

## Dialectical Behavior Therapy with Couples

Alan E. Fruzzetti, Ph.D.  
Department of Psychology  
University of Nevada

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### Why extend DBT to couples?

Almost everyone “knows” how to communicate effectively & constructively...at least when not in the middle of an argument.

What happens?  
What gets in the way?

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What is this  
process?

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## Emotion Dysregulation

- Person focuses on immediate reduction of aversive tension or negative emotional arousal (regardless of consequences)
- Most often occurs in the context of important relationships
- Behavior is reactive, often impulsive
- Either attacking or withdrawing in the relationship
- *May or may not* appear highly distressed
- Dysregulation ≠ being upset

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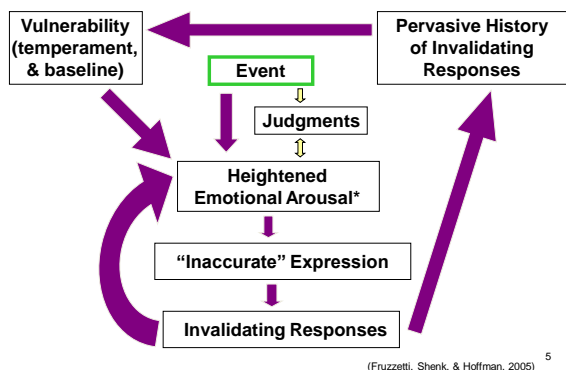
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## Transactional Model for Emotion Dysregulation




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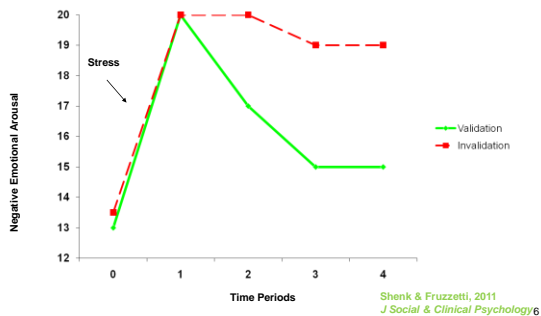
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## Validating vs. Invalidating Responses




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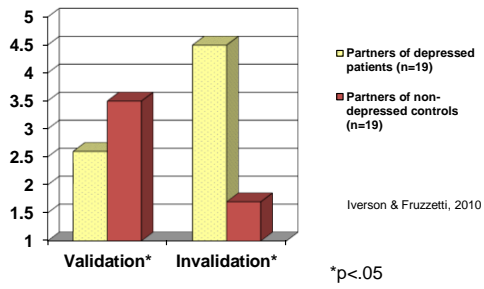
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### Partner Responses to Depressed Patients



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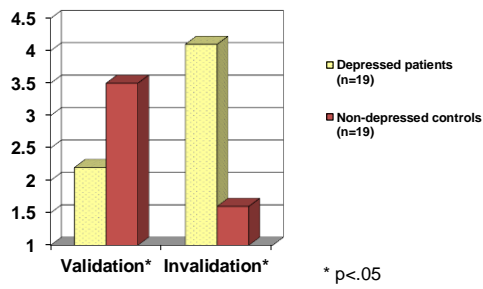
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### Depressed Patient Responses to Their Partners



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### Pilot Study: Outcomes for Distressed Couples

Fruzzetti, A. E. & Mosco, E. (2011).

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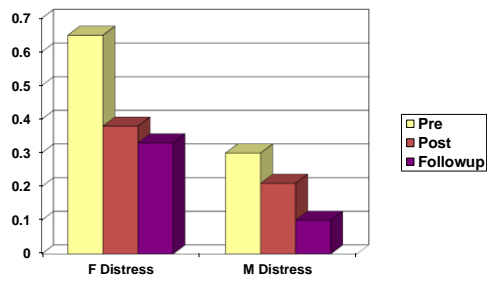
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### Individual Distress (BSI)



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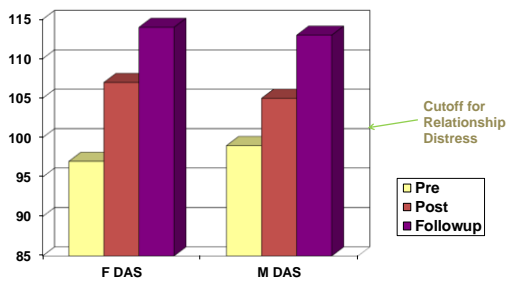
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### Relationship Satisfaction



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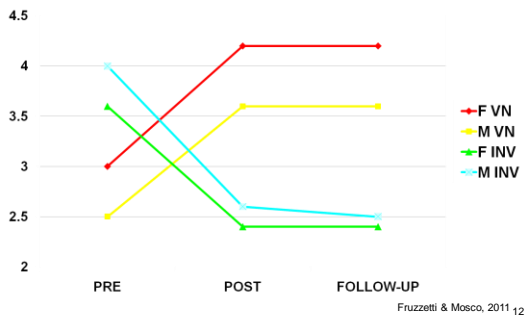
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### Changes in Validating and Invalidating Responses



Fruzzetti & Mosco, 2011 12

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## Interventions

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### Intervention Target Hierarchy:

1. Establish safety\*
2. Identify and reduce invalidation\*\*
3. Rebuild relationships
4. Increase accurate expression
5. Increase validation
6. Problem management
7. Transform conflict into closeness
8. Acceptance & engagement

\*After orienting & committing to treatment

\*\*Skill building, psychoeducation are ongoing

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## Treatment Modes

- Couple Therapy
- Couple Group
- Family Connections (may be mixed group)
- Multi-Family
- Combination of group program *plus* ongoing couple/family therapy
- May co-occur with individual treatment or stand alone

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## Therapist Strategies

- Dialectical
  - Assessment: What is missing
  - Thinking: Both/And (rather than either/or)
  - Synthesize polarizations
  - Acceptance AND Change
  - Communication style (e.g., warm & confrontive)
  - Metaphors and stories
  - Reason AND emotion
- Acceptance and validation
- Change and problem solving (push)

Fruzzetti & Fruzzetti, 2009 16

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## Multimodal Assessment of Families

- Self-report
  - pre/post treatment battery
  - daily/weekly monitoring (diary cards)
    - make assessment match targets
- Therapist Observation in Session
- Video/audio Samples
  - formal coding
  - informal target identification informed by coding
- Chain Analysis

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## Step 1: Establish safety

- Eliminate violence & aggression
- Remove reinforcers for suicidal behavior

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## Violence & Aggression

- Physical Aggression
- Sexual Aggression
- Damage to Property or Pets
- Threats of Aggression

See Fruzzetti & Levensky, 2000

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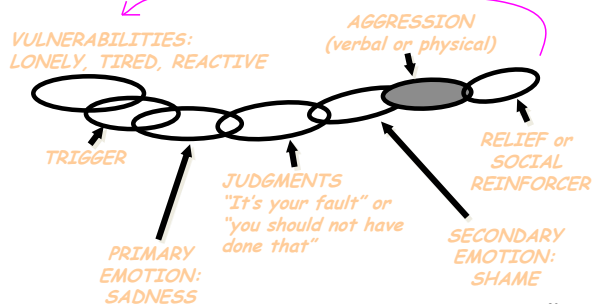
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## Chain Analysis



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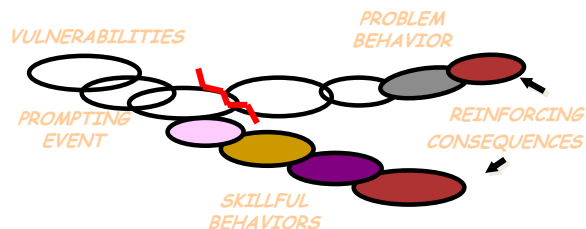
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## Changing Behavior & Breaking the Old Pattern



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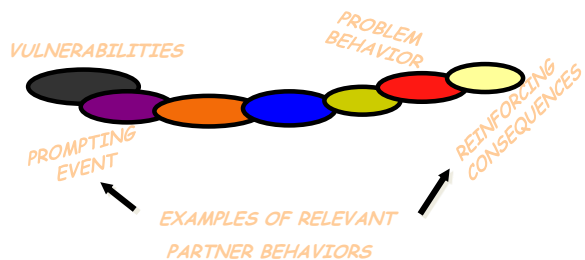
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How are partners, parents relevant?



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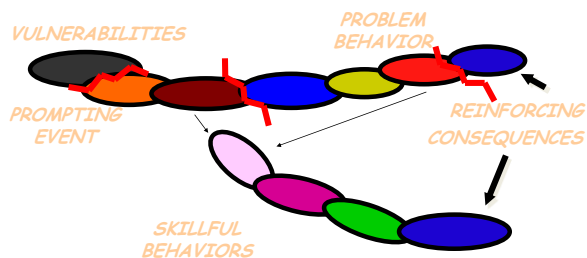
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Changing Behavior &  
Breaking the Old Pattern



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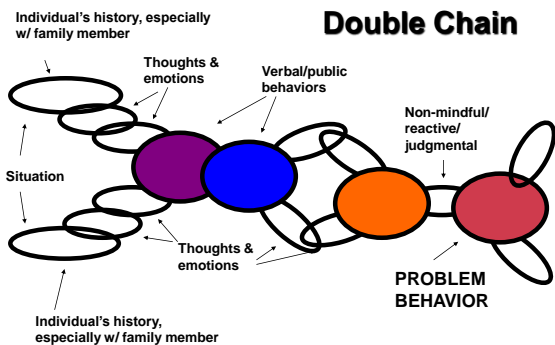
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## Psychoeducation and Skill Building are Ongoing

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## Psychoeducation

- Emotion dysregulation/BPD and beyond
- Transactional model
- No blame
- Reciprocal/dialectical balance
- Description vs. judgment (mindfulness)
- Role of accurate expression
- Role of validating & invalidating responses
- Family skills needed

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## Orienting

- Emotion dysregulation
- Transactional model
- No blame
- Reciprocal/dialectical balance
- Role of accurate expression
- Role of validating & invalidating responses vis-à-vis emotion, accurate expression
- Family skill approach
- Expectations for participation

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Balance in Relationships  
We are linked, like it or not:

What I do ← → What you do

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### Primary Polarities

- Acceptance vs. Change
- One person's desires/goals vs. Another's
- Nurturance vs. limit setting
- Individual behavior  
vs. Relationship behavior
- Individual dysfunction & psychopathology  
vs. Relationship dysfunction
- Autonomy vs. Intimacy

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### Teach Family Skills

- Mindfulness
- Accurate Expression
- Relationship Mindfulness
- Relationship Activation
- Validation
- Problem Management
- Acceptance & Closeness
- Parenting

(see Fruzzetti, 2006)

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Step 2:  
Reduce invalidating  
responses using  
mindfulness skills  
(stop making things worse)

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What gets in the way?

- Self-righteousness (judgments)
- High reactivity or high negative emotional arousal (dysregulation)
- Inability to accept reality
- Attacks and withdrawal negatively reinforced
- Social reinforcers for destructive behaviors (judgments, self-righteousness, inflexibility, nasty attacks on partner may be supported by friends, family of origin)

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Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict

- Destructive
  - Judgmental; criticism broad
  - Me vs. you (win vs. lose)
  - Invalidate emotions, wants, opinions of partner
  - Loss of closeness, companionship, etc.
- Constructive
  - Non-judgmental; criticism narrow
  - Work together toward common goals (win/win)
  - Validate emotions, wants, opinions, of partner
  - Increased understanding, closeness, companionship, etc.

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### Awareness of Self and Others: Mindfulness and Relationship Mindfulness

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### Relationship Mindfulness, applied

- Being aware of longer-term relationship goals and desires (as parent, partner, friend, child, etc.)
- Experiencing oneself in the context of the other, and the other in the context of oneself
- Acting from this context effectively
- Extension of both Mindfulness and Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills from Individual DBT

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### Primary and Secondary Emotions

- Primary emotions: initial response, normative, typically adaptive, effective
- Secondary emotions: emotional response to primary emotion itself; through over-learning, secondary emotional responses may even become a problematic initial emotional response; escape/avoidance
- Goal or strategy: treat primary emotions; ignore/refocus away from secondary emotions

Fruzzetti, et al. (2009) 36

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### Secondary Emotional Reactions

Sadness  
Fear  
Guilt    **→**    **Judgment**    **→**    **Anger**  
Jealously  
etc.

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### Emotion Self-Management I

- Awareness of rising emotional arousal
- Mindfulness (let go of judgments)
- Notice anger...treat it as a signal
- Label the *PRIMARY* emotion accurately
- "Treat" the primary emotion
  - emotion self-validation
  - acceptance or change: situation, emotion
- Reduce vulnerabilities to dysregulation
- Inhibit ineffective responding

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Anger is corrosive in relationships,  
even when justified.

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### Emotion Self-Management II

- Distress Tolerance
  - Distraction
  - Self-soothing
- Build cues for different emotion
  - Condition a chair, window, etc.
  - Build a "relationship box"
- Allow the emotion (acceptance)
- Activation to balance or change emotion
- Seek support for being balanced
- Avoid "intimacy through bitching"

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### Step 3: Rebuild relationships (relationship reactivation)

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### Reverse the Balance of Positive and Negative Interactions

Increase non-negative time together:

- Conditioning positive emotion (exposure, letting go of negative emotion)
- Being more "together" when together
- Being "together" even when apart

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### Domains of Relationships

- Companionship
- Comfort and support
- Recreational and leisure activities
- Intellect and ideas
- Tasks and chores
- Doing things together (alone or with others)
- Spiritual and religious activities
- Parenting
- Emotional closeness
- Sex and affection
- Supporting each other's autonomy

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### Step 4: Accurate expression

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Accurate expression includes the  
expression of *primary* emotions

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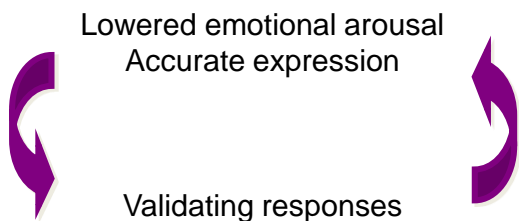
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### Step 5: Validate

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### Identifying Invalidating Responses

- Validating
  - 1. Paying attention; relationship mindfulness
  - 2. Acknowledging & describing
  - 3. Benefit of the doubt; asking questions
  - 4. Normalize (“of course”) the normative
  - 5. Respectful, not condescending
  - 6. “Positive” control strategies dominate
- Invalidating
  - 1. Not paying attention; closed
  - 2. Judgmental, minimizing
  - 3. Assume the worst; lack of interest
  - 4. Invalidate the normatively valid
  - 5. Condescending, disrespectful
  - 6. “Aversive” control strategies dominate

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### Verbal Validating Responses

- Listening, paying attention
- Acknowledging the other's point of view, experience
- Working to understand; asking questions, making hypotheses
- Understanding his/her problems in context
- Normalizing his/her responses when they are normative ("of course")
- Extending, matching with your own vulnerability

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### More on Validating Responses

- Validate the valid things...often
- Sometimes, we can invalidate invalid things (if we validate the valid things first)
  
- Try hard not to:
  - Invalidate valid things
  - Validate invalid things

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Even in difficult situations, or with  
very problematic behavior,  
something valid can be found

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### Other validating responses

- Functional validation: do what's needed in the moment
- Soothing your partner
  - Problems and emotions outside the relationships
  - Problems and emotions in your relationship

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### Step 6: Manage conflict, solve problems

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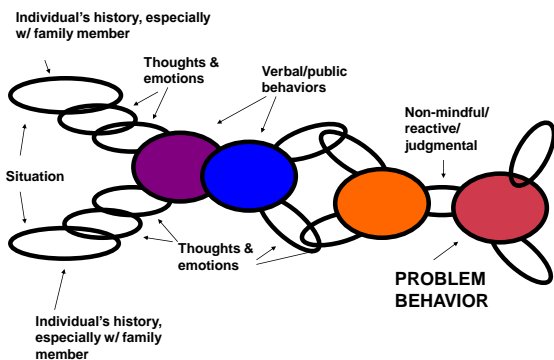
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Step 7: Transform conflict into  
negotiation and closeness

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Destructive conflict and lack of  
closeness are both consequences of  
non-acceptance (lack of relationship  
mindfulness)

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After Invalidation: Recovery,  
Not Revenge...Closeness Instead

- Review
- Mindfulness (goals, awareness, non-judgmental, descriptive)
- Relationship mindfulness
- Self-validation (primary emotion)
- Self-soothing
- Accurate expression
- Repair (if needed)
- Validation "Rule of 3"

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Step 8:  
Increase acceptance of the other  
person, including the very  
behavior that drives you crazy  
(reduce suffering and  
engage your life)

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### Acceptance & Closeness Skills

- *Behavioral tolerance*: cease & desist
- *Problem/pattern mindfulness*: awareness of how attention to the problem creates a context for less-than-optimal relationship functioning
  - Grieving is necessary to go to next step
- *Synthesis*: true radical acceptance through recontextualization and practice

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“If we are peaceful ... everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace. This capacity of waking up, of being aware of what is going on in your feelings, in your body, in your perceptions, in the world, is ... the capacity of understanding and loving.

“It is with our capacity of [acceptance] and *being* peace that we can make peace.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh

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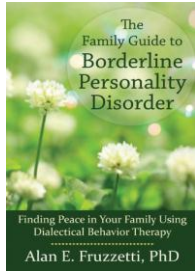
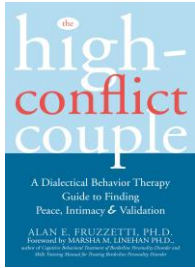
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### Family Education and Skills



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Prof. Alan E. Fruzzetti  
Director Dialectical Behavior  
Therapy and Research Program

Department of Psychology 298  
University of Nevada  
Reno, Nevada 89557-0062 USA  
aef@unr.edu

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