DBT Skills for Everyday Wellbeing

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK SELF-HELP SERIES



DBT Skills for Everyday Wellbeing

A twelve-module skills training programme based on dialectical behavioural therapy

A self-help workbook · 12 modules · about 12 weeks

TALKING THERAPIES UK

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First edition, 2026.

This workbook accompanies the DBT Skills for Everyday Wellbeing programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. Its text is drawn from the programme and is kept current with it: whenever the programme changes, the workbook is set again.

Revision 9. This printing was set on 8 November 2026 from the programme as it stood that day.

A note on using this workbook. It offers self-help based on established psychological approaches for difficulties of mild to moderate severity. It is not a substitute for assessment or treatment by a qualified professional and is not designed for use in a crisis. The examples in it are fictional; no real person appears in them. If you are worried about your safety, or your difficulties are getting worse, the page headed “When self-help is not enough” says where to turn.

Set in Poppins and Roboto, the Talking Therapies UK typefaces.

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How to use this workbook

Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based therapeutic approach developed in the 1980s by the American psychologist Marsha Linehan, originally for the treatment of chronic suicidality and what was then called Borderline Personality Disorder. In the four decades since, DBT has become one of the most widely used and rigorously researched skills-based therapies in mental health, applied across a much wider range of difficulties including emotion dysregulation, eating disorders, substance use, and the relational instability that comes with intense emotional experience. The 'dialectical' part of the name describes the central principle: that change and acceptance are not opposites but complementary movements that have to operate together. You learn to accept yourself and your experience as it currently is, while simultaneously working to change the patterns that are causing suffering. Neither acceptance without change nor change without acceptance produces sustained improvement; the dialectic of both is what does the work. The DBT Skills for Everyday Wellbeing programme teaches the four core skill domains of standard DBT across twelve structured modules. Mindfulness is the foundation, taught first and woven through everything that follows. You learn to observe your experience without immediately reacting, to describe what is actually happening rather than what your mind tells you is happening, and to participate fully in the present moment rather than getting lost in worry about the future or rumination about the past. Mindfulness in DBT is practical and skill-based, not contemplative; it is the capacity that makes every other skill workable. Distress tolerance is the set of skills for surviving difficult moments without making them worse. When something has happened that you cannot immediately change and the urge is to act in ways that will create new problems, distress tolerance skills give you ways to ride through the intensity until it passes. The skills include paced breathing, intense exercise, sensory grounding, and the structured practice of radical acceptance for situations that cannot be changed. Interpersonal effectiveness is the set of skills for handling relationships skilfully: asking for what you need, declining what you do not want, maintaining the relationship while doing both, and preserving your self-respect in the process. The DBT scripts (DEAR MAN for requests, GIVE for relationship maintenance, FAST for self-respect) give you reproducible structures for difficult conversations that often have to happen in moments of high emotion. Emotion regulation addresses the underlying drivers of emotional reactivity: the physical foundations such as sleep, eating, movement, medication, and mood-altering substances, the cognitive patterns that intensify emotions, and the behavioural actions that either ride emotions out or amplify them. You learn to identify and name emotions accurately, to reduce vulnerability to intense emotional states, and to act opposite to the urge when the urge is not aligned with the life you want. What you will work on. The twelve modules cycle through the four domains in a deliberate sequence: mindfulness first to build the foundation, then distress tolerance for the surface-level survival skills, then interpersonal effectiveness for asking, refusing and keeping relationships in good order, and finally emotion regulation for the underlying patterns, ending with a plan to keep the skills in use. Each module includes structured psychoeducation, specific exercises to practise between modules, and diary-card-style tracking that lets you see your patterns over time. Who this is for. The programme is for adults whose lives are affected by emotional intensity: people whose feelings arrive faster and harder than they can manage, people whose relationships are repeatedly destabilised by emotional reactivity, people who respond to

distress in ways that create further difficulty such as impulsive decisions, substance use, withdrawal, or eruptions, and people who want a structured skills-based approach rather than open-ended talk therapy. The limits of self-paced DBT. The full DBT model includes a weekly individual therapist, a weekly skills group, and between-session phone coaching. This self-paced programme covers the skills curriculum component of that model, which is real and substantial work, but it is not a substitute for full DBT delivered with clinical support. If you are in active crisis, experiencing frequent self-harm, or living with severe emotional dysregulation that has not responded to other treatment, a referral for full DBT through your GP or community mental health team is the more appropriate route. The programme is positioned as an excellent starting place for emotion-regulation work, a useful adjunct to therapy already under way, or a preparation for fuller DBT engagement.

This workbook is the written form of the DBT Skills for Everyday Wellbeing programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. It follows the programme module by module: each part of the book is one module, and each chapter is one piece of the module's teaching, set in the order the programme presents it.

Read the chapters of a part in order, then turn to the worksheets that follow them. The worksheets are the part of the work that changes things, so give them the time they ask for and come back to them as the weeks go on. You may copy or print the worksheets for your own use, as often as you need.

Most people work through one module a week, which takes the whole programme about 12 weeks. Go at the pace that suits you: a module done properly is worth more than two done quickly.

The check-in questionnaires let you see how things are changing. Complete each one when you reach it, note the date and your total, and compare it with the last.

When self-help is not enough

- If you are in danger now, or have seriously harmed yourself, call 999 or go to your nearest accident and emergency department.
- If you need help urgently but it is not an emergency, call NHS 111 or contact your GP surgery.
- Samaritans are there day and night, every day of the year: call 116 123 free from any phone.
- If you would rather not talk, text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential support at any hour.
- If your difficulties are getting worse as you work through this book, or you find yourself thinking about ending your life, stop and speak to your GP or a mental health professional. A workbook can be a good start, and some difficulties need more help than a book can give.

What this workbook will help you to do

- By the end of this module you will:
- Understand what dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) is and how the skills approach differs from traditional therapy
- Have a working understanding of the dialectic, the central idea that holds the whole programme together
- Know the biosocial theory of emotional intensity and how it explains the difficulty without

blaming the person

- Have a clear sense of the four skill sets and how they work together
- Have set personal goals for what you want to be different by the end of the twelve weeks
- Understand the three states of mind in DBT and recognise them in your own experience
- Know what Wise Mind is and how it differs from suppressing emotion or overriding reason
- Have a working sense of how to access Wise Mind when you need it
- Have begun to track which state of mind you tend to default into under stress

PART 1

Welcome to DBT Skills

What DBT is, why these skills work, and what the next twelve weeks will cover

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to DBT skills

Welcome. Choosing to start a structured twelve-week skills programme is itself a meaningful step, and the fact that you are here matters. The work that follows is real work, but it is doable, and the skills you will learn have helped many thousands of people change their relationship with emotional intensity.

Dialectical behavioural therapy, usually shortened to DBT, was developed in the late 1980s by the American psychologist Dr Marsha Linehan. She had originally trained in cognitive behavioural therapy and was working with clients whose emotional intensity made standard CBT extremely difficult to deliver. Many of her clients responded to change-focused interventions with the perfectly understandable feeling that their experiences were being dismissed; the gap between how impossible their lives felt and the calm rationality of the techniques they were being offered was simply too wide. Out of years of clinical work and research, Dr Linehan developed an approach that holds two things together at once: the validation of what the client is experiencing as making sense, and the active teaching of skills that can change it. That dual stance is the dialectic, and it is the foundation of everything that follows.

How this programme works

This is a twelve-module programme with a recommended pace of one module per week. You set the actual rhythm. Some people work faster, especially in the early modules. Others sit with a particular skill for two or three weeks before moving on, particularly when life is busy or the skill is one they want to embed properly before introducing the next. The skills work cumulatively; later modules assume the earlier skills are at least familiar to you, but there is no penalty for taking longer.

Each module is a self-contained piece of learning organised around the same five-block structure that the rest of the platform uses.

- Introduction orientates you to what the module covers and why
- Psychoeducation is the core teaching content
- Exercises give you something concrete to practise
- Reflection prompts connect the material to your own life
- Summary wraps up and points to what is next

The platform tracks your progress automatically; you can pause and pick up where you left off, and you can revisit any module at any time during your access window of twenty-four weeks.

A NOTE

If you are in crisis right now, this programme is not the right place to start. Please contact:

- Samaritans on 116 123 (free, 24 hours, every day)
- NHS 111 (option 2 for mental health) for urgent support
- Your GP for a medical assessment
- 999 if you are in immediate danger

The skills can wait. Your safety cannot. You can return to the programme when things feel more stable, and the work you do then will be more useful than work done in crisis.

Skills, not just understanding

The biggest single shift to make in approaching DBT is this: the skills only work when you practise them. Reading about mindfulness will not make you mindful. Knowing that opposite action changes emotions does not mean you will remember to use it when you are angry. The skills become useful through repeated practice, often in low-stakes situations first, until they are available to you when you most need them. Each module ends with a small piece of practice that runs across the week before the next module. Doing that practice is the difference between a programme you read and a programme that changes how you live.

Take your time. The work you do here is for you, and the value comes from the engagement, not from finishing quickly.

CHAPTER 2

The dialectic: holding two things at once

The word ‘dialectic’ has a long history in philosophy, going back to ancient Greek thinkers and developed further by the German philosopher Hegel. In its DBT-relevant form it is much simpler than the philosophical heritage suggests. A dialectic is the holding of two apparently opposing truths at the same time, recognising that both are valid and that the tension between them is generative rather than something to be resolved by picking a side.

The central dialectic of DBT is the holding of acceptance and change. Standard CBT and most behavioural therapies are change-focused; they identify the problem and apply techniques to change it. Many forms of supportive counselling are acceptance-focused; they hold space for the experience without trying to alter it. DBT does both at once. It says: what you are experiencing makes sense given your history, your biology, and your circumstances, and at the same time, you can learn skills that will change how this goes. Neither alone is enough. Pure change without acceptance feels invalidating and creates resistance. Pure acceptance without change leaves the person stuck in a life that is causing them suffering.

A NOTE

The dialectic in plain language. I am doing the best I can in this moment, and I can learn to do better. Both things are true at the same time.

This dual stance is woven through every skill in the programme. Distress tolerance skills accept that some pain is unavoidable, and at the same time give you ways to get through painful moments without making them worse. Emotion regulation skills accept that emotions are valid responses to circumstances, and at the same time teach techniques for changing emotional responses that are no longer serving you. Interpersonal effectiveness skills accept that relationships involve real conflicts of needs, and at the same time give you structured ways to navigate those conflicts that protect both the relationship and your own self-respect.

Why this matters for self-help

When you work through self-help material it is easy to slip into one or other half of the dialectic and lose the tension. People who lean towards self-criticism tend to read change-focused material as a list of additional ways they are failing; the very techniques designed to help become evidence of inadequacy. People who lean towards resignation tend to read acceptance-focused material as permission to stay where they are; the validation becomes a reason not to act. Holding the dialectic across the twelve weeks is a deliberate act. As you work through this programme, try to notice when you are leaning entirely into one side or the other, and gently bring the other side back into view.

A client who has been struggling with emotional reactivity in their relationship reads the chapter on opposite action and immediately feels that they have been doing it wrong all along, that their emotional reactions are weaknesses to be overcome. The dialectic correction is to add the other

half: the emotional reactions made sense given the situation as it was experienced, and there are skills that will reduce the reactivity going forward. Both true. Either alone is incomplete.

The dialectic also points to a particular kind of patience the programme asks of you. Skills change is gradual. Weeks where you feel competent are followed by weeks where you feel you have lost the thread, and the skills feel as if they have stopped working. This is normal. The cumulative effect of twelve weeks of practice is substantial even if individual weeks do not feel transformative. Trust the process; keep practising even when you feel discouraged; and try to extend to yourself the same dialectical generosity that the programme is asking you to extend to others.