

# Case Report: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Based Psychological Counseling Practice

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## Abstract

In this study the psychological counseling process is handled with a client who has long-term and overwhelming emotions. The client had experienced a negative and stressful situation in which he could not deal with overwhelming emotions and stressful experiences and could not find a way to live a normal life. Dialectical Behavior Therapy which was formulated by Marsha Linehan is used in order to examine the client and the counseling process as well as to construct the sessions. Dialectical Behavior Therapy as a therapy approach that gives importance to make client be well equipped with four skill areas. These are stress tolerance skills, mindfulness skills, emotion regulation skills and lastly interpersonal effectiveness skills. Radical acceptance, safe place visualization are techniques that are used for stress tolerance skill acquisition. Defining the emotions and behavior analysis are used for emotion regulation skill acquisition. Getting out of past regrets, criticism, and judgments as well as despair toward the future. Psychoeducation about the relationship characteristics and the qualities of healthy relationship are studied as being interpersonal effectiveness skill acquisition. So far nine sessions are handled, and the counseling process has not completed yet. In these sessions, it is observed that the client's stress level is decreased as well as there are enhancements about the interpersonal effectiveness and radical acceptance.

**Keywords:** *Overwhelming emotions; Dialectical behavior therapy; Mindfulness; Radical acceptance*

## 1. Introduction

Dialectical Behavior Therapy is based on cognitive, behavioral, and awareness-based techniques. The primary goal of treatment is to help clients live a life worth living. Research on dialectical behavior therapy, developed to help people cope with overwhelming emotions, has revealed that this model strengthens people's ability to cope with stress without losing control and being destructive [1]. Dialectical Behavior Therapy, influenced by dialectical philosophy, biosocial theory, behaviorist and social learning theories, was also influenced by the receptive philosophy of Zen Buddhist teachings. The basic dialectical idea is that the therapist perceives the client as someone who strives for change and accepts them as such. In order to reflect this

situation in the therapy environment, it always attaches importance to the equal application of acceptance and change-oriented techniques in the strategies and techniques applied by the therapist in each therapy session [2]. According to the biosocial theory, some people are biologically predisposed to experience intense emotions. When they encounter these feelings, this situation can be even better/worse with certain experiences they have in their social environment. People are asked to regulate and control their emotions, but they are not taught how to do this. Likewise, the environment does not teach us to tolerate stress and adversity and to develop realistic goals and beliefs. In this environment, the person exaggerates his emotional state and tries to show his surroundings and attract attention in this way (such as a suicide attempt). For this reason, people are at the two extremes between suppressing emotions and exaggerating them [2]. Behaviorism explains learning by stating that all behavior is the result of a repetitive stimulus-response process [3]. In particular, he argues that all behaviors occur by an external stimulus and can be explained without the need for internal mental processes. Social learning theory, on the other hand, combined both behaviorism and cognitive learning theories. According to social learning theory, people perform behaviors through observation, modeling and imitation [4]. Dialectical behavior therapy aims to identify distressing behaviors and then to better understand the variables that initiate and maintain these behaviors [5]. Linehan was influenced by Zen Buddhist practises and Christian teachings [6]. People who experience Zen teachings are freed from their thoughts about what should really happen and can be liberated with their ability to tolerate and accept what they experience [5]. In both teachings there is acceptance without trying to change the memory [6]. In the early stages of intervention in therapy, meditation has been practiced in order to accept the negative experiences of the client without change; however, it has often been seen impossible to do meditation work in people with suicidal thoughts or severe emotional problems [7]. A more integrative approach was aimed; Zen practices and religious teachings have been transformed into behavioral skills, so that both the therapist and the client can learn. Many people can achieve this with the skills learned within the framework of this model in order to provide better emotional control in the face of our experiences with intense and overwhelming emotions. Dialectical behavior therapy basically aims to provide four basic skills teaching. These skills provide both to reduce the intensity of the emotions experienced and to maintain the balance when faced with the presence of overwhelming emotions. These four basic skills are [1];

1. Distress Tolerance: It builds psychological resilience and gives the ability to struggle with painful events. It provides the emergence of different ways to alleviate the situation.
2. Mindfulness: By giving the person the ability to focus on the present, it allows to focus less on the painful experiences of the past or the frightening possibilities of the future.
3. Emotion Regulation: Skills in this area give you the skills to be aware of exactly what you are feeling.
4. Interpersonal Effectiveness: It includes expressing thoughts and needs in order to protect bilateral relations in a respectful manner, mutual negotiation for the solution of problems and gaining new skills to set boundaries.

Dialectical behavior therapy intervention strategies can be grouped under four headings. These; dialectical strategies, communication strategies, core strategies (affirmation and problem solving), and case management strategies [2]. Dialectical Strategies; strategies that enable the organization of the therapy session. The therapist both develops and responds to the opposition that arises. Entering the paradox and playing devil's advocate are dialectical strategies. In the first strategy, the therapist addresses the contradictions in the client's behavior, the therapy process, or the reality that the client is dealing with in general and brings them before the client. It is a strategy used for the client to experience the synthesis between different views by tolerating the contradictions and confusions. In the strategy of playing devil's advocate, the therapist brings a

dysfunctional belief adopted by the client to therapy. The therapist and client try to resolve this belief by discussing it [2]. Core strategies are validation and problem-solving strategies. In terms of the affirmation strategy, affirmation is about the therapist's ability to consider the client's behavior, why he/she has chosen that behavior, how his/her psychological mood affects that behavior and to explain the situations in client's life periphering the client's action or behavior. It can be realized in five ways; It is done by actively listening to the client's experiences, retransmitting the heard experience to the client, conveying the experience that was not verbally expressed by the client, addressing, and approving the client's reactions in terms of the client's past experiences and learnings, and finally approving the client's experiences in terms of their current situation. With the fourth and fifth stages, the process is separated from the basic counseling skills of reflection and empathic feedback. For example, the therapist uses the fourth stage affirmation strategy, "I understand very well that you don't trust me now, considering your experiences with previous therapists"; or using the fifth level validation strategy, "I totally understand why you don't trust me considering you just got to know me" [2]. In problem-solving techniques, the therapist ensures that the client fully accepts the problem and deals with it realistically. This process, which starts with behavior analysis, continues with solution analysis in order to find the necessary steps for a solution. At this stage, the therapist can use skills training, exposure or cognitive regulation methods found in the traditional behavioral method. The therapist can use some techniques to ensure that the client will take the necessary steps for a solution. One of these techniques is the "Foot-in-the-door" technique. In this technique, the therapist asks the client to implement a solution that he or she thinks will be acceptable. In this way, the therapist will be able to elevate the solutions that the client will approve to more difficult. Thus, the client will not be uneasy about the application by taking smaller steps [2]. Communication strategies, on the other hand, refer to the form of communication that exists between the therapist and the client during the therapy. There should be a form of mutual communication in which active listening, warmth and empathy are conveyed by the therapist. However, it may be necessary to make confrontations, and care is taken to make the language used in these times not disrespectful, but with a language that creates a difference or attention to the client [2]. Case management strategies are strategies to maintain the balance between the client's needs in the therapy process and the therapist's needs that may arise in this process [2].

## **2. Case Presentation**

The client (Mr. C.) is a 27-year-old male. He graduated from the Faculty of Sports Sciences in 2016 and completed his master's degree in 2019. While his family was living in Adana in Turkey, he is currently living with a friend from school in Kayseri in Turkey, where he came for undergraduate education. After his undergraduate education, he worked for a few times in different job positions. He wants to continue her master's education with a doctorate, so he studies to increase his low language score. However, he cannot motivate himself to study. On the other hand, the client has a problem that causes distress in his life, makes him uneasy and significantly reduces his quality of life. About six months ago, his relationship, which had been going on for 6 years and which he had decided to marry, ended. This situation consumed all of the life energy of the client, causing intense and overwhelming feelings and deep despair.

## **3. Psychological Counseling Process**

The client requested counseling voluntarily. During the interview with the client, the client's demographic information was obtained, the scope of the problem was evaluated, and the confidentiality principle was explained.

Mr. C. stated that he had experienced intense stress since breaking up with his fiancée. In addition, the client stated that he had been suffering from intense tooth and jaw pain due to grinding his teeth at night for the last year, and therefore he went to the doctor many times. He also experienced pain and swelling in his left leg four months ago. He was seen by doctors in the branches of orthopedics and traumatology, neurology, cardiovascular surgery, and physiotherapy, but no diagnosis could be made. He could not stand up and walk due to leg pain during the first two to three months, when he stayed with his family due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

After starting the sessions with the client, there were delays in the planning of the sessions due to the client's employment, moving to another city and settling in, and workload. For this reason, nine sessions lasting an average of 1 hour were held and the sessions are still continuing. In the sessions, both the philosophy of Dialectical Behavior Therapy and the strategies and techniques it recommends were used. In addition, it was decided to conduct psychoeducation with the theme of healthy relationships and interaction in relationships for the next sessions.

#### **4. First Sessions**

It covers the first and second session. The first sessions are the sessions in which the client's problem situations are listened to. The relationship of the client, which had been going on for six years, had to end about six months ago, and this unexpected and shocking situation caused the client to experience intense and overwhelming feelings. The client experiences intense indecision between starting the relationship again or terminating it completely. The forced separation that comes unexpectedly and suddenly in the relationship causes the client to constantly and intensely remember the past during the day, not be able to focus on his daily work, not be able to do what he needs to do against the goals he has set for himself, show introverted behaviors due to the forced separation he has experienced.

The first relationship of the client, before this six-year relationship, also ended when the other party cheated. The second experience of being cheated both increased the current emotional intensity of the client and caused him to develop negative feelings and irrational thoughts about future close relationships. The fact that he has not found a job since 2019, not get enough language points to start his doctoral education, and not complete the second part of the first level certificate he received on paragliding caused him to think of himself as inadequate. Before being cheated, there were other problems in the relationship too. The last year of the six-year relationship has passed with disagreements and pointless arguments. The fact that these disagreements and fights initiated by the client's fiancé are often without reason appears to be an important indicator of the factors leading to the end of the relationship. During this last year, the client's withdrawal from these arguments and disagreements caused the relationship to deteriorate further.

The client wants to be an academician but has difficulty in obtaining the required language score for the doctorate. The reason for the difficulty is that he can not give himself to the English course lessons mentally, so he begins the process, but he is not able to finish it. For the client, the reason is that unable to find a suitable job for three years. Finding a job means he can make a living so he can marry. Not finding a job made the client postpone all plans regarding the marriage. At that time Mr. C. felt not only the pressure coming from unable to find a job but also the expectation of his family regarding marriage date. So, this deception had a shocking effect on the client giving way to intense and depressing feelings for the next six months following deception, and the tension he experienced in all of his bilateral relations, along with the fact that he constantly had retrospective

memories, and all these problems. In addition, physical symptoms such as pain in the leg for no reason, inability to stand up, grinding and clenching teeth at night, and jaw pain indicate that the client has experienced intense stress and distress.

Negative results in job searches cause hopelessness against future possibilities. In dialectical behavior therapy, this past and future-oriented thinking due to the inability of the person to live in the moment causes the emotions he feels to intensify.

Although the client's relationship has ended, there has been no acceptance against this ending. In order for change and healing to occur in dialectical behavior therapy, first of all, acceptance must be felt. The existence of a negative situation in which acceptance is experienced is related to experiencing such a process and experiencing everything despite all rejections.

The fact that the client's previous relationship also resulted in with deception, seems to make the client has difficulties in interaction and communication, especially in close relationships. The existence of the problems experienced in interpersonal relationships arising from these negative, intense, and overwhelming emotions can be handled with dialectical behavior therapy. The client always appears in a position of forgiving and assuming responsibility. This situation seems to have led to the formation of low self-respect in the client and a one-sided value perception in the dynamic of the relationship established with the other party in close romantic relationships.

The client stated that his ex-fiancee wanted them to be together again, but he could not make this decision by feeling and thinking rationally. This dilemma experienced by the counselee, that is, between re-starting or ending a relationship with his ex-fiancee, is felt very intensely both in her gestures and facial expressions and in the tone of his voice.

The most basic purpose expressed by the client in the sessions was expressed as the resolution of the dilemma experienced and the reduction of the intensity of these intense emotions.

## **5. Intervention Stages**

As the sessions continue, the intervention phase is still ongoing. During the intervention phase, dialectical behavior therapy strategies and techniques were used, and skill training areas were tried to be developed. The primary purpose is that the client's daily work and activities can be continued in the face of these intense and overwhelming feelings; duties and responsibilities can be fulfilled; to bring an awareness that enjoys living and finds life valuable.

In order to develop tolerance to stress, a change in attitudes must be made. This situation is referred to as "radical acceptance" [8]. Often, a sufferer's first reaction to the situation is to be angry, upset, or blaming the person causing the pain, often preventing a full analysis of the situation. Being self-critical, being overly judgmental, or being overly upset causes more suffering, overlooks details, and inability to react. Radical acceptance requires accepting the situation without judgment or self-criticism [2]. It means being able to look at one's experiences from a different perspective [1]. Dialectic means comparing and balancing two different things. In Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, this balance occurs between change and acceptance [8]. It is the balance between accepting that it is necessary to change the behaviors that cause suffering in life and accepting oneself as he/she is. Radical acceptance is one of the most difficult skills because it requires looking at oneself and the world in a different way. It is being able to accept something without criticizing it. Radical acceptance is being able to accept the present moment without

fighting it, getting angry, or trying to turn it into something it isn't [1]. The client was deceived by her fiancé, and the fact that this was done at the end of a six-year relationship, just before the wedding, and at a time when all her family members and friends were waiting, pushed the client to intense emotions. Although six months have passed since the incident, the client still experiences feelings of anger, anger, disappointment, and hatred on one side and longing on the other, so intensely that it affects the whole day. He could not accept the deception incident and, with a self-critical point of view, states that this incident happened to him because of his own deficiencies and mistakes. For this reason, it is considered important to develop the ability to accept radically. The client should primarily accept that a negative experience has been experienced without criticizing, judging, and worrying too much about the cause of the event. This acceptance gives the person the strength to move on with life and also provides a more logical evaluation of the problems. Gaining the ability to accept radically requires internalization that will take place over a wide and long period of time.

One of the most important purposes of Dialectical Behavior Therapy in order to develop tolerance to stress is to help stop doing self-destructive behaviors (criticizing and humiliating, etc.) [8]. For this purpose, the therapist tries to teach the client some alternative actions. For this purpose, it has been tried to create an environment in which the client can say whatever he wants to say to his fiancée in therapy. Initially, it was suggested to write a letter, then it was suggested to write an e-mail or send a message on the phone. The client stated that he first wanted to know when the problem with his relationship started with his fiancée. He stated that he wanted to get the answer to this question in order to understand the mood of his fiancée at that time. The client also wants to ask his fiancée why he confessed to him so late. The client stated that it would be easier for him to forgive if he had heard the truth in the first place. The client was asked to focus on the extent of forgiveness, that is, acceptance, can be realistic? The client stated that there can be no real forgiveness here because he feels that acceptance is superficial at that moment. This has led the client to gain a clearer awareness of the past and the future, and in the distant moment and emotions. Later, the counselor wanted to focus on what it might mean for the client to end this relationship for the same reason as the first relationship, and the possibility of the client's excesses that obscure him in the relationship was explored. In particular, he mentioned that his own opinion was not seen as valuable in a relationship and stated that he covered it up in order to avoid problems. On the other hand, the counselor stated that the interaction cycle that develops in close romantic relationships will come to light again when any relationship starts again, because personality traits will be reflected in the process again, and it was questioned how such a situation can be perceived from the client's point of view. In addition, it is given as homework for the client to think about what it means to be in a relationship where he or she feels worthless, to ignore it in a way that covers it, and to think about different interaction problems.

It is considered important to do activities that the person enjoys before experiencing overwhelming feelings. For example, exercising has emerged in research as an effective treatment for depression [9]; It is also a very effective pain reliever because it provides the release of endorphins in the body, which is the secretion that occurs when the person injures himself or herself [1]. The client's interest in paragliding and helping his friend in the works that require physical assistance at the master's thesis caused the client to relax and to get away from the feelings that bother him.

Another of the skills to increase tolerance for distress is to occupy the mind with a comfortable image, to imagine an environment in which the person will feel comfortable. For this purpose, "safe place visualization" activity was conducted [1].

*“To begin, sit in a comfortable chair and place your feet flat on the floor. Let your arms rest comfortably on the arms of the chair or on your lap. Close your eyes. Take a long, slow breath through your nose. As you breathe in, feel your stomach inflate like a balloon. Hold for five seconds. Then slowly exhale through your mouth. Feel your stomach collapse like a balloon. Repeat three times. Now start taking slow and long breaths without holding and keep going. Breathe softly for the remainder of this exercise...” [1].*

It is important to dissipate thoughts in order to develop a tolerance for distress. The harder one tries not to think, the more powerfully the brain brings it into their thoughts. The more a person tries to forget, the stronger the brain will try to remember. For this reason, in therapy, the client is taught that instead of trying to forget, it is possible to get away from overwhelming feelings and thoughts with different thoughts or images [1].

Conscious Awareness refers to the ability to be aware of your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and behaviors as you live, without judging yourself or criticizing your experience [1]. However, another situation as important as this; thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors do not occur in the same way in every event. Therefore, it is important to learn to be aware of the variability of experiences in every moment of life. It is thought that the past-oriented perspective that appears with the client's recollection of the past, not being able to forget the old times, and constant flashbacks during the day affects the client's being in the present. Likewise, the fact that he has decided that he cannot experience the same feelings with another person in the future is thought to show that he is also thinking about the future. In all conversations of the client, thoughts, or feelings about either the past or the future stand out. It is noteworthy that even getting a job, which he had stated as looking forward to a long time, did not seem to make a difference in this respect. However, getting rid of the past and the future and focusing on what is lived in the moment is an important condition for conscious awareness. Even if the person can be in the moment, he can evaluate his problems more realistically and make healthy decisions. For this reason, the question of what could be the characteristics of healthy relationships was directed in order to draw the client from the past or the future and to concentrate on the present. The client, while describing the partner characteristics that he wants to have in healthy relationships, stated the component of facilitating life, altruism, and loyalty that he thinks is important at the moment. Afterwards, the client was asked to think about the forgivable and unforgivable features in the relationship, and the client was tried to withdraw into the present. The client stated that the unforgivable feature is also related to loyalty and expressed that he started to be more realistic and stated that there is a difference in intensity of deception experience between the first time he experienced the event and now. The client mentioned that by being realistic here, he gained an awareness that the fault did not originate from himself, and that he moved away from self-criticism and judgment.

It is necessary for the client to get rid of the past life that distress and to be able to live in the moment. Constant flashbacks related to the top act happy moments makes the client feel hopelessness about the future. Three-year job search process and negative job interviews also hinders to focus on the present and the present time. For this, the client should be able to experience a logical thinking style in which emotion and rational thinking are balanced, instead of the overly emotional thinking style that develops as a result of negative experiences and unfavorable future imaginations. The process continued with mindful awareness-building activities (focusing on the moment, identifying emotions, developing behavior analysis, etc.).

The first step in emotion regulation skills is to define and name the emotion that the client feels exactly. For this, the client is guided by the therapist in terms of defining the event that brings out the emotion, thinking about the explanations that can be made from different angles, evaluating the event phenomenologically, including the physical sensations, specifying the behaviors that appear after the emotion, and thinking about the general effects that occur as a result of this emotion-behavior process [8]. In the case, the client expressed the dilemma he experienced by making it clear with his emotions. He expressed both his grudge and his love. In addition, he stated that he could not forgive even though he wanted to forgive. The counselor wanted to ask what forgiveness means for him and tried to embody the process. For the client, forgiveness appeared to be equivalent to accepting, and the counselor asked the client to explain what the obstacles were in front of his acceptance. The counselee stated that the biggest obstacle was whether to return or not to his ex-fiancee due to the probable anxiety he feels if he would experience the same event again in the future. In the meantime, he talked about the fact that his days were spent constantly conflicting between forgiveness and unforgiveness, and that he always wanted to create an excuse to forgive.

The second stage in emotion regulation can remove the barriers to changing emotions. Considering the functions of emotions, they are used as a means of communication in the form of controlling and manipulating the behavior of other people, or as a means of confirming one's own attitudes and behaviors. For this reason, there may be situations that reinforce the behaviors caused by emotions. Especially, these situations in which negative emotions are felt should be understood [8]. The counselor asked the client about the satisfaction he felt in their relationship before cheating, then asked him to determine what relationship characteristics he wanted to have, and finally, to compare them. He stated that he realized that many factors, such as not being remembered on special occasions, not taking into account his suggestions, and his fiancee's problematic way of speaking, were actually there in the relationship.

Finally, in therapy, which aims to develop interpersonal interaction skills, the therapist helps clients learn effective interpersonal skills, change their negative social environment by using problem-solving skills and assertiveness skills, and develop more effective relationships [8]. For this purpose, it is also aimed to provide training and psychoeducational information for these skill trainings in the next sessions of therapy.

## **6. Evaluation**

The counseling process, nine sessions of which were given above, was handled from the perspective of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy and session planning was made accordingly. The reason behind seeing this therapy method as compatible with the case is the intense and overwhelming feelings that the client has been feeling for about 5-6 months. The physical symptoms that occur in the presence of these emotions reveal the magnitude of the stress felt. In addition, the client cannot resolve the dilemma he is experiencing because he cannot accept cheating. Acceptance and the accompanying change and the feeling of relief that will emerge afterward are the reasons for choosing this therapy for the case. Although the client was willing to explain in the first sessions during the counseling process, he expressed the same arguments and the same dilemma as the therapy goes on for four sessions. This gave me a negative feeling about that the therapy doesn't work. For this reason, the counselor felt helpless, especially in the fourth session, and informed the client that the process would not progress if he was not active in the process. The fifth session could be done after a long break (approximately 3 weeks). In this session, that was delayed due to the client's entry and placement in a new job and workload, the counselor's uneasiness and helplessness

disappeared when the client's reflection on previous sessions, the awareness he gained, and his more collaborative nature were seen.

There are parts that cannot be emphasized in the first nine sessions. In the following sessions, it is aimed primarily to acquire social skills such as assertiveness and problem solving related to both friends and close romantic relationships in order to develop interpersonal skills. Apart from this, it is necessary to develop conscious awareness skills. With these skills, when a person experiences stressful situations, he or she can make more logical evaluations by leaving the negative life. Awareness of the moment in which one lives will make it easier to realize that the event has been lived and finished and will enable him to better grasp the causes of the complaints that arise in his body. Extra work needs to be done on emotion regulation skills as well. Seeing what emotions and behaviors the client's behaviors cause on the other side, understanding what feelings and behaviors the other party's behaviors cause to him should be evaluated with behavior analysis, and accordingly, it should be emphasized that the parties mutually affect each other and how this cycle can be corrected by making it healthy.

## 7. Conclusion

Since the therapy has not been terminated, the current point can be explained instead of talking about a general result. The intensity of the intense and overwhelming feelings that the client felt when starting the therapy decreased. The degree of indecision experienced decreased, and the client began to focus more on normal life, daily work and activities, and activities that would give him happiness.

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