Dialectical Behavior Therapy with Couples

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

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?

Couple/Relationship Distress

Individual Distress & Psychopathology

What is this process?
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

**Transactional Model for Emotion Dysregulation**

Vulnerability (temperament, & baseline) → Event → Pervasive History of Invalidating Responses → Judgments → Heightened Emotional Arousal* → “Inaccurate” Expression → InValidating Responses

(Fruzzetti, Shenk, & Hoffman, 2005)

**Validating vs. Invalidating Responses**

Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011

*J Social & Clinical Psychology*
Partner Responses to Depressed Patients

- Partners of depressed patients (n=19)
- Partners of non-depressed controls (n=19)

Iverson & Fruzzetti, 2010

*p<.05

Depressed Patient Responses to Their Partners

- Depressed patients (n=19)
- Non-depressed controls (n=19)

Pilot Study: Outcomes for Distressed Couples

Individual Distress (BSI)

Relationship Satisfaction

Changes in Validating and Invalidating Responses

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Interventions

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

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
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)

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

Step 1: Establish safety

- Eliminate violence & aggression
- Remove reinforcers for suicidal behavior
Violence & Aggression

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

See Fruzzetti & Levensky, 2000

Chain Analysis

VULNERABILITIES: LONELY, TIRED, REACTIVE

AGGRESSION (verbal or physical)

TRIGGER

JUDGMENTS "It's your fault" or "you should not have done that"

PRIMARY EMOTION: SADNESS

RELIEF or SOCIAL REINFORCER

SECONDARY EMOTION: SHAME

Changing Behavior & Breaking the Old Pattern

VULNERABILITIES

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

PROMPTING EVENT

REINFORCING CONSEQUENCES

SKILLFUL BEHAVIORS
How are partners, parents relevant?

Changing Behavior & Breaking the Old Pattern

Double Chain
Psychoeducation and Skill Building are Ongoing

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

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

What I do ← → What you do

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

Teach Family Skills
• Mindfulness
• Accurate Expression
• Relationship Mindfulness
• Relationship Activation
• Validation
• Problem Management
• Acceptance & Closeness
• Parenting
(see Fruzzetti, 2006)
Step 2: Reduce invalidating responses using mindfulness skills (stop making things worse)

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)

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.
Awareness of Self and Others: Mindfulness and Relationship Mindfulness

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

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)
Secondary Emotional Reactions

Sadness  
Fear  
Guilt  
Jealously  
etc.

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

Anger is corrosive in relationships, even when justified.
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”

Step 3:
Rebuild relationships
(relationship reactivation)

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
## 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

## Step 4:

### Accurate expression

Accurate expression includes the expression of *primary* emotions
Lowered emotional arousal
Accurate expression

Validating responses

Step 5: Validate

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
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

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

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

Step 6: Manage conflict, solve problems
Step 7: Transform conflict into negotiation and closeness

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

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

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

“If we are peaceful … everyone in our family, our 
environmental 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
Family Education and Skills

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