Self-harm behaviors, Jill Compton, PhD & Prue Cuper, PhD ~ UNC Clinical Lecture Series

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

Chain Analysis

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**
  - 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

Emotional Vulnerability

Pervasive Emotion Dysregulation

- **Emotional Vulnerability**
  - Inability to Modulate Emotions

Invalidating Environment
### 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

### 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
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!