



Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)

Explains what DBT is, what problems it can help with, what sessions are like and how to access treatment.

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What is DBT?

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is a type of [talking therapy](#). It's based on [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#), but it's specially adapted for people who feel emotions very intensely.

The aim of DBT is to help you:

- understand and accept your difficult feelings
- learn skills to manage them
- become able to make positive changes in your life.

'Dialectical' means trying to understand how two things that seem opposite could both be true. For example, accepting yourself and changing your behaviour might feel contradictory. But DBT teaches that it's possible for you to achieve both these goals together.

"Before DBT, I felt like the only solution was suicide... through learning various skills from DBT I can ride the waves of my depression rather than letting them swallow me."

What's the difference between DBT and CBT?

- [CBT](#) focuses on helping you to change unhelpful ways of thinking and behaving.
- [DBT](#) does this too, but it differs from CBT in that it also focuses on accepting who you are at the same time. DBT also usually involves more group work than CBT. A DBT therapist will expect and encourage you to work hard to make positive changes.

What can DBT treat?

Research shows that DBT can be helpful in tackling problems like:

- [self-harming](#)
- [suicide attempts](#)
- [depression](#).

It was originally developed for [borderline personality disorder \(BPD\)](#), so most of the evidence for it so far has been about treating people with this diagnosis. Some NHS services are also starting to offer DBT for:

- [children and adolescents](#)
- [drug and alcohol problems](#)
- [eating problems](#)
- offending behaviour (committing crimes).

But regardless of your diagnosis or problems, **DBT might not be right for you.**

"After a few months I found that, although how I felt and a lot of my symptoms did not change, I was managing them all so much better. I could actually get through days without a crisis."

DBT is more likely to work for you if:

- you're committed to making positive changes in yourself
- you're ready to work hard at therapy, and do homework assignments
- you're ready to focus mostly on your present and future, rather than your past
- you feel able to do some sessions in a group with others.

Some people like group work, but others find it harder. You might ideally prefer to work with a DBT therapist one-to-one, but unfortunately this is not always offered as an option. Talk to your doctor about what you would find most helpful to see what is available in your area.

It's important to remember that **everyone experiences therapy differently**. See our information on [getting the most from any therapy](#) for more tips, including things to try if you're on a course that isn't working for you.

"I was really nervous about the group aspect of DBT. When I started group I wouldn't speak or make eye contact, but everyone was supportive and by the end I was much more confident and even taught a skill session to the other group members."

What are DBT sessions like?

DBT can vary between different providers and across different areas. But these are the types of sessions that a DBT course usually includes:

DBT pre-treatment

Some therapists may offer you an assessment or pre-treatment phase of DBT. This is where the therapist will look at how suitable DBT is for you. They might offer you several sessions where you

will learn about the DBT model. Then if you decide it is the right therapy for you, they will ask you to make a commitment to the treatment.

Individual therapy

Individual therapy usually involves weekly one-to-one sessions with a DBT therapist. Each session lasts approximately 45–60 minutes.

The individual sessions have a hierarchy of goals:

1. To help keep you safe by reducing [suicidal](#) and [self-harming](#) behaviours.
2. To reduce behaviours that interfere with therapy.
3. To help you reach your goals and improve your quality of life by addressing what's getting in the way. This might be other mental health problems like [depression](#) or [hearing voices](#). Or it might be things in your personal life like employment or relationship problems.
4. To help you learn new skills to replace unhelpful behaviours and help you achieve your goals.

Your DBT therapist is likely to ask you to fill out **diary cards** as homework, and bring them to sessions. This is for you to track your emotions and actions, and look for patterns and triggers in your life. You then use this information to decide together what you will work on in each session. You can find some sample diary cards on the [DBT Self Help website](#).

"I've learned that emotions are not the enemy. They are useful and have functions. I still feel emotions intensely, but I can now identify them and know how to manage them without using harmful behaviours."

Skills training in groups

In these sessions DBT therapists will teach you skills in a group setting. This is not group therapy, but more like a series of teaching sessions.

There are usually two therapists in a group and sessions might be weekly. The room is sometimes arranged like a classroom where your skills trainers will be sat at the front. The aim of these sessions is to teach you skills that you apply to your day-to-day life.

There are typically four skills modules:

- **Mindfulness.** This is a set of skills that focus your attention on the present, rather than worries about the past or the future. You might have a mindfulness module running between other modules. DBT sessions may often also start with a short mindfulness exercise. See our resource on [mindfulness](#) for more information.

- **Distress tolerance.** This means learning to deal with crises without harmful behaviours, like self-harm.
- **Interpersonal effectiveness.** This means learning to ask for things and say no to other people, with respect for yourself and others.
- **Emotion regulation.** This is a set of skills you can use to understand, be more aware, and have more control over your emotions.

In group sessions your therapist might ask you to do **group exercises** and use **role-play**. You are also given **homework** each week to help you practise these skills in your day-to-day life.

Telephone crisis coaching

DBT often uses telephone crisis coaching to support you in your day-to-day life. This means that you can call your therapist for support between sessions. For example:

- when you need help to deal with an immediate crisis (such as feeling suicidal or wanting to self-harm)
- when you are trying to use DBT skills but want some advice on how to do it
- if you need to repair your relationship with your therapist.

But you can expect your therapist to set some clear boundaries around this. For example:

- calls are usually brief
- calls should only take place between hours you agree with them
- in particular circumstances, they might ask you to wait 24 hours before calling them.

"If I had a meltdown or crisis, she'd help me understand what may have contributed."

During sessions DBT therapists will use a balance of acceptance and change techniques.

Acceptance techniques

Acceptance techniques focus on:

- understanding yourself as a person
- making sense of why you might do things such as [self-harm](#) or [misuse drugs](#).

For example, a DBT therapist might suggest that this has been your only way of coping with intense emotions. So even though it's damaging in the long-term, and may alarm other people, your behaviour makes sense.

"Finally someone is saying 'yes it makes sense' rather than 'no that's wrong'."

Change techniques

Change techniques focus on replacing behaviours that harm you with behaviours that help you. This may mean your therapist:

- challenges your unhelpful thoughts
- encourages you to find new ways of dealing with distress.

"It's not a short term thing... you have to work at it every single day. It's hard to do, and even now, some 2 years after I completed the therapy, I'm still having to work at it."

How do I get DBT?

The main ways to seek DBT are through the **NHS** with referral from your doctor or mental health team, or through the **private sector**.

There is currently no official register of DBT therapists in the UK. But some directories may let you filter your search by diagnosis or type of therapy.

For tips on finding a therapist, see our information on [finding a therapist](#).

Unfortunately, many people find that **accessing DBT can be quite difficult**. DBT isn't available everywhere, and NHS waiting lists can be very long. And many of us can't afford to go private.

If you're in this situation, our information on [facing barriers to seeking help](#) has ideas on how to cope.

"I see a future for myself now that I didn't see before the therapy."

Do I have to accept my diagnosis to get DBT?

Because DBT was developed to treat [borderline personality disorder \(BPD\)](#), you might be more likely to be offered DBT if you accept this diagnosis. But [personality disorder is a controversial diagnosis](#). If you don't like the idea of using this term, you're not alone.

It might help to remember that however you understand your problems, DBT could help you manage them.

"I was referred to a Personality Disorder clinic but found out only group DBT is available in this area and the waiting list was approximately 6 months long... I'm left here with no hope of ever receiving individual DBT therapy."

Can I do DBT by myself?

Unlike [CBT](#), it can be difficult to learn DBT techniques by yourself. It can also be overwhelming when you start doing DBT. So doing it by yourself doesn't usually work as well as going to sessions run by trained therapists.

Doing a formal course can help you:

- stay motivated if you feel like giving up
- find situations where you can practise DBT skills
- feel supported and less alone, as others in the group are going through the same process.

But you may be able to find DBT self-help materials available online. This might include diary cards, exercises and behavioural analysis sheets. You could use these to brush up your DBT training alongside or after finishing a formal course. The [DBT Self Help](#) website offers these resources.

"At first it was really tough, and I wondered what the point of it was going to be. Some of the DBT skills seemed silly to me, but I had committed myself to the process and as time passed, it started to make more sense."

You can find out more about DBT on the official DBT website, [BehavioralTech](#).

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- [Helplines](#) – our Infolines provide information and support by phone, email and text.
- [Local Minds](#) – provide face-to-face services across England and Wales. These might be talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- [Side by Side](#) – our supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Other organisations

Behavioral Tech

behavioraltech.org

Official DBT website. Provides information and resources aimed at professionals.

DBT Self Help

dbtselfhelp.com

User-led website. Provides DBT information and resources.

For useful contacts about talking therapies more generally please see our resource on [talking therapies and counselling](#).

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References are available on request.