

Using Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills to Cope with Chronic Illness



By Stephanie Lauer, MHC

THOSE OF US with chronic illness are constantly trying to find ways to cope with something that just will not go away. Let's face it, chronic illness is here for the long run, which leaves us with three options: 1) feel miserable about it, 2) feel better about it or 3) accept it. I admit that I am often stuck with the first option! And, while the second option sounds great, it's not realistic. That leaves us with the third option: accepting our condition for what it is. This is where using dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) skills can help.

Four DBT Skills

The term "acceptance" doesn't always conjure up happy emotions. But, this is because, oftentimes, individuals incorrectly define what acceptance really means. Acceptance is not giving up. It is not agreeing with the situation. And, it is not pretending to be happy about something difficult. Acceptance is staying in the here and now while acknowledging that we cannot change what is happening so we might as well stop fighting it. One core DBT skill is called radical acceptance, which means completely

accepting something for what it is, bad or good. It's completely accepting reality. Once we stop fighting something we cannot change, we can finally begin to find some peace.

Another DBT skill is called IMPROVE. This skill can be especially beneficial if used daily in whole or even in part. IMPROVE stands for imagery, meaning, prayer, relaxation, once a day do something you are good at, vacation and encouragement. Imagery is a popular concept right now, so you may have a good idea of what some imagery tasks could be. For me, coloring mandalas is fun (adult coloring is the thing to do right now!). Meaning could translate into trying to find meaning out of the not-so-good things that happen. Most of us know what prayer is, but if you do not pray, time in nature could be a great alternative. Relaxation does not have to be a day at the spa, but could be a few minutes to yourself just chilling out on the couch. Once a day, do something you are good at: Whatever is fine! Perhaps you are an awesome cook or are good at repairing things? Vacation is similar to relaxation; it could be a 10-minute vacation doing something you don't normally get to do such as a walk around the block or even a

bubble bath. Finally, encouragement could mean being your own cheerleader. Hey, someone needs to do it!

My favorite DBT skill is an easy one called opposite action (O2a). While this is self-explanatory, it is also met with the most resistance. I am not suggesting you should go out and run a mile when you are feeling ill. Instead, try to identify how you are feeling and the actions you normally take when you are feeling that way. For example, I often get upset after having a conversation with a loved one or friend who makes light of my situation or gives unsolicited advice. I usually withdraw when this happens. With opposite action, I would do the opposite and interact. I might post on a support group what happened, or call someone who I know could offer a bit of support. Opposite action might also include pushing myself to do some cleaning or take a brief walk. Again, do what you can. Only you know what your limits are. Sometimes you might need to just rest.

We all know how difficult it can be to communicate with friends and families about our needs and wants. There is one DBT skill in particular that can really help us to communicate our needs to others. DEAR MAN stands for describe, express,

assert, reinforce, mindful, appear confident and negotiate. Although this sounds cheesy and simple, it can be effective. In essence, it means to describe only the facts of a situation before using feeling words, and to be assertive while also being mindful of what others might be feeling. Many of us get into the habit of apologizing for needing something. While apologies are sometimes needed, they can also be overused. Part of appearing confident is not apologizing when we don't need to. This can be a tough habit to break, but it does work when help is needed.

Start Here, But Branch Out

These four DBT skills can be very helpful, but there are a lot more DBT skills out there. A simple Google search will turn them up. As with other skills, these will take some practice to get used to. So, start using your new skills today. I look forward to hearing about how they work! 📌

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