effectively Responding to Explicit or Implicit Bias When you Experience it in the Moment

Key Points: Experiences of stigma, racism, bias, discrimination, are very real and impactful. It is often *not* effective to simply “cognitively restructure” these experiences or treat them as completely benign. When experiences of identity-based othering occur, it is often best to *acknowledge and validate* the feeling/experience and *externalize* the meaning.

How to acknowledge and self-validate following an experience of bias, stigma, or discrimination:

- (1) Explicitly validate the painful emotions associated with this real experience.
- (2) Acknowledge and further self-validate that we live in a world that can be oppressive where these types of events do occur and are unfair and unjust, even if unintentional. If you can't solve the problem or change your relationship to the problem in the moment pivot to radical acceptance so you don't make things worse than they already are. Remember radical acceptance is about accepting life on life's terms and not resisting what you cannot or choose not to change. It doesn't mean you have to LIKE it and it doesn't mean you can't take committed anti-oppressive actions to make it better or potentially change it. Take care of yourself – sometimes a battle is worth fighting; sometimes its more effective to focus attention elsewhere.
- (3) Focus any cognitive restructuring strategies not on the “truth” of the event but on any underlying thoughts about what the event means about you as a person. Validate your experience; externalize the meaning (e.g., internal locus of control; external locus of responsibility.)

Additional examples and recommended skills:

Acknowledge & Self-Validate with Affirming Self-Talk

“It makes sense that this is painful for me, and that I have a lot of different emotions about having to deal with these additional obstacles because of aspects of my identity. Am I internalizing blame? What skills can I use to cope and be kind to myself in this unfair situation?”

DBT Skills to try: (1) STOP; MoCE & MoCT, STUNwave; then (2) Self-Validation, then (3) try to use the S, C, or R of SCREW.

Cognitive Restructuring

(sometimes OK but often ineffective when experiencing painful emotions due to identity-based stress)

Sometimes effective: “They probably didn't mean to be offensive. I might be mind-reading. It's probably not that bad, I'm blowing it out of proportion.”

Rarely effective: “I'm the one with the problem and need to change. Other people have been telling me I need to relax and not take things so personally.”

DBT Skills to try: Check the Facts (be thoughtful about what you restructure, review 3 points above).

Communicating with Friends, Relatives, and People who *invalidate* you and your socio-cultural identities

Key Points: Based on the specific situation it might make sense to take on the role of educating others, even though it is unfair that educating places yet another burden/responsibility on ourselves when we are experiencing pain in the first place. At other times, protecting oneself and deciding to take a step back may be the best course of action to preserve one's emotional resources and to keep yourself safe. Pick your battles and stick to your goals and values. Before deciding on a course of action take a breath and decide "how can I be most effective in this moment?" If your personal control is very low focus first on distress tolerance skills.

Educating and Listening to Others – Raising Collective Critical Consciousness

"Hmm...can you tell me what you mean by that?"

"It sounds like you and I are coming at this from different perspectives and experiences. Would you be open to hearing a little about my experiences and perspectives on this topic?"

"Oh – that's hard for me to hear ... are you saying that (reflect back statement using person-centered language)?"

DBT skills to try: (1) STOP; MoCE & MoCT, STUNwave; then (2) Interpersonal effectiveness skills including DEARMAN, GIVE, FAST, THINK

Setting Limits / Walking Away

"I am not sure that it will be effective for us to engage in conversation right now. I am going to respect my own limits and step back; thank you for respecting that."

Or, alternatively, walking away without saying anything if emotions are very high.

DBT Skills to try: Distress Tolerance and Emotion Regulation skills including STOP, TIPP, Opposite Action to Emotion. The S, C, or R of SCREW to prevent the situation from worsening.

Raising Importance of Social and Cultural Factors with Providers, Teachers, and People in Positions of Power

Key Points: Although they may be in the “expert” position (and hold more contextual power), treatment providers, teachers, and other people may make mistakes, including incorrect assumptions. Pointing this out can be helpful to enhance the services you are receiving, to help you feel more empowered, and to enhance your working relationships. People’s responses and answers to broaching can provide good clues about whether or not they are ready or have the current emotional or cognitive bandwidth for certain types of conversations (e.g., if their PLEASE skills are depleted they may not be effective in hearing your very reasonable comments). Additionally, there is an art in giving feedback so others can actually hear it, *especially* if it’s about something that they did ‘wrong’ and may feel ashamed, guilt, defensive, or angry about.

Broaching

“Can I tell you about a certain aspect of my identity (provide as much information as needed to test the waters) and how it may influence our work?”

“It sounds like you are thinking that expressing anger and talking loudly has been a problem for me. Is it OK if I tell you a bit about communication styles in my culture...because what’s actually really bothering me is...”

DBT skills to try: (1) STOP; MoCE & MoCT, STUNwave; then (2) Interpersonal effectiveness skills including DEARMAN, GIVE, FAST, THINK

Deferring

I have tried to broach the topic with my therapist, but they do not seem receptive, and/or I am starting to feel unseen/unsafe, and/or I don’t feel my therapist can help with my identity related struggles, perhaps they can refer me to someone who can. Are there any other trusted adults I can talk to about this experience?

DBT Skills to try: Distress Tolerance and Emotion Regulation skills including STOP, TIPP, Opposite Action to Emotion. The S, C, or R of SCREW to prevent the situation from worsening.