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COVID-19: Building Skillful Clients Using a DBT Model

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During a time of crisis, like the pandemic we are experiencing, many of us just metaphorically hold our breath waiting for it to end. For a short time we may be successful but as the crisis lengthens it becomes more important to learn the skills needed to manage our distress. Those clients whom we have been working with prior to COVID – 19 will most likely be experiencing their initial symptoms more strongly. If they were experiencing anxiety and despair then likely this added layer will exacerbate these feelings. Our goal, as therapists, should be helping clients grow through adversity not just weather it. That being said, for some clients, weathering the storm (using distress tolerance) without acting out on their feelings is growth. So the first step is setting a goal with your client for treatment during this time. Is it more important to gain skills in tolerating distress? Or managing emotions? Or being mindful?

This will help both you and your client to avoid the trap of focusing solely on what is happening in the world to the exclusion of how they may be able to learn through it.

In order to manage any crisis we first have to Radically Accept it. If the directive is to stay at home and practice social distancing and your client is railing against this, protesting “It’s not fair”, “Why do I have to do this?” then they are not accepting reality as it is. This creates a greater level of stress for your client, more intense emotions and then maladaptive coping. The skill of Radical Acceptance is a difficult one and acceptance is often incorrectly equated with approval which makes it more difficult. We need to help our client to accept the fact that at the current moment this is my reality without judging it as good or bad. If they are able to use this skill it will decrease their emotional level and aid them in making more reasoned decisions about their actions. It is easy, I think, to see how this skill would translate to the original issues that brought your client into treatment.



Another skill to teach and practice with your client is that of Mindfulness, which focuses on Staying in the Moment through various grounding techniques. It is difficult for all of us not to anticipate, especially when the anticipation is tinged with fear of what is coming next. I am sure that many of us, both therapist and client, have experienced this more than once over the past few months. However, when this is superimposed on already existing anxiety and depression the anticipation often turns into catastrophizing. Mindfulness helps by teaching us to use our senses to stay in the right now. Focusing on breath is one of the easiest ways to begin to learn this skill but when someone has frightening thoughts racing through their brain this can be very challenging. Sometimes it is more helpful, then, to practice mindfulness in a more active fashion such as taking a walk and noticing the feeling of the grass or identifying all the different colors around.

Although I have focused on two skills there are many other skills that DBT offers. I would recommend looking into others as we continue to support our clients through their different levels of crises at this time.