

DBT Skills Group #6 - Opposite Action

1. DBT – Dialectical Behavioral Therapy – was named because it focuses on “dialectical thinking” – which is the skill of seeing multiple perspectives, and finding a truth that reconciles seemingly contradictory (opposite) positions or postures. For example:
 - I am powerless/helpless (nothing I can do to help myself)
 - I am omnipotent/all powerful (everything is my fault, I need to be perfect)
2. All or nothing thoughts or feelings tend to drive all or nothing responses. For example:
 - Helplessness -> avoid, withdraw, hide
 - Omnipotence -> overworking, excessive risk taking, fighting, boundary violations
3. For people with a trauma history, our default responses to a feeling of fear/danger – to our safety, health, or relationships – are often the instinctive responses we learned in our early life that helped to keep us safe and alive. Examples include:
 - Flight (running away)
 - Fighting
 - Freezing (withdrawal, passivity)
 - Compliance/deference – including attending to needs of person in power

Question: how do these show up in your day-to-day life?

Question: what options do you have as adult, that you didn't have as a child?

4. “Opposite action” involves acting in ways that are opposite to our instinctive/default “keep me safe” behaviors. Another way to think about this, is to identify behaviors that you might choose if we felt the opposite emotion. Doing so will often result in changing your emotions and thoughts. Examples:
 - Standing taller, and relaxing the face into a small half smile when you feel scared/sad can change your physiological response and mood.
 - Taking deep, slow breaths rather than shallow, fast breaths with anxious can create a sense of calm.
 - Meeting avoidance with action can help you get “unstuck” and feel hopeful.
 - Meeting anger/hate with love and tolerance can de-escalate a relationship crisis and create a sense of relief and safety.
 - Finding ways to address problems, rather than avoiding them, is a critical skill for confronting the life challenges that make us anxious and depressed.

5. Since we are trying to avoid “all or nothing” thinking, remember that opposite action can be small steps. If you are struggling to get out of bed, your opposite action goal probably shouldn’t be going to a loud party with hundreds of strangers.
6. Opposite action helps you avoid repeating ineffective patterns, and helps you explore and (re) discover your strengths, power, and control. It is helpful and important to note and record the impact of your opposite action choices.

Exercise: Opposite Action

Intense Feeling	When it happens	What I normally do	An opposite Action	When I will try this	Results of this try
Ex: anxious	Something I “should do” and deadline	Lie in bed, distract myself	Do something active, then try spending 15 minutes on item	Tonight at 7:30pm	

