

## Interventions to Aid in Symptom Relief: How Parents Can Help

When we see our child struggling, it is helpful to know how to help them. Being able to use therapeutic skills to aid your child in reducing the uncomfortable symptoms they are experiencing is absolutely a helpful tool.

A therapeutic modality that is evidenced based and has shown efficacy in treating mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). In DBT, the idea is focusing on the dialectic, meaning there is an opposite of everything in which we tend to be the most effective when we find balance between opposites.<sup>1</sup> We find this balance by incorporating and/or including ideas from two opposite ends of a spectrum.<sup>2</sup> The additional important dialectic in DBT is acceptance and change. With acceptance, one is non-judgmentally understanding oneself, others and the corresponding world that one lives in. Once acceptance occurs, one is not trying to change the issue but instead noticing it and taking it for what it is. On the opposite side is change where one is attempting to do something different to address something that is not working. Once the focus on change occurs, you focus on doing rather than acceptance.<sup>1</sup>

Below are some ideas of skills parents can use with their child when they need support in the moment. These first three skills are focused on distress tolerance where our goal is to not only be able to tolerate distressing emotions but to be able to reduce the emotional mind quickly before actions impulsively occur.<sup>3</sup>

### Paced Breathing<sup>3</sup>

- Goal here is to pace the breathing by slowing it down
- Breathe deeply into your belly
- Slow your pace of inhaling and exhaling way down (on average, five to six breaths per minute)
- Breathe *out* more slowly than you breathe *in* (for example, 5 seconds in and 7 seconds out)

### Paired Muscle Relaxation<sup>3</sup>

- Goal is to calm down by pairing muscle relaxation with breathing out
- While breathing into your belly deeply tense your body muscles (*not* so much to cause a cramp)
- Notice the tension in your body
- While breathing out, say the word “Relax” in your mind
- Let go of the tension
- Notice the difference in your body

### Intense Exercise<sup>3</sup>

- Goal is to calm the body down when the emotions are revved up
  - *Note: any intense exercise will increase the heart rate, so make sure to consult with your doctor before using this skill if you have a heart or medical condition, a lowered base heart rate due to medications or take a beta-blocker*
- Engage in exercise, if only for a short while

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<sup>1</sup> Eich, J., 2015. *Dialectical behavior therapy skills training with adolescents*. Eau Claire: PESI Publishing and Media, pp.1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Linehan, M.M., 1993. *Skills training manual for treating borderline personality disorder*. Guildford Press: New York.

<sup>3</sup> Linehan, M., 2014. *DBT skills training handouts and worksheets*. 2nd ed. New York: Guildford Press.

- Expend your body's stored up physical energy by running, walking fast, jumping, playing basketball, lifting weight, etc.

An additional skill that could be used within the DBT framework is under the concept of emotion regulation. The specific skill is called Cope Ahead where we help the individual identify how they will plan to essentially cope with a stressor that is likely to happen in the future. By doing this with your child, not only are you aiding them in identifying a healthy coping skill to use in the moment of a trigger, but it also allows you, as the parent, to gain insight into what can help your child when they face distress. Essentially, you are coming up with a game plan for when the trigger or stressor occurs.

#### Coping Ahead of Time with Difficult Situations<sup>3</sup>

1. Describe the situation that is likely to prompt problem behavior.
  - a. Check the facts – be specific in describing the situation
  - b. Name the emotions and actions likely to interfere with using the skills
2. Decide what coping or problem-solving skills can be used in the situation
  - a. Be specific – write out in detail how to cope with the situations with the likely associated emotions and action urges
3. Imagine the situation
  - a. Imagine as vividly as possible and imagine the situation as if you are in it right NOW; try not to “watch” the situation
4. Rehearse coping effectively
  - a. What can be done to cope; practice the actions and think the thoughts that could be experienced
5. Practice relaxation after rehearsing

An additional and more in depth relaxation technique based in Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is progressive muscle relaxation. This exercise allows for the individual to connect how their body is tensing in response to a trigger or anxious/negative thought and mental imagery in attempts to relax. Please see the separate handout on working through this exercise.