SELF-HARM BEHAVIORS IN ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS

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Today’s agenda:

- General information about self-harm
- Overview: Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)
- Strategies from DBT
- Videos and questions
# Self-harm vs. Suicidality

**Self-harm**
- Intentional
- Would normally cause pain
- **No** intent to die or ambivalence

**Suicidality**
- Intentional
- May or may not be painful
- The intent is to die

“Non-Suicidal Self Injury”
Why self-harm?

- The function of self-harm varies.
- To assess the function for a specific client in a specific context, consider both internal and external reinforcement.
  - Internal: Self-reinforcement
  - External: Reinforcement from the environment
Common self-reinforcing reasons:

- To feel something, even if it’s pain
- To stop feeling anger, sadness, self-hatred
- To get away or escape
- To punish oneself
- To relieve anxiety or terror
- To give one something, anything to do
Common **socially-reinforcing** reasons:

- To let others know how desperate one is
- To get other people to act differently
- To get back at or hurt someone
- To gain admission to treatment
- To demonstrate to others how wrong they are
- To get out of doing something
Basic Behavior Therapy Paradigm

Cue

Emotion Dysregulation

Problem Behavior

Consequences
Chain Analysis

VULNERABILITY FACTORS

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

PROMPTING EVENT

LINKS

CONSEQUENCES
Example: Prompting Event

- An 18-year-old high school senior has an argument on the phone late at night with her boyfriend and he hangs up on her.
Example: Vulnerability Factors

- **Situational**
  - Fatigued, earlier argument with Mother about college applications

- **Biological**
  - Low frustration tolerance, emotionally intense
Example: Private Events

- **Thoughts**
  - He doesn’t care about me
  - He’s going to break up
  - No one will ever love me, I’m hideous

- **Emotions**
  - Sad, Lonely, Angry, Empty

- **Action Urges**
  - Scream, Cry, Skip School, Self-harm, End it all
Example: Behavior Response

☐ Cried, stayed up all night

☐ Scratched arm with an ink pen, wrote “I hate me”

☐ Told her parents that she was not feeling well in the morning and stayed home from school
Example: Consequences

- Reduction in immediate tension by crying and scratching
- Reduction in anxiety by avoiding school and boyfriend
- Relief when boyfriend calls at lunch to see if she is okay
- Shame associated with scratching
Dialectical Behavior Therapy

- Developed by Marsha Linehan
- Treatment and Skills Training Manuals published in 1993 by Guilford Press
  - Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder
  - Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder
DBT: The Biosocial Theory

- Emotional Vulnerability
- Invalidating Environment

Difficulties with Emotion Regulation
Emotional Vulnerability

- **High Sensitivity**
  - Immediate reactions
  - Low threshold for reactions

- **High Reactivity**
  - Extreme Reactions
  - Cognitive processes impaired by high arousal

- **Slow Return to Baseline**
  - Long-lasting reactions
  - Contributes to high sensitivity to next stimulus
Invalidating Environment

- Optimally, a family publicly validates a private experience
- When family members have difficulty understanding a child’s emotional reaction, they may have a hard time validating
Pervasive Emotion Dysregulation

Emotional Vulnerability

Inability to Modulate Emotions
DBT Principles Applied to Self-Harm

- DBT therapists observe the dialectic of **acceptance and change**
  - **Validation strategies (acceptance)** are important in working with emotionally aroused clients
  - High emotional arousal interferes with the ability to:
    - Process information
    - Solve problems
    - Manage behavior
    - Focus on current
  - Therapists assume that clients are doing the best they can, given current circumstances and skills set, AND . . .
DBT Principles (cont.)

- DBT therapists assume that clients can **change** and cope with emotions in more adaptive ways

- **Change** is promoted by:
  - Teaching skillful behavior (skills group)
  - Generalizing skillful behavior (coaching calls)
  - Reinforcing skillful behavior; not reinforcing unskillful behavior (coaching calls, group, individual)
DBT Principles (cont.)

- Self-harm is a Level 1 target
  - If self-harm is on the diary card, it is addressed before any other topic
  - A chain analysis is used to uncover function(s)
Steps to being Effective

- Identify targets or goals
- Take time to be emotionally balanced
- Adopt a non-judgmental stance
- Target being effective (win/win) rather than on right or wrong
Adopting a Non-Judgmental Stance

- Recognize the client’s struggle and accept that he/she is doing the best they can given the circumstances
- Admit that you may not fully understand how difficult, painful, scary or crazy the situation is for him or her
Adopting a Non-Judgmental Stance (cont.)

- Assume that emotional arousal is blocking effective behavior NOT malevolent intentions
- Remember that this is an opportunity to help the client get what they need
- Listen carefully and let go of being right
Strategies to Manage Client’s Emotion Dysregulation

- Validate aspects of client’s experience that are valid
  - Stress level, emotions, desired outcomes
- Redirect attention to neutral stimuli to reduce emotion intensity
- Avoid problem-solving or redirecting to task
How to Validate

DBT Levels of Validation:

- **Level 1**: Unbiased listening and observing
- **Level 2**: Accurate reflection
- **Level 3**: Articulating unverbalized emotions, thoughts, and behaviors
How to Validate (cont.)

- **Level 4:** Validation in terms of past learning or biological dysfunction

- **Level 5:** Validation in terms of present context or normative functioning

- **Level 6:** Radical Genuineness
How to **Invalidate**

- **What **NOT** to do:**
  - Reject self-description as inaccurate
  - Reject response to events as incorrect or ineffective
  - Dismiss, ignore, or disregard
  - Pathologize normative responses
  - Attribute response to social undesirable characteristics
Tasks to Modulate Emotions

- Decrease (or increase) physiological arousal associated with the emotional state
- (Repeatedly) Turn attention to present goals
- Inhibit mood-dependent action
- Organize behavior in the service of valued goals
Teaching Distress Tolerance Skills

- Crisis Survival Strategies
  - Distraction, Self-soothe, IMPROVE the moment, Pros and Cons

- Guidelines for Accepting Reality
  - Radical Acceptance, Willingness over Willfulness
Factors that Reduce Effectiveness

- Strong emotions (for the therapist)
- Misattributions about what the client does or why it is done
- Judgments about the client or family
- Focusing on being “right” and that the client’s behavior is “wrong”
- If you’re feeling ineffective, consult
  - Consultation Team is an important component of DBT
Questions and Video

- Do you have questions?
- Do you have a case you’d like to discuss?
THE END

Thanks for your attention!