

TOPIC #3: ADOLESCENT DIALECTIC BEHAVIOR THERAPY: THE MODULE OF MINDFULNESS

Topics within this series have emphasized the usefulness of Dialectic Behavior Therapy (DBT) with an adolescent population. The remainder of this series will focus on the use of DBT skills training using four modules; Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation and Interpersonal Skills (Linehan, 1993), exploring challenges and techniques for applying these skills to a younger population. Each of these modules will be explored in the next several articles, beginning with what is considered to be their foundation; Mindfulness.

Defining Mindfulness

Bishop et al. (2004) refer to general mindfulness as "a kind of non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is" (pg. 232). The author's definition of mindfulness is broken down into the following two components:

Self regulation of attention: One problem inherent in adolescent development is the tendency to engage in selective abstraction especially in youth with delinquent, self-injurious, or suicidal behaviors (Everall, Bostik, & Paulson, 2005; Frey, 1999; Weismoore & Esposito-Smythers, 2010). Many experiences in youth's daily lives are emphasized, while others that may be equally important are ignored. For example, a youth may get picked on in school and feel intense loneliness, anxiety, and anger, experiencing faulty beliefs based in extremes like "I have **no** friends"; "**everyone** hates me", or "things will **never** get better". Self regulation of attention allows for increased attention to all of the happenings in a current moment, including conscious awareness of one's current thoughts, feelings, and surroundings (Bishop, et al., 2004). This increased awareness reduces the amount of faulty beliefs experienced, assists youth in accurately identifying emotions, and can help the individual find new insight into any life situation, even if it is difficult to endure.

Adopting a particular orientation toward the present moment: Along with focusing our attention on the present moment, mindfulness requires that we adopt a different way of viewing that moment. While youth in treatment can often be oppositional, grandiose, or unwilling to consider alternatives to a situation, true mindfulness requires one to be open-minded in exploring all aspects of the present, with a willingness to accept what **is**, even if it may be challenging or painful (Bishop, et al., 2004).

Aside from some of the developmental barriers discussed above, mindfulness is inherently difficult to grasp, and requires practice in order to become comfortable with it. DBT employs a psychological approach to mindfulness, providing clients and clinicians with specific steps that can be practiced to increase the ability to be mindful in their daily lives.

The Complicated Nature of Mindfulness

Although each of the four modules of DBT is fairly distinct, the concepts taught in mindfulness are interwoven throughout the other three modules. Therefore grasping the concept of mindfulness is essential for enhanced application of the skills learned in DBT. The complicating factor with regard to teaching this module to an adolescent population is in the abstract nature of mindfulness. Developmentally, adolescents may be limited in their cognitive abilities, understanding only concrete ideas, or having only newly developed and therefore restricted abstract thinking capabilities (Piaget & Inhelder, 1973). Since mindfulness can be very difficult to grasp for even an intelligent, mature adult, learning and applying it can be extremely frustrating for a younger or cognitively limited individual. This presents a challenge for the adolescent clinician, requiring a great deal of creativity, flexibility and patience in helping youth learn and practice mindfulness.

The best way to introduce mindfulness is to explain that it is the opposite of mind/lessness. Because we live in a very fast-paced culture that encourages multi-tasking, productivity, and high self-expectations, most of us live in a very mindless way on a daily basis. For example, do you actually pay attention to the chores and tasks you accomplish within your normal daily routine? Do you mindfully get dressed in the morning or do you do so while you think about what to do next, talk to others, or watch the news? Mindfulness is being fully aware and attentive to what is happening in the present moment; with everything we have. While mindfulness is becoming more widespread within the media, its definitions and uses are variable depending upon the source. The DBT approach to mindfulness centers on using three tools to become more mindful; these are: “Wise mind”, the “What skills”, and the “How skills” (Linehan, 1993). “Wise mind” and the “What skills” will be described here, while the “How skills” will be explored in next month’s article.

Wise Mind

Because every concept in DBT is designed to balance our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, the concept of wise mind (similar to Freud’s theory of intra-psycho conflict) is a tool used to gain that balance (Linehan, 1993). The Venn diagram below is used to explain this model to clients, illustrating the three states of mind one can enter into in any given situation. While wise mind represents a state of mind that is balanced, centered, and aware, reasonable mind and emotional mind are equally important components of our experiences.

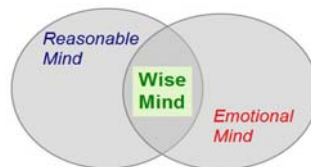


Illustration 1: Venn diagram useful for explaining different states of mind to clients (Lawson, 2010).

Reasonable mind

Our reasonable mind, similar to Freud's superego, is grounded in logic and intellect. It is appropriate to be in the extreme of reasonable mind occasionally, such as when taking a math test. Logic and reason can and should guide this process, as we wouldn't want emotion getting in the way of our algebra problems. However, consider a person who always answers to logic and avoids attending to emotional states. Defenses such as intellectualization and dissociation may be relied upon often and to extremes for these individuals, making it difficult to identify and express even basic emotions.

While youth may struggle developmentally with identifying and expressing emotions, the adults in their lives may enable and foster suppression of emotions by assuming that youth are incapable of doing so. While emotions can be somewhat abstract, a pattern of avoiding emotions can develop early in life if adults do not encourage, support and validate youth's emotional experiences, by assisting them in developing an emotion vocabulary (Look for more on this in future articles discussing the emotion regulation module).

Emotion mind

The opposite of reasonable mind, emotion mind is akin to the id. Decisions grounded in emotion mind are determined purely ***because*** of emotional states, rather than considering the consequences, or the effectiveness of such decisions. While youth who are impulsive may spend much of their time in emotion mind, this can be an appropriate state of mind occasionally as well. A simple example is the death of a loved one. Logic and reason are inappropriate during a period of intense and immediate grieving; rather it is more appropriate to be overcome with many strong emotions. For the most part however, allowing emotions to control our decisions is not a healthy reaction to life situations.

The balance of Wise Mind

Wise mind, similarly to the ego in Freud's theory, will balance our emotions and reason, and we can consider ourselves to be "centered" when acting from wise mind. There are emotions that we experience in wise mind; however we can make good decisions based on not only these emotions, but logic and reason as well. What makes wise mind even more distinctive from the other two states of mind is the added presence of intuition. For many youth, intuition is still developing and they are learning to trust their instincts. A DBT therapist has an opportunity to discuss the differences between impulsive decisions and instinctive decisions. The caveat here is that while most youth are working toward developing their instincts, some individuals are unable to trust their instincts even throughout adulthood, and will need significant guidance in determining how to use instincts within the decision-making process. For instance, those in an active addiction may instinctually believe that stealing is necessary to avoid the pain of substance withdrawal, while youth with a significantly low self worth may instinctually feel that anything goes as long as they gain the approval of others.

The “What” skills

The “What” skills of mindfulness; observe, describe and participate, are instrumental in teaching individuals to be mindful. Although there are many ways to learn and teach mindfulness, the “What” skills break down very simply, and provide clear and somewhat concrete steps in the process of becoming more mindful. However the dialectic here is that we can over-think these steps, becoming easily confused and overwhelmed by the depth of these “simple” concepts. Within this discussion, both simple and complex reactions are explored in order to assist professionals with the application of the “What” skills to an adolescent population.

Observe: Very simply, the first step of mindfulness involves just noticing things (Linehan, 1993). If we ask a youth to notice something, like a pen or a tree, we would be hard pressed to find a client who was unable to do so. However the more sophisticated method of observation involves detaching oneself from the object being observed, and simply observing in the moment, with all of one’s senses, before progressing on to the next step of describing. This can be very difficult to practice, and is frustrating for impulsive youth who get bored easily (such as youth with attention deficit disorder), tend to skip ahead (such as learning disabled youth) or are always eager to move on to the next thing (ex. anxious youth).

In addition, observing inside of one’s self is painful, scary, and often, time consuming. Many youth feel safer or more confident observing things outside of themselves, which is a good place to start when learning these skills. However, the need to eventually look inward should be emphasized and observing internal states is a goal that should be worked toward. Although observing our thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations can clearly be instrumental in the therapeutic process, care should be taken with traumatized or severely anxious youth to form a strong alliance, in order to slowly guide this process rather than prematurely promote self guided observations of inwards states.

Describe: How much time do we spend encouraging clients to express themselves, and to clearly describe what they are experiencing? After one has observed thoughts, feelings, sensations, or external stimuli, an individual should be taught to put words to that experience, and to fully describe all of the observations he/she perceives in the moment. Like observing, describing is fairly simple to explain, but can be complicated to actually carry out.

The difficulties involved in describing something inside of us are inherent in what we find inside. None of us, adults included are eager to clearly articulate painful emotions, scary thoughts, or embarrassing situations. Most of us instinctually bury things that are hard to face, unless we clearly know better and work hard to avoid doing so. Adolescents have not learned the consequences of running from problems, in fact at this young age; they usually have determined that life is less painful if you avoid dealing with struggles. Convincing them otherwise can often be difficult, however if they continue to rely on avoidance as a method of coping this behavior can carry through to adulthood, creating significant problems later in life.

Participate: Finally, what good is observing and describing our current reality if we are not fully participating in it? Teaching youth to participate includes teaching them to tolerate what is, and to take time for one's self. Meditation, guided imagery, metaphor or story-telling, and silence are tools that are encouraging of full participation in the moment and, using the "How" skills (to be discussed next article), makes participation in the moment a safe and meaningful process. Allowing oneself to be fully in the moment, rather than drifting in and out of consciousness can only be accomplished by observing and describing.

Developmentally, adolescents are between the two extremes of childhood and adulthood. However instead of being balanced because they are in between two opposite states, they are instead more prone to alternate between immature, childish play and failed or inappropriate attempts to be independent and self sufficient. Neither of these is usually comfortable in that youth are confused about where they fit. Teaching them how to have fun and play in a healthy way, while still being responsible and honing adult skills is challenging. Many youth in need of DBT are afraid or unsure of how to have healthy play and relaxation, either avoiding it altogether or turning to drugs, sex or other self destructive ways to relieve tension. In addition, youth may be fearful of adulthood and the responsibilities therein, and in response may act out recklessly. Rather than being reprimanded for making poor decisions, youth need to learn how to be an adult, and need practice in making wise mind decisions.

Summary

Mindfulness entails being fully aware of the present moment as much as possible. Grasping the concept of mindfulness is essential for enhanced application of the skills learned in DBT; however there are many barriers involved, such as developmental and societal issues, and the complicated nature of mindfulness. Linehan's (1993) "What" skills, Observe, Describe, and Participate, provide three simple steps to becoming mindful, and her concept of "Wise Mind" enables youth to gain insight into the way extreme states of mind driven solely by reason or emotion affect us and others in certain situations. Next month's column will continue to examine this topic, focusing on the second half of mindfulness; the "How" skills.

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