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# The Use of DBT and ACT Therapies to Treat Addictive Disorders

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# Disclosures



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Neither I nor my spouse/partner has a relevant financial relationship with a commercial interest to disclose.



# Goals of Talk

- Third wave therapy
- Review evidence for DBT and ACT
- Case Examples for both
- Considerations

# Therapy Types: Waves



Therapy Wave	Definition	Examples of Therapies
<b>Psychodynamic</b>	Approaches focused on unconscious processes, emotional insight, and the influence of early relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Psychoanalysis</li><li>- Short-Term Psychodynamic Therapy</li><li>- Object Relations Therapy</li><li>- Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT)</li></ul>
<b>First Wave</b>	Traditional behavioral therapies focusing on observable behaviors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Classical Conditioning</li><li>- Operant Conditioning</li><li>- Applied Behavioral Analysis</li></ul>
<b>Second Wave</b>	Cognitive-behavioral therapies integrating thoughts and beliefs into behavior change strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)</li><li>- Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)</li></ul>
<b>Third Wave</b>	Holistic approaches emphasizing mindfulness, acceptance, and context over symptom elimination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)</li><li>- Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)</li><li>- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)</li><li>- Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT)</li></ul>



# Key Differences – 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave:

- Focus on values-driven actions.
- Emphasis on accepting experiences without judgment.
- Context over content of thought
- Do not delve into unconscious
- Do not focus on “changing” maladaptive thoughts
- Integrate: Mindfulness and Acceptance
- DBT and ACT as examples



Aspect	Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
<b>Core Focus</b>	Balancing acceptance and change for emotional regulation and interpersonal effectiveness.	Building psychological flexibility through acceptance and value-driven actions.
<b>Primary Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reduce emotional dysregulation.</li><li>- Build skills to cope with distress.</li><li>- Improve relationships.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reduce experiential avoidance.</li><li>- Increase openness to internal experiences.</li><li>- Commit to meaningful actions aligned with values.</li></ul>
<b>Foundational Concepts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Dialectics: Balancing opposing forces (e.g., acceptance vs. change).</li><li>- Validation: Accepting emotions without judgment.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Cognitive defusion: Detaching from thoughts.</li><li>- Acceptance: Allowing thoughts and feelings without fighting them.</li></ul>



Aspect	Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
<b>Key Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Mindfulness</li><li>- Distress Tolerance</li><li>- Emotion Regulation</li><li>- Interpersonal Effectiveness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Present-moment awareness</li><li>- Acceptance</li><li>- Values clarification</li><li>- Committed action</li></ul>
<b>Structure of Therapy</b>	Highly structured, with individual therapy, group skills training, and crisis coaching.	Flexible and adaptable, typically delivered in individual therapy.
<b>Target Population</b>	Originally developed for borderline personality disorder; now used for mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders.	Broadly applicable across anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and other conditions.
<b>Therapist Role</b>	Actively teaches and models skills while emphasizing validation and collaboration.	Guides clients in accepting inner experiences and committing to values-based actions.

# Evidence - DBT



Therapy	Study	Findings
DBT	Linehan et al. (2019)	A randomized controlled trial showed that DBT reduced substance use frequency and improved emotion regulation in individuals with co-occurring borderline personality disorder and substance use disorders.
	Shorey et al. (2020)	DBT skills-based interventions showed significant reductions in emotional dysregulation and alcohol use in young adults.
	Recovery Research Institute (2022)	DBT adaptations showed small to moderate improvements in reducing maladaptive behaviors, including substance-related issues, through enhanced emotion regulation. However, more rigorous trials are needed.

# Evidence - ACT



Therapy	Study	Findings
ACT	Twohig et al. (2021)	A systematic review found ACT effective in reducing cravings and increasing psychological flexibility, particularly in alcohol and opioid use disorders.
	Lee et al. (2020)	ACT interventions reduced relapse rates in patients with alcohol use disorder and improved quality of life compared to standard treatment.
	Luoma et al. (2017)	ACT targeting shame and stigma associated with substance use improved treatment outcomes in opioid use disorder patients.



# Case Example: DBT

## Patient Background

- *Name:* Sarah
- *Age:* 24
- *Diagnosis:* Alcohol Use Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and PTSD from childhood trauma.
- *Challenges:* Frequent binge drinking to numb feelings of shame and sadness, difficulty managing emotions, and avoidance of traumatic memories.
- Lives with boyfriend & roommates, struggling with regular work.



# DBT therapy approach:

- **Mindfulness:**

- Sarah practices "observe and describe" techniques during cravings. For example, she focuses on her physical sensations (e.g., racing heart) and identifies thoughts like, "I can't cope without drinking."
- This helps her pause and recognize cravings without acting on them.

- **Distress Tolerance:**

- When overwhelmed by memories of her trauma, Sarah uses the "TIPP" skill (Temperature, Intense exercise, Paced breathing, Progressive relaxation).
- Example: During a flashback, she holds an ice cube to ground herself in the present moment, avoiding an impulsive to drink her roommates alcohol.

- **Emotion Regulation:**

- Sarah learns to recognize and label her emotions, such as guilt and sadness, and replaces drinking with healthier coping mechanisms.
- Example: When she feels guilty after a fight with her partner, she journals about her emotions and listens to calming music instead of drinking.



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- **Interpersonal Effectiveness:**

- Sarah uses "DEAR MAN" (Describe, Express, Assert, Reinforce, Mindful, Appear confident, Negotiate) to communicate with her partner about needing support without conflict.
- Example: She calmly says, "I feel unsupported when you dismiss my recovery efforts. Can we plan activities that don't involve alcohol?"

- **Validation:**

- In therapy, Sarah is taught self-validation, affirming her feelings of shame without judgment.
- Example: "It's okay to feel this way after what I've been through. My emotions make sense, but I can still choose healthier behaviors."

- **Chain Analysis:**

- Sarah maps out the triggers and consequences of a binge-drinking episode.
- Example: A trigger might be feeling rejected. She identifies alternate behaviors, like texting a friend or attending a DBT skills group instead of drinking



# Case Example: ACT

## Patient Background

- *Name:* John
- *Age:* 58
- *Diagnosis:* Opioid Use Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, and Prolonged Grief Disorder following the death of his wife.
- *Challenges:* Avoids social interactions, uses opioids to suppress emotional pain, and struggles with meaning and purpose in life after his loss.
- Lives alone after his wife died 5 years ago



# ACT Therapy Approach

- **Acceptance**

- *Example:* John is guided to sit with his grief and anxiety rather than trying to suppress them. During a session, he practices acknowledging his feelings: “I feel deep sadness because I miss my wife, and it’s okay to feel this way.”
- *Goal:* To reduce his reliance on opioids as a way to avoid emotional pain.

- **Cognitive Defusion**

- *Example:* John learns to distance himself from self-critical thoughts like, “I’m too broken to move forward.” He practices saying, “I notice that I’m having the thought that I’m broken,” rather than fusing with it.
- *Goal:* Helps reduce the power of unhelpful thinking and creates space for healthier behaviors.

- **Mindfulness**

- *Example:* During group therapy, John practices being present by observing his surroundings (e.g., noticing the texture of a chair, the sound of a clock) rather than fixating on his worries about judgment from others.
- *Goal:* Mindfulness reduces his social anxiety and increases engagement in group activities.

# Cont'd



- **Values Exploration**

- *Example:* John identifies meaningful values, such as honoring his wife's memory by contributing to his community. He sets a goal to volunteer at a local library, aligning with his value of helping others.
- *Goal:* Give John a sense of purpose and reduces feelings of emptiness.

- **Committed Action**

- *Example:* John creates a concrete plan to reduce his opioid use. He commits to attending weekly support meetings, practicing mindfulness exercises, and engaging in small acts of service (e.g., helping set up a local grief support group).
- *Goal:* Meaningful actions help build confidence in the ability to live a meaningful, drug-free life.

- **Self-as-Context**

- *Example:* John reflects on his identity beyond his loss and addiction. He practices seeing himself as an observer of his experiences rather than being defined by them: "I am not my grief or my addiction; I am the person experiencing these challenges."
- *Goal:* Gain perspective on struggles and separate self from diagnosis



So...

- Both effective in the treatment of substance use and mental health
- DBT → Consider for those with heightened emotional dysregulation  
→ Borderline PD, Trauma
- ACT → Consider for those with significant avoidance behaviors  
→ Comorbid Anxiety, Depression, those “lost” or no meaning



# Considerations

- DBT – quite structured including group and therapy, intense → Drop out
  - Some studies suggest not as effective in ASPD / chronic addiction
- ACT – Concepts can be tricky, esp those with cognitive issues
  - May not be as effective for those with low motivation

Harned, M. S., et al. (2014). "Dialectical behavior therapy for individuals with borderline personality disorder and co-occurring substance dependence." *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*.  
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# Thank You



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