

DBT Journal: Weeks 1-7

Week 1: Philosophies – “You’re Doing Your Best (And Need to do Better)”

This week, I had an argument with my fiancé about something insignificant (per usual). The argument escalated and I ended up emoting a lot – so much so, that our goal went from focusing on the issue to making sure I felt okay. The biggest problem with my behavior was that I acted exactly like his mother. When he and his mother get into an argument, she reacts so strongly to my fiancé that he feels overwhelmed and goes into “appeasing mode”; He merely focuses on making sure she feels less of whatever it is that she is feeling because he just wants everything to calm down.

My argument with my fiancé came only a couple days after I recognized I was doing to him what his mom does to him, and promised that I wouldn’t act like his mom. I made this promise because of all the times when he felt torn between choosing his mom’s feelings versus my feelings. When he feels torn between us both emoting, his mind blanks and becomes paralyzed to the point that his voice disappears and retracts into himself. So I made this promise with him in order to relieve him from the need to appease me as he does his mom, and to manage our conflict in a healthier way. But when I ended up emoting my feelings so strongly, I felt really disappointed in myself that I broke my promise only a few days after I made it, and I felt guilty that I reinforced his need to appease, rather than provide a safer space for healthy conflict management.

Then I remembered this DBT skill. When I first read the description, my eyes skipped over “You’re doing your best” and went straight to “And need to do better”. But I re-read the card slowly and repeated aloud to myself until I actually believed that I did the best I could. I applied the mantra to the situation and ended up saying, “I’m doing

my best in this relationship” and found peace in my mistake against my husband. I already know I need to do better, but accepting what happened was freeing. Once I accepted my mistake I was able to accept his feelings and validate them. Accepting the dual reality of needing to do better but also that, in this very moment, you are doing your best is sobering and frees you to move forward.

Week 2: Dialectics – “Self-Acceptance and Change”

I had my first family therapy session this week and I botched it. I botched it in multiple ways: before the session began, during the session, and when the session ended. Before the session began, the mother of the family (main contact), said her and her husband were going to run 20 minutes late because they got held up with a family event and didn't have the chance to tell me ahead of time. I responded to that by saying it was fine and that I would wait. I did not let her know the practice policy, nor stuck to it, which was to consider it a canceled session if the client doesn't show in 10 minutes. Instead, I chose to show flexibility because this session was a long time coming and I didn't want to miss another opportunity to meet with the parents. So we began the session with only 20 minutes left (and less respect for my time because this has now become the pattern with our sessions). I botched my first family therapy during the session because I didn't ask any systemic questions, and instead, let the mother rant for 15 minutes. I didn't get any information about my main client, the daughter. Lastly, I botched the end of the session with a very awkward goodbye during which I repeatedly thanked the parents for their time and could not decisively wrap up the conversation in time. Overall, I was swayed by the family structure and demonstrated low clinical

confidence and skill in my first family session. I felt really discouraged about this and sought comfort in my usual ways, like eating sweets or leaning onto my fiancé. But soon afterwards, I meditated on the DBT skill card that emphasized self-acceptance and change. The instructions were to take a deep breath and a nonjudgmental stance to accept myself. I took a deep breath, took a nonjudgmental stance, and accepted myself for the way I was and the moment as it was. I continued to take deep breaths with this mantra in my mind. Each deep breath helped me feel better and less overwhelmed by my failure. It felt as if I was physically breathing in acceptance. Once I took several breaths and slowed down my emotions, I realized that I could not change what happened and only accept it. This realization helped me to stop seeking comfort in immediate gratification and slow down – this is the actual process of self-acceptance.

Week 3: Mindfulness – “Hourly Breathing”

I was socially anxious on Sunday as several people came up to me asking about my wedding plans. I didn't realize until later that my shoulders were stiff and I barely breathed during the whole hour I interacted with people. Understandably so, I left service with a major headache and fatigue from my hypervigilance to people's words and behaviors.

I went out to lunch with my fiancé soon after. While we were waiting for the food, I decided to apply this DBT skill. The skill instructed the user to notice their breath. So I closed my eyes and paid attention to my breathing. I noticed that my breathing was shallow and quiet, almost still. Then I recalled a breathing technique that my supervisor previously taught me to try with clients who exhibit anxiety (I later discovered that this

was also a DBT skill called, rectangular breathing). The breathing exercise involved taking a deep breath for 4 seconds, holding the breath for another 4, letting out the breath slowly for 4, then holding that position for another 4. You can visualize a rectangle with 4 points, where each step is at each point and you complete the shape of the rectangle when you finish one round of this. I did this very slowly and it instantly worked. My thoughts stopped racing, I felt more “dull” even, and calmer. My shoulders, face, chest, and arms were more relaxed, and I was able to pay attention to the sun beaming from the window next to us. I noticed my surroundings more and how warm the sun was as it touched the left side of my face. I didn’t notice the weather until that moment.

This DBT skill helped calm my anxiety because I was able to take in oxygen into my lungs and brain. I never realized the power of breathing until this DBT card. I paid attention to my breathing several times for the remainder of the day. Each time I took a deep breath, I felt my body shake because I wasn’t used to taking deep breaths. It was as if I had to train my abdomen and lungs to learn how to take in more oxygen. But I had to practice acceptance whenever I connected with my cycle of breathing. That is the goal of this DBT skill, to bring me back to the moment through my breathing and reconnect with myself. Change can only occur if there is acceptance of the self, and acceptance can only occur if there is connection with the self. Connection could be emotional or physical. Physical connection starts with physical presence, and breathing is a sure way to be present with your body in the here and now.

Week 4: Dialectics – “Two Opposite Things Are Both True”

There has been an ongoing feud with my brother-in-law and his girlfriend, and my husband and I. It began when my husband and I started dating and intensified during the wedding planning process. My perspective about what my brother-in-law did since we started dating is set in stone. I have examples upon examples of how my brother-in-law did not support us. Meanwhile, it appears that my brother-in-law and his girlfriend hold a grudge against us for all the things that we did not handle correctly since we started dating. They blame my husband for some things and blame me for other things. Their side seems absurd to me because of the things they did. It makes no sense to me that they have resentment towards us for unmet expectations when they did not support us from the beginning. They are both first-borns in their sibling order, and my husband and I are both the youngest in our sibling order. My husband and I wish they would just leave us alone because we have little to no expectations from them, while my brother-in-law and his girlfriend wish we would handle things better such as including them in the wedding planning process and handling other family members the way they would.

This DBT skill was especially difficult to apply because it was difficult to consider that our perspective and their perspective were equal. To imagine myself “holding both sides” of seemingly contradictory ideas was extremely difficult. I kept coming up with reasons for why their side wasn’t worth holding. But then I came to a point that their perspective, standard, and needs are all different from mine, and therefore their feelings are just as valid as mine. Two opposites can be true at the same time. When I held this philosophy, I was able to validate their behaviors better, and my empathy increased.

Week 5: Dialectics – “Refusing Right and Wrong”

The following week, I continued in the skill set of Dialectics, and chose the next card: Refusing Right and Wrong. This DBT skill came in very handy because within the first couple weeks of being married, my husband and I got into a big argument. The argument was over a miscommunication in something we each said. The topic was whether we should cook or buy a meal to bring to our next church community group gathering. But while we were running errands, we suddenly had a miscommunication about what we each said. It was so technical for me that I told him I understood the gist of what he was saying and we could move onto deciding what we should do. But he felt misunderstood and kept repeating the segment that I misheard. When he did that, I felt like he was correcting me over and over and felt like he wasn't hearing me when I said I understood, and felt misunderstood by him.

The DBT skill asks, "Is one right and the other wrong?". Dialectics maintain that two different points of view can be true at the same time, but we cling to the concept of being right when it all depends on perspective. In this situation, I knew I felt misunderstood, and therefore, he was wrong. He was also fixated on correcting my misunderstanding, instead of considering my perspective on why I felt misunderstood. It wasn't until we both became exhausted with fighting for our own perspectives that we came to the conclusion that we were both misunderstood and neither of us were wrong.

The argument lasted a really long time – into the next morning. It led to a painful breakout of harsh words and attitude and walking away from each other. But the next morning, once we both took a step back and considered the other person's perspective, we were able to understand each other, which is what matters most.

Week 6: Emotion Regulation - "Change Interpretations"

This DBT skill came in really useful before an event occurred and during. It was a challenge to digest what the description said– to accept that my automatic interpretation may not always fit the facts. I am used to validating my gut reaction to a situation, that to consider there may be multiple interpretations to any given situation was humbling.

A recent event that led to a powerful emotion and interpretation was when I got into an argument with my husband about tithing. Our recent wedding ceremony was held at our church. I wanted to tithe a large amount of money as a sign of gratitude to the church and to God. My husband asked for more time to think about it and come up with an amount together. I agreed. This past week, my husband felt grateful for the community and asked if he could tithe a large amount of money on our behalf. I felt angry and felt the anger continue to swell as I could not understand why my husband felt he could tithe a large amount of money without consulting with me but did not want to go forward with the amount that I wanted to tithe a few weeks back. I felt dismissed, and as a result, started to interpret his actions as a reflection of his flawed character. In this moment, I challenged myself to implement this DBT skill and consider two alternate interpretations about why my husband acted in this way.

One alternate interpretation led me down a thoughtful consideration of how he might have come to this decision, rather than why. Knowing he is an emotional decision maker, he was most likely responding out of joy and gratitude. This means he did not intentionally disregard my wishes, which means he is not someone who is neglectful of someone else but someone who is quick to respond with joy and gratitude when the opportunity presents itself. The other interpretation was that he wanted to give a large

amount of money despite how little money he had. This means he is becoming more generous, which is an incredible character trait, not a bad one.

Considering these interpretations instantly changed my emotions for better and dissipated the anger that I felt towards him in that very moment. I stopped taking this personally and was able to look at him with kindness and admiration, instead of contempt. Becoming flexible with my interpretations helped me to have less reactive and less intense emotions towards my husband.

Week 7: Dialectics - “Self-Other Balance”

This week, my husband and I had to move to my parents' home temporarily and dogsit for them, while they went on vacation for 2 weeks. This was a particularly difficult task because my husband is allergic to dogs, and my parents have 4 dogs. Because we had no choice but to help them out, we came up with a system on how to minimize the spread of dog fur while we stayed there. The main tactic was for me to change my clothes whenever I went down to the basement (where the dogs stayed), and change again whenever I came back upstairs. This was extremely taxing because I needed to change about 4 times in a day to take care of them. The laundry machines, garbage disposals, and other house-related tools were downstairs as well, so I had to change my clothes a few more times whenever we needed to go downstairs for something. Additionally, because my husband had to go to school in person 3 times out of the week, I had to cook our meals in between my online courses and virtual therapy sessions.

This made me feel like our relationship was out of balance. I started becoming easily frustrated with him when he struggled to come up with a dinner plan one night, while I was moving twice his speed accomplishing other tasks. So I decided to implement this DBT skill in order to consider the proportionality of our relationship.

The skill, however, doesn't encourage you to take more if you feel the relationship balance is tilted. It asks, "Do you give proportionally to what you take?". I considered what I take from my husband and was able to recognize he does a lot for me that goes unappreciated. He always speaks to me with warmth and kindness, he never raises his tone, he is patient with me and hears all of my concerns and emotions, and he brews tea for me every single morning and evening when he makes his coffee. These are but a few of the "little things" he constantly does for me. This DBT skill shifted my perspective to see that what I've been doing for him during these two weeks is the least I could have done for him compared to what the overall give-and-take balance of our relationship has been. In fact, he is staying at my parents' house despite having an allergy to dog fur, but has never once complained.

After I came to this recognition, my husband came to me and thanked me for all that I did the past week and half to take care of his allergies. He realized that I have been constantly tired because of the immense detailed concerns and thoughts I had to take into consideration to make sure he had a comfortable experience at my parents' home. When I showed self-other balance, the relationship balanced itself out.