



How DBT Can Help Your Employees Regulate Emotions and Strengthen Relationships

Today, employees typically have a multitude of therapy options from counsellors with varying specialties to choose from within their employee assistance program. The type of therapy and counsellor best suited for your unique employee depends on the mental health concern they wish to address. For instance, if an employee needs help regulating their emotions at work, thinking more positively when receiving feedback, or strengthen their relationships with coworkers, they might benefit from speaking with a counsellor who specializes in DBT. Although it has become increasingly popular over recent years, you might still be asking yourself: what exactly is DBT and is it right for my employees?

DBT stands for Dialectic Behavioural Therapy, an effective therapeutic approach that can help your employees regulate their emotions. Rather than ride the ups and downs of an emotional rollercoaster, DBT helps them

achieve emotional stability at home and in the workplace. What's more, with the guidance of a qualified counsellor, they can learn skills to increase resilience, as well as decrease vulnerability and harmful behaviours. In doing so, they can then focus on cultivating positive emotions and healthy relationships while feeling like the competent and confident team members they deserve to be. Plus, your organization will be able to function more efficiently and harmoniously with healthier employee dynamics.

Taylor's Story: A Nurse in Need of DBT

Let's follow the fictional yet relatable example of someone who struggles with feedback at work; let's call them Taylor. Taylor is a 30-year-old nurse who takes care of an overwhelming number of patients at a large hospital, which requires them to work quickly but

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effectively while managing crises. Although Taylor tries their best to maintain consistently high-quality work during particularly busy times of their shift, there is the odd time when their supervisor points out Taylor's areas of improvement, such as time management, attention to detail, and bedside manner.

Since Taylor prides themselves on being an effective and compassionate nurse, they take even the most constructive of criticisms personally. Consequently, Taylor has on multiple occasions expressed anger towards their supervisor after receiving feedback by raising their voice and making snide remarks. It has escalated to the point that Taylor's supervisor no longer feels comfortable providing feedback and worries that Taylor's anger is creating a hostile work environment, which is grounds for dismissal.

Fortunately, Taylor has an opportunity to maintain their employment by seeking mental health support to help regulate their emotions and strengthen their professional relationship with their supervisor. After doing some research on suitable therapeutic approaches, Taylor found that counsellors who specialize in DBT can help them learn four core skills: Distress Tolerance, Emotional Regulation, Mindfulness, and Interpersonal Effectiveness.

Distress Tolerance

One of the most effective DBT strategies Taylor can use to overcome extreme emotions is to practice distress tolerance. They can achieve this through regulating their physiology as to encourage their body to respond more favourably. So, instead of shouting at their supervisor during a time of crisis, such as a patient experiencing a medical emergency, Taylor can avoid an extreme reaction by using Crisis Survival Skills.

In moments of intense stress or anger, DBT's Crisis Survival Skills can provide Taylor with Techniques to quickly reduce the intensity of their emotions. An easy

acronym to remember this Distress Tolerance tip is just that: TIPP, which stands for temperature, intense exercise, paced breathing, and paired muscle relaxation. Our body can influence the way we respond to experiences and events, so it's helpful for Taylor to know how to regulate their body as well as their mind. If Taylor feels particularly stressed one day, they can do one or more of the following:

1. Splash cold water on their face to lower their body temperature and heart rate
2. Walk or jog at lunch to burn off excess energy
3. Breathe deeply by inhaling through their nose and exhaling through their mouth
4. Flex and release their muscles from head to toe to let go of tension

By following TIPP's Crisis Survival Skills, Taylor will be better able to take their supervisor's feedback as constructive rather than an attack, simply by acknowledging and changing their physical state.

Emotional Regulation

DBT can help Taylor become more aware of their emotional responses by learning to identify early signs of anxiety and anger, thereby allowing them to address these emotions before they escalate. If Taylor becomes frustrated when their supervisor reminds them to update a patient's medical chart, they can acknowledge that frustration is building so they can practice emotional regulation before reacting negatively with a snide remark or hostile tone.

If Taylor tried TIPP's distress tolerance techniques but still felt like they were about to get angry with their supervisor, they could use a strategy called positive self-talk. This strategy can help Taylor stay calm and focused during stressful moments of feedback by using their inner monologue to give themselves praise and encouragement rather than doubt and scrutiny. By

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reciting simple phrases, such as “You are a good nurse” or “Patients like and need you,” Taylor can find positivity through much-deserved positive self-talk. Sometimes we can be our own worst critic, so getting out of the habit of criticizing ourselves can take some time; however, once we learn to embrace positivity, it will be second nature.

Mindfulness

Taylor has heard of mindfulness from their yoga instructor, who teaches them to focus on their breath and clear their mind, but what does it actually mean to be mindful? Mindfulness is so much more than simply breathing deeply or focusing your attention – although those exercises are definitely helpful in steadying your body and mind. Moreover, the DBT skill of mindfulness can help Taylor change the way they pay attention to and interact with the world.

A particularly helpful mindfulness skill that can help Taylor change the way they react to their supervisor is to practice radical acceptance. If Taylor accepts that the hospital is a place filled with change, uncontrollable events, and unique people with their own personalities and responsibilities, they can gain the peace of mind needed to perceive their environment and interact with their supervisor more positively. This realization can be understandably challenging to adopt without the right frame of mind, but when you take the perspective of radical acceptance, you can start to feel less reactive to your surroundings.

Taylor can accept that their supervisor is likely under as much stress as they are and has to report to their own boss at the end of the day. The fact that other people face unpleasant circumstances just like Taylor can help them convey understanding and compassion during times of conflict. By practicing DBT mindfulness techniques, Taylor can change the way they perceive feedback so that it doesn't feel so personal.

Interpersonal Effectiveness

Interpersonal effectiveness in the workplace, or simply put social skills, is how effectively your employees interact with coworkers, supervisors, and even customers. For Taylor, their interpersonal effectiveness might be stronger with coworkers than with their supervisor because they feel less judged and more supported around peers. It stands to reason that like Taylor, we all typically get along better with people with similar interests, personalities, and circumstances at work, so it's easier to feel empathy and compassion for a colleague than a boss. But, how can Taylor extend the same level of understanding for their supervisor that they show their fellow nurses?

Rather than viewing their supervisor as a judgmental superior, Taylor can assume a healthier perspective by seeing their supervisor as someone who cares. With that in mind, when Taylor's supervisor shares an unsolicited suggestion to administer medications more quickly, perhaps Taylor can give their supervisor the benefit of the doubt that they share the same value: patient care. That understanding may enable Taylor to see their supervisor as more of a colleague than a boss, thereby improving how they communicate and respond to suggestions. By working on their communication skills and taking on a different perspective to practice empathy, Taylor can express themselves calmly and rationally, while being more receptive to feedback with the knowledge that if a coworker gave the same advice, it wouldn't seem malicious.

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Find a DBT Counsellor for Support

Taylor's story might be fictional but their circumstances may be all too real for your employees who are struggling with their mental health. If you believe your employees could better manage their emotions, the DBT skills and topics discussed above are often easier said than done, so having the support of a qualified counsellor –and even like-minded people with similar goals– can set them up for success. The path to positive workplace mental health is a journey that doesn't need to be travelled alone. As such, all employees can benefit from the guidance and comradery of a supportive community.

Reach out today if you think DBT could help your employees manage their emotions.

