

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

Last month this series focused on the first three steps of mindfulness within the Dialectic Behavior Therapy (DBT) model: the “What” skills (Linehan, 1993). These three steps to mindfulness (Observe, Describe, and Participate) are challenging for most of us, requiring much dedication to practice before we can achieve mastery. However, the way in which we practice these “What” skills is equally as important, and equally as challenging for clinicians to teach clients. The remaining discussion of mindfulness will explore the three additional “How” skills according to Linehan’s DBT model, with a focus on the use of story-telling to enhance adolescent’s understanding of these steps.

Revisiting Mindfulness

As discussed last month, 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). This definition encompasses all of the components of the DBT approach to mindfulness, emphasizing both the “What” and the “How” skills described by Linehan (1993). The “What” skills of DBT require one to center him/herself in the present by increasing awareness, however mastering these steps is only half the battle, as it is just as much how we do this that determines what we gain from mindful experiences. It is the “How” skills of DBT that help us to gain the non-judgmental acceptance of one’s experiences described by Bishop, et al.

The “How” skills

All three of the “How” skills are meant to be applied to each of the three “What” skills; Observe, Describe, and Participate (See Table #1). The importance of the “How” skills cannot be overstated, in that they determine the quality of mindfulness, however sometimes youth are able to grasp the “What” skills more easily than the “How” skills, making it challenging for clinicians to maintain youth’s attention during the second half of these lessons.

With any age group, metaphors can be a valuable tool for explaining the importance of mastering the “How” skills. For example, a good while back the concept of spending “quality time” with kids became popular in the media. Rather than spending a day with children where one is doing work, chores and running errands, parents were encouraged to focus on their children during family time. Most of us can understand how it would be better to spend one hour of focused one-on-one time with our children, than a weekend of multi-tasking while our children accompany us.

With youth, age-appropriate metaphors, quotations and stories can be even more powerful to help them grasp difficult concepts, with the added benefit of honing their abstract thinking abilities. Aesop’s fables, well-known stories geared toward helping youth find their moral compass, are stories that are not only fun to discuss, but have multiple interpretations and meanings, assisting youth in learning to be open to other perspectives of events and situations (adopting a dialectic worldview). The following Aesop’s fable (Barnes-Murphy & Barnes-Murphy, 1994) can be used to reinforce the value of the “How” skills:

THE BUNDLE OF STICKS AT SEA



Some travelers interrupted their journey to look out to sea at what they took to be a great ship. As it sailed slowly inland, the travelers agreed that it was, in fact, not a ship but a boat. They watched as it gradually drifted onto the beach and saw that they had been wrong again. Disappointed, they complained to one another, "We have wasted all this time watching a bundle of sticks."

Illustration #1: Aesop's fable as illustrated and interpreted by Barnes-Murphy & Barnes-Murphy (1994)

Although there are always multiple interpretations to artistic expression, this fable may be used to illustrate the idea of observing, describing and participating in a judgmental and ineffective way, or in a way that makes our situation more problematic. Suppose I am practicing observing my thoughts and then I decide, "I must be an awful person to have such selfish thoughts". In this case, observing may become a hindrance rather than a benefit. Perhaps that is why the first of the "how" skills we teach is to observe non-judgmentally.

Non-Judgmentally: By nature we are all judgmental, and this is a necessary survival skill. Where would we be if we were unable to judge a dark alley as unsafe? Or if we could not judge food we eat as tasty, smells as offensive, or sensations as soothing? In fact, much of the work we do with adolescents centers on our teaching them to use "good" judgment, helping them to make "better" choices for themselves.

The context of non-judgmental skills in DBT is not to remove all judgment from everything we ever do, but to be non-judgmental in our use of the "What" skills (Linehan, 1993). For example, if we observe our own ideas, and then judge those ideas as better than most people's, we may develop a sense of grandiosity that distances us from others, and detaches ourselves from reality. If we judge ourselves as worse than others, we then develop a low self concept and inaccurate views of ourselves and the world. Similarly, judging our emotions as "good" or "bad", "wrong" or "right", etc., invalidates ourselves, making it difficult for us to tolerate emotions and ultimately, to work through them.

The value of taking a non-judgmental stance is difficult to convince adolescents of. By nature they can be harshly critical of themselves and others, and have difficulty accepting the concept of "all men are created equal". The following fable is useful in helping them explore the idea of yin and yang, and the dialectic that all human beings are intrinsically "good" and "bad" at the same time:

THE TWO BAGS



Every man has two bags around his neck, one slung over his chest and the other over his back. Each bag is full of human faults. The bag in front of the man, in full view, contains the faults of others, while the bag on his back, which is difficult for him to see, contains his own.



Illustration #2: Aesop's fable translated by Barnes-Murphy, & Barnes-Murphy (1994)

Encouraging youth to accept their strengths and their limitations, as well as the strengths and limitations of others is one of the most valuable things we teach in DBT. Among other benefits, this enables youth to increase their self-esteem and sense of control, form and maintain meaningful relationships with others, and face rather than avoid painful emotions and obsessive or distorted thinking.

One-Mindfully: Doing one thing in the moment is another difficult concept within our society, and particularly for adolescents who have multiple physical, emotional, and mental changes happening simultaneously. To illustrate the importance of putting all of our attention on one thing at a time, try an exercise where we are asked to use our senses to attend to different experiences at the same time; such as eating a piece of candy while smelling a candle, watching a video, touching a piece of cloth, and listening to music. It is not possible for us to divide our attention equally among all of these experiences; however we can decide to fully attend to **just** the candy, or **just** the candle, etc.

Youth today are bombarded by information due to the technical advancements of our time, making this another difficult concept to sell. Research on multi-tasking has shown that the more we multi-task, the worse we are at it (Schmid, 2009), and that learning while multi-tasking is not as effective as learning one thing at a time (eSchool News staff and wire service reports, 2006). One-mindfully attending to the moment helps us get the most out of that moment, as the fable below illustrates:

THE LIONESSE

A CONTROVERSY prevailed among the beasts of the field as to which of the animals deserved the most credit for producing the greatest number of whelps at a birth. They rushed clamorously into the presence of the Lioness and demanded of her the settlement of the dispute. "And you," they said, "how many sons have you at a birth?"

The Lioness laughed at them, and said: "Why! I have only one; but that one is altogether a thoroughbred Lion."

--Translated by Townsend (1999)

We can interpret this fable as emphasizing the concept of quality not quantity. While we can feel good about doing many things in a day, or striving to multi-task every moment of every day, it is truly those of us who can appreciate one thing fully that benefit the most.

Effectively: According to Dictionary.com (2010), being effective means that we are "producing the intended or expected result". As described earlier, the intention of each of these steps is not that we simply observe without describing, or that we stop judging entirely in order to be healthy. Ultimately, it's not just mastering all of the steps involved in mindfulness, but being mindful in a way that fits each unique moment. Putting all of the "What" and "How" skills together means that we are being effective.

Pulling together all of our energy and centering ourselves in the moment makes us one with the moment (Linehan, 1993). When we are one with the moment, we are the most effective in our current situation, doing just what is called for in that moment; no more and no less. The following fable can be interpreted as a warning against what happens when we are not fully grounded in the moment:

The Kites and the Swans

THE KITES of olden times, as well as the Swans, had the privilege of song. But having heard the neigh of the horse, they were so enchanted with the sound, that they tried to imitate it; and, in trying to neigh, they forgot how to sing.

---Translated by Townsend (1999)

Being effective is the ultimate goal for youth. We want them to be in control of their emotions, thoughts, and reactions, rather than coming to believe that they are powerless over themselves. Being one in the moment means that we do not allow ourselves to respond to extraneous influences that are not relevant to that current moment, rather that we are meeting that moment's needs as effectively as possible.

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), and "How" skills (Non-judgmentally, One-mindfully, and Effectively), are intended to assist individuals in living fully in the moment, and making "Wise mind" (See last month's column) decisions. Although the concept of mindfulness may seem too abstract for a young mind to comprehend, adolescents can learn to become more mindful through the use of metaphor, stories, or allegories such as Aesop's fables. The next two columns will focus on another module of DBT: Distress Tolerance.

Table #1: Applying the “What” and the “How” Skills of Mindfulness.

“What” Skills	“How” Skills
Observe	Non-judgmentally
	One-Mindfully
	Effectively
Describe	Non-judgmentally
	One-Mindfully
	Effectively
Participate	Non-judgmentally
	One-Mindfully
	Effectively

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