



# DBT for Psychosis: Distress Tolerance Skills and Interpersonal Effectiveness

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## Introduction

In this segment, Maggie Mullen explains in detail how they teach specific DBT skills related to dialectical thinking, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Maggie teaches clients how to think more dialectically through pros and cons as well as the fact-checking skill, especially with the help of a trusted adult.

In addition, they teach clients to tolerate psychosis-related distress through distraction skills, self-soothing with the 5 senses, and the TIPP acronym. They also teach emotion regulation skills through the ABC PLEASE acronym, which helps clients attend to both body and mind.

Finally, Maggie teaches interpersonal effectiveness through the DEAR MAN acronym, especially by helping clients build up a strong social network, including a robust support system.

## Applying Dialectics to Psychotic Disorders



**Kirby** How do you apply dialectics to this population? Are there any unique challenges?

**Maggie** Often, non-dialectical thinking shows up with distressing thoughts, also known as delusional beliefs. People with psychosis make attempts, as all of us do, to explain unusual experiences.

For example, when I'm talking about a friend and I run into them moments later at the grocery store, I might say to myself, "That was fate," or, "What a fun coincidence." People with psychosis are likely to jump to unusual conclusions quickly and be confident about these ideas.

If they hear the television talking to them, they might automatically think, "I must be a god." This leads to that rigid or what we call non-dialectical thinking in DBT. I help the client soften that belief so it doesn't cause distress.

Sandra might say, "My mom is plotting against me." I might use some distress tolerance skills to examine the pros and cons of whether it's worth holding on to this belief so tightly.

I can use checking the facts from emotion regulation to look for other ways to explain her mother's behavior. If that's too hard to explore because of the client's level of insight, instead we work



on the pros and cons of whether it's worth thinking about things in this way.

We don't need to challenge her belief directly. Instead, we explore it curiously and see what comes out of that process to find a middle path. That's a dialectical way of thinking about things.

## Distress Tolerance and Psychosis



**Kirby** How does distress tolerance look when you work with clients with psychosis?

**Maggie** For people with psychosis, it is important to make any skill accessible, especially distress tolerance. Many people with psychosis struggle with issues like finances, housing, getting their basic needs met. Whatever you offer them, you want to make it cheap or free. Accessibility is key with these skills.

Examples of free or cheap options of distress tolerance are having them take a walk in a park or enjoy a warm cup of coffee. My go-to skills overall with clients with psychosis are things like distraction, self-soothing skills, and TIPP.

Distraction is taking your mind off of what's happening so that you can have the opportunity for your emotions to go from a 9/10 to a 6/10, something that's a little bit more manageable by taking a break from thinking about it. For example, watch a movie and if it's hard to engage, keep the subtitles on. Take a walk. Have a conversation with a friend. Do anything that takes your mind off what's going on.

We can often over-rely on distraction to the point that it becomes avoidance. I tell clients to set an alarm. It's crucial to use the distraction for 30 minutes or 1 hour because if the client ends up binge-watching Netflix for a full day, that has turned into an avoidance strategy.

The next piece is self-soothing. This is using the 5 senses to do things that make you feel soothed, relaxed, or calmed. That is when I come up with unique lists for each of my clients.

There are some things that I recommend to everyone because they're free or cheap. Eating your favorite comfort food is a great example of something soothing for a lot of us. Another soothing activity is listening to your favorite music or talking to a friend on the phone. There are all kinds of ways that we already employ self-soothing. You want to draw on those skills your clients are using.

TIPP is one of my go-to skills for psychosis because it works quickly. There's a lot of value to that for people with psychosis of getting a result quickly so they can integrate that into their routine. TIPP stands for temperature, intense exercise, paced breathing, and paired muscle relaxation.

Temperature is about changing the body's temperature. What you're trying to induce is the mammalian dive reflex. We want the heart rate to get lower so that the client can think, breathe, and function more clearly.

The way we induce that mammalian dive reflex is by putting either our face into a bowl of cold water or putting an ice pack under our eyes, holding our breath, and leaning over for 30-second intervals. People tend to like it because it works quickly.

If that doesn't work, we could move on to intense exercise. You're trying to get your heart rate up and get sweaty by doing any kind of intense exercise. It can be going for a walk or run, doing jumping jacks or pushups, or whatever is comfortable for your physical body.

Then we add on things like paced breathing which is timing your breath, and paired muscle relaxation. Paced breathing is inhaling for 5 seconds, holding at the top, and exhaling for 7 seconds. Muscle relaxation is going through each of your muscle groups, tensing them up intentionally and then letting



them go. This is helpful particularly for people with psychosis who have trouble with sleep.



## How to Implement Emotion Regulation



**Kirby** How is emotion regulation implemented in clients with psychosis?

**Maggie** Emotional regulation is the core of DBT. That's the problem that people come in dealing with and it's the most important module to be focusing on with clients.

DBT's most challenging module is emotion regulation. It's the hardest thing for clients to grasp. When I'm adapting this section for people with psychosis or any cognitive challenges, I want to make it as concrete and basic as possible so that the tools are quick and easy for them to learn. It allows people to consider other possible explanations for their experiences.

If Sandra is thinking that her parents have had bad intentions toward her after she sees her mom wringing her hands when she's talking, we might have her look at checking the facts to look at whether her emotional response makes sense given what she's seen.

The key is to look at not just what my emotions are causing me to think about in this situation, but looking at what the facts are. "If I had a friend or a family member helping me look at the situation, what are the things that we both see in common that would be true at that moment?"

I often bring in loved ones to help them with this skill because it gives them the ability to see something from somebody else's perspective, and specifically somebody that they trust. This can



sometimes be an issue for people who are dealing with psychosis and paranoia and might feel suspicious.

ABC PLEASE is a crucial set of skills that is focused on reducing client's vulnerabilities to feeling intense emotions. It focuses on things like attending to your physical health, doing pleasurable activities every day, getting enough sleep, avoiding substance use, and doing things that give you a sense of mastery. The overall idea is to find more balance in your emotions.

Particularly for people with psychosis, there tends to be a heavy emphasis on negative or challenging emotions created by distressing thoughts or paranoia. We're trying to focus on bringing more positive emotions or preventing them by making sure that their basic needs are cared for. That's the key when it comes to sleep hygiene, substance use, and taking care of medical health needs.

In DBT, we focus on helping clients build a life worth living. The suicide rate is very high amongst people with psychotic spectrum disorders, around 4.9%. The skills of building mastery, identifying your most important values and finding ways to act on them, and doing a pleasurable activity every day are critical for people with psychosis to build lives that feel worth fighting for.

It is also important that they continue taking their medication, doing the work with me, and showing up for groups. It's about giving the motivation of the goals that they're working towards in the long term. Because there is so much stigma and judgmentalness, in general, around the experience of psychosis, this is something we have to work extra hard on for people who are dealing with these symptoms.

## Psychosis and Interpersonal Effectiveness



**Kirby** How do you teach interpersonal effectiveness to clients with psychosis?

**Maggie** Building a support network for people with psychosis is sometimes the difference between somebody graduating from college and living independently or that same person ending up unhoused and surviving on the streets. Having a strong support network can make a huge difference in somebody's ability to function and make it in the world. Psychosis can be impactful on somebody's ability to do daily living activities.

I help my clients utilize interpersonal effectiveness to engage their loved ones. Also, I work on communication skills to help them find friends, and to build and strengthen existing relationships. There's a whole section within DBT interpersonal effectiveness that is about skills for finding friends.

I find a lot with people with psychosis that either may have missed or not developed skills for building relationships because they started experiencing their first symptoms of psychosis around the time where they might be doing those things. We have to go back to the basics of how to find people that you want to talk to and what to talk to them about when you get into contact with them. That's where the skills for making and building friendships come in in interpersonal effectiveness.

I use DEAR MAN a lot with my clients. That skill is focused on helping you ask for what you want or to say no to a request.



When you are feeling symptomatic or stressed as a client, knowing when to ask for help is important because it gives you the ability to bring somebody in to provide support for you.

I coach clients to ask for help picking up their medication, communicating with their doctor, or asking somebody to take them out to do something. That skill of knowing how to ask for help can be important. People with psychosis can often be vulnerable to people taking advantage of them. That's why we work a lot on how to say no and how to mean it.

It's important that whatever you offer to your clients is aligned with their cultural values, otherwise, it's not going to be successful. For example, depending on your client's culture, the suggestion in DEAR MAN of making eye contact to show confidence may not fit your client's communication style.

Rather than being directive with your client, I always ask first, "How do you communicate confidence?" And if they're not sure, you might ask them, "How do those around you communicate their confidence?" We use the DBT skills and principles to work with their style of communication. You want to make an adaptation for psychosis and for their general cultural identities that are part of their lives as well.



## Main Points

1. DBT uses many acronyms to teach clients a variety of skills. The TIPP skills help clients tip their mood by tipping their body chemistry through changes in temperature, intense physical activity, and paced breathing paired with muscle relaxation.
2. The ABC PLEASE acronym also leverages the mind-body connection. For example, the PLEASE part of the acronym focuses on optimal physiological functioning, whereas the ABC part of the acronym focuses on optimal psychological functioning. Both components are necessary when helping clients to stabilize their emotions.
3. The DEAR MAN technique helps clients to increase their social skills by teaching them to describe, express, assert, and reinforce through more mindful interactions. As with all DBT skills, it's especially important to teach this skill in a culturally sensitive manner.
4. Clients with thought disorders also require a strong social network, especially characterized by a robust support system.



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