



Charlie Health's Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) Skills Guide

Mindfulness

Distress
Tolerance

Interpersonal
Effectiveness

Emotional
Regulation

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Letter from Charlie Health's Chief Clinical Officer

To Charlie Health parents, guardians, and caregivers:

When it comes to engaging teens and adults in mental health treatment, we know that family involvement is crucial. Research shows that clients are more likely to complete treatment and achieve recovery when family members participate in their care.

That's why I'm excited to share with you this comprehensive guide to dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) skills—a cornerstone of our treatment approach at Charlie Health. In this guide, you'll find an overview of all the DBT skills your loved one is learning in treatment, plus examples of how to practice them at home as a family.

I hope this resource empowers you to support your loved one in treatment and practice skills to improve your family's communication and overall mental health. Working together as a family is the most sustainable path to healing—we couldn't do it without you.



Sincerely,



Dr. Caroline Fenkel, MSS, DSW, LCSW

DBT 101

Mindfulness

Distress
tolerance

Interpersonal
effectiveness

Emotional
regulation

What is DBT?

DBT is a type of talk therapy designed to help people understand and regulate their emotions to improve their interpersonal relationships.

It includes a mix of individual therapy and group skills training sessions.

DBT was initially developed in the 1980s to treat people with suicidal ideation and borderline personality disorder (BPD) but has since been adapted to treat people with a wider variety of mental health conditions, including major depressive disorder (MDD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders.

It has been found to reduce anger, suicidal ideation, symptoms of depression, and self-harm but is not a substitute for immediate crisis support. People who are experiencing life-threatening mental health symptoms should contact a local emergency department or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.

What does the “dialectical” in DBT mean?

The core principle of DBT is understanding and accepting that two opposite thoughts can both be true at the same time—a concept known as a dialectical framework.

Dialectical thinking teaches that there is always more than one way to see a situation and highlights the importance of not looking at the world in absolutes—like “right” and “wrong” or “good” and “bad.”

One of the most important dialectics in DBT is acceptance and change. In DBT, people are encouraged to explore and accept their feelings while simultaneously working on replacing challenging behaviors with helpful skills.

Examples of dialectical frameworks of thinking include:

- I need help, and I don’t know where to start
- I want to make new friends, and I am shy
- I self-harmed today, and I want to stop

How are DBT skills used at Charlie Health?

At Charlie Health, DBT is practiced in individual therapy and group sessions.

Individual therapy sessions allow people to discuss interpersonal issues and learn how to handle them using DBT skills.

Those skills are then reinforced during group sessions, where people can practice DBT skills in a supportive environment with peers dealing with similar mental health challenges.

What are the main skills taught in DBT?

The main DBT skills fall into one of four categories:

Mindfulness:

Skills that help you become aware and accepting of the present moment.

Distress tolerance:

Skills that teach you how to use healthy coping techniques to navigate difficult situations instead of defaulting to destructive behaviors.

Interpersonal effectiveness:

Skills that empower you to better understand your needs and communicate them to others.

Emotional regulation:

Skills that help you recognize and change emotions before they become unhealthy feelings or behaviors.

Welcome to Your DBT Diary Card

The DBT diary card is an essential tool for tracking your emotions, behaviors, urges, and the skills you're practicing between therapy sessions.

By filling it out regularly, you'll gain a deeper understanding of patterns in your thoughts and actions and learn how the skills you're developing impact your day-to-day life.

How do I use the Diary Card?

By using your diary card consistently, you'll develop a clearer picture of your emotional and behavioral landscape, giving you more control over your actions and decisions.

Daily entries

Make it a habit to complete your diary card each day. This will help you track any emotional changes, urges, or behaviors that occur.

Track your skills

DBT teaches various skills like mindfulness, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. Note which skills you've practiced and how they worked for you.

Be honest

The diary card is a judgment-free zone. It's a tool for self-awareness and growth, so try to be as honest and detailed as possible.

Share with your therapist

Bring your completed diary card to each therapy session. This will help guide the conversation, highlight areas of progress, and pinpoint where additional support is needed.

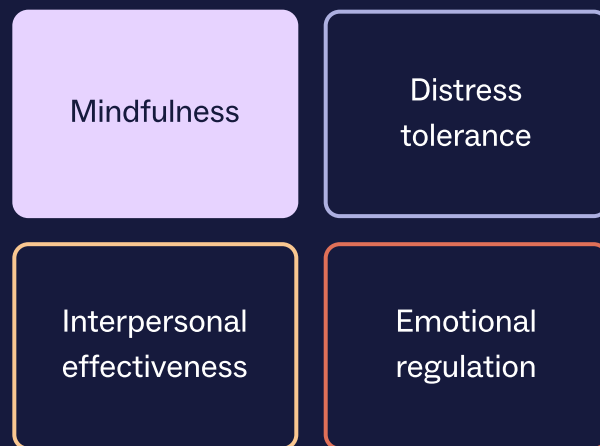
This diary card can help you monitor your use of the DBT coping mechanisms we'll be discussing. Simply check off each day that you use the skills!

M T W T F S S

- **Distress**
Tolerance

[illegible]

The “What” Skills of Mindfulness



Being mindful gives you more control over your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. When you're more aware of and accepting of the present moment, you're less likely to act impulsively.

Mindfulness can reduce your emotional suffering, help you make important decisions, and help you build compassion for yourself and others.

The “what” skills of mindfulness are the exercises you can practice to strengthen your mindfulness muscles.

The “what” skills of mindfulness are:

- **Observe**
Notice what is going on around you using your five senses, and notice what is going on internally by acknowledging your thoughts and emotions.
- **Describe**
Put into words what you observe. Label your observations and focus solely on the facts—not interpretations. Remember: your feelings are valid, but that doesn't mean they're facts.
- **Participate**
Engage in activities that keep you grounded in the present moment.

Here's an example:

Sam is walking to school on a cold morning and can't stop worrying with thoughts like, “I'm missing out on what's going on with my friends because my hands are too cold to check my phone.” Sam's also angry that their mom didn't drive them to school, which is only making it harder for them to calm down.

Realizing that their emotions are starting to feel overwhelming, Sam takes a breath, pauses, and begins to practice the “what” skills of mindfulness.

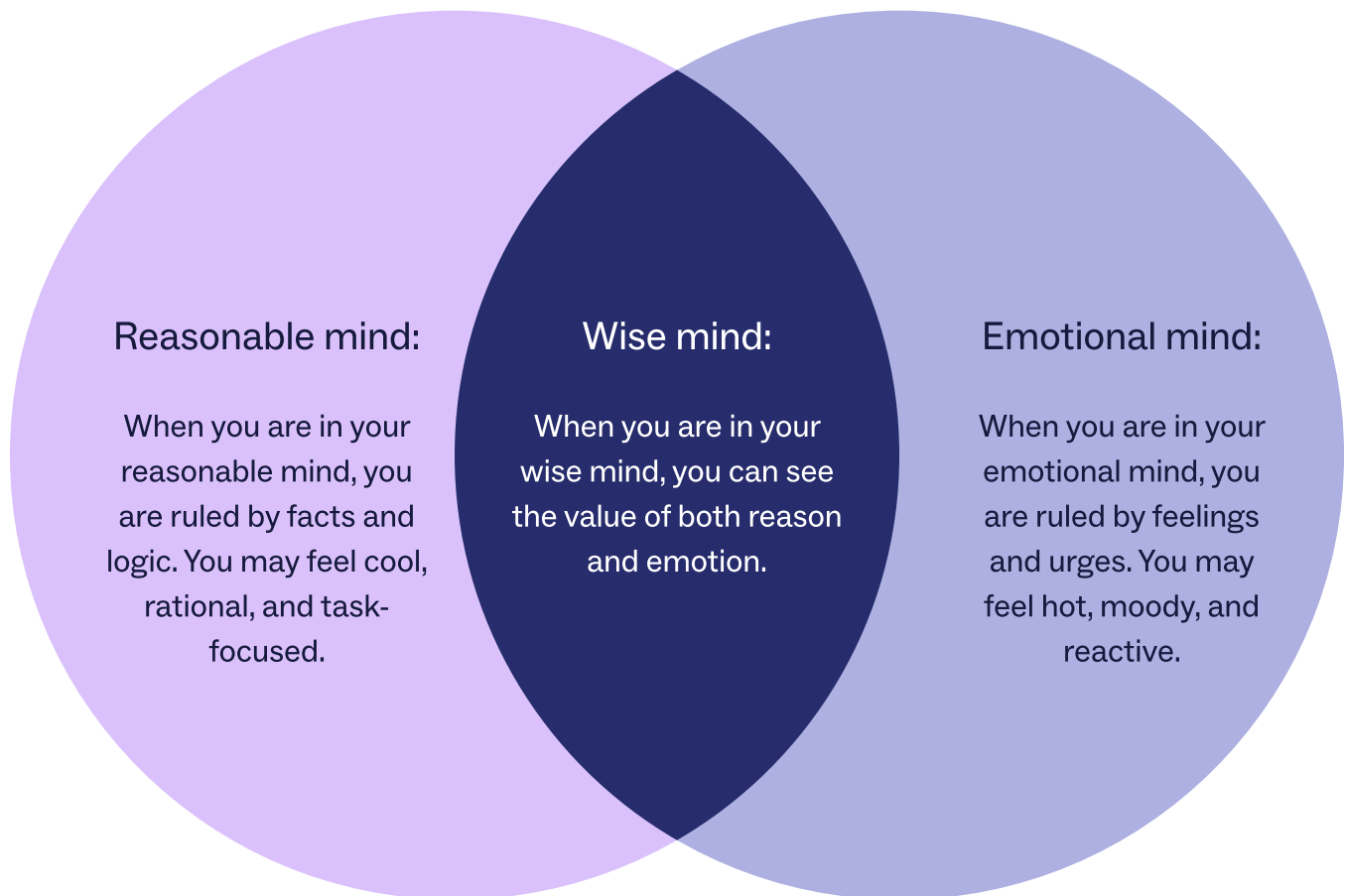
They observe the frost on the ground, the smell of a fireplace, and the feeling of their numb fingers. They describe these observations: “I see the dew freezing on the ground, I smell someone making a fire in a house nearby, I feel my fingers going numb because of the cold air.” They participate in the activity of the present moment by continuing to walk to school.

In doing so, Sam feels more relaxed, more focused, and more prepared to start the school day calmly.

Skills

Wise mind:

Your “wise mind” is the joining of your left brain (the “reasonable mind”) and right brain (the “emotional mind”).



Let's practice at home

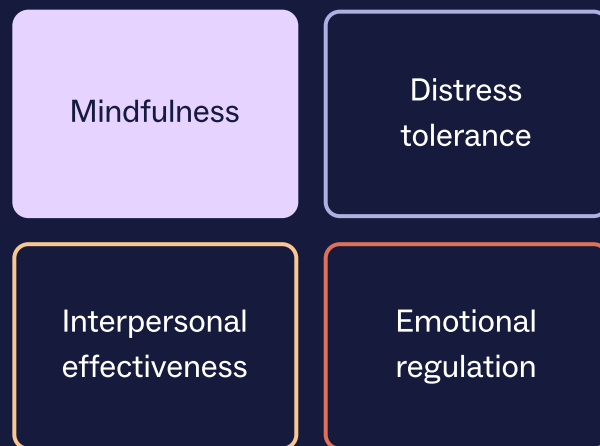
When you practice mindfulness skills, you are encouraging your wise mind. Try practicing these skills with a loved one by taking a mindful walk together. While you are on the walk, take turns observing, describing, and participating.

Observe your surrounds with your five senses (sight, smell, taste, sound, touch)

Describe

Participate

Radical Acceptance



Radical acceptance means accepting a given moment or situation as it is. This doesn't mean you have to like your life all the time; it is simply about accepting reality as it is.

- Example: If someone breaks up with you, practicing radical acceptance means accepting the reality that this person does not want to be with you. You don't need to be happy about their decision to break up with you, but you need to accept it and move forward while taking care of yourself.

Radical acceptance is for when things in your life don't go the way you want them to. You don't need to wait for a crisis to use this skill; it can be used at any time.

Over time, embracing radical acceptance helps you participate in life as it is—even if it's not quite how you'd ideally like. When things aren't going your way, this skill encourages you to make positive changes (sometimes called “healthy rebellion”) in a way that doesn't hurt yourself or others.

Skills

Healthy rebellion

When you are unhappy with things as they are in this moment, it's normal to want to rebel against them, but there are unhealthy and healthy ways to rebel.

- Unhealthy rebellion is often done in secret, features extreme behaviors, can be damaging for relationships, and leads to a lack of trust. Examples include:
 - Speeding while driving
 - Sneaking out
 - Breaking rules or the law
 - Using substances in an unhealthy way

- Healthy rebellion can help us grow, involves creativity and open communication, and features gradual behavioral changes. Examples include:
 - Singing loudly
 - Getting a dramatic haircut
 - Wearing bright clothing or makeup

Let's practice at home

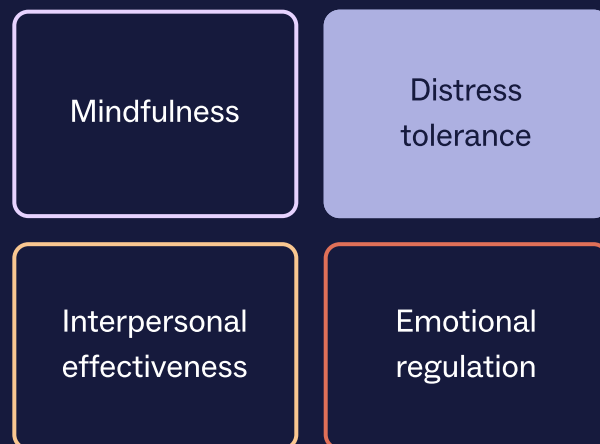
Try journaling about radical acceptance and healthy rebellion. Consider the following questions (and share as a family as you feel comfortable):

Where in your life do you need to practice radical acceptance?

What might change in your life if you practice acceptance?

What are some ways you can be rebellious without harming yourself or others?

Crisis Survival

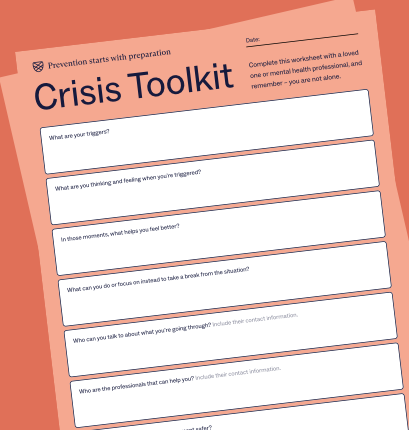


A crisis is a highly stressful, short-term situation where the people involved feel intense pressure to resolve the situation immediately.

Crisis survival skills are concrete things you can do to tolerate painful feelings that arise during a crisis and survive the crisis.

- Remember: crisis survival skills should be used in crises—short-term, stressful situations where you feel overwhelmed and want to act on emotions but should instead act logically. We don't use crisis survival skills to manage every single problem or day-to-day issue.

These crisis survival skills will help you survive the crisis without making things worse, help you accept the reality of the present moment, and free you from the need to respond to every feeling or urge you have.



The image shows a worksheet titled "Crisis Toolkit" with the subtitle "Prevention starts with preparation". It includes a date field and a note: "Complete this worksheet with a loved one or mental health professional, and remember - you are not alone." The worksheet has several sections with prompts: "What are your triggers?", "What are you thinking and feeling when you're triggered?", "In those moments, what helps you feel better?", "What can you do or focus on instead to take a break from the situation?", "Who can you talk to about what you're going through? (include their contact information.)", and "Who are the professionals that can help you? (include their contact information.)".

Crisis Resources at Charlie Health:

A mental health crisis can happen to anyone. Create your Crisis Toolkit today to empower yourself or a loved one with resources and support.

[Learn More](#)

Skills

STOP skill:

Stop:

Hit the pause button on your feelings and behaviors. Do not react.

Take a step back:

Distance yourself from the situation mentally. Take a deep breath or try another calming technique.

Observe:

Become aware of your feelings, thoughts, and the situation around you. Notice what is happening objectively (this is a place to practice the “what” skills of mindfulness; see page 8).

Proceed mindfully:

Make a deliberate choice about how to respond based on a clear understanding of the situation rather than acting impulsively.

Pro/Con list:

Instead of acting on an impulse or urge which could make things worse in the long term, make a list of the pros of making a choice and the cons of making a choice.

Pros:	Cons:
✓ _____	✗ _____
✓ _____	✗ _____
✓ _____	✗ _____

TIPP skill:

Temperature:

Change the temperature. Try taking a cold shower, splashing water on your face, or walking in cold, fresh air. If you'd prefer something warm, try taking a hot bath, sitting with a heating pad, or drinking a hot cup of tea.

Intense exercise:

Release your energy as a way of releasing feelings from your body. 10 minutes of jogging, jumping jacks, or any other mini-workout you like should do the trick.

Paced breathing:

Take slow, intentional breaths from your belly. Try to inhale for two to four seconds and exhale for a little longer, around four to six seconds.

Progressive muscle relaxation:

Tense and loosen your muscles one at a time. Tighten one muscle, such as your upper back or one of your arms. Hold it for five seconds, and then release it. Make your way through your body muscle by muscle.

ACCEPTS skill:

Activities:

Try something grounding or engaging, like going for a walk, doing a puzzle, or talking to a friend.

Contributing:

Distract yourself by being of service to others, even with something small. Clean out your closet for donations or surprise a loved one with a kind text.

Comparisons:

Think about a time when you felt differently than you do in the present moment. Remember that there are billions of people out there right now who are also dealing with big emotions.

Emotions:

Try to tap into an emotion other than the one you're currently dealing with. For example, if you're feeling sad, try watching a comedy. If you're feeling angry, listen to music that reminds you of someone you love.

Pushing away:

Visualize physically pushing the negative thoughts and emotions away. Imagine building a wall between yourself and the situation, box up the pain, and put it on the (imaginary) shelf.

Thoughts:

Direct your thoughts elsewhere from the current situation. Count by 7's as high as you can, read a book, or try a new recipe.

Sensations:

Engage your senses. Squeeze a stress ball as hard as you can, hold ice in your hand, take a hot shower, or sing as loudly as you can.

Let's practice at home

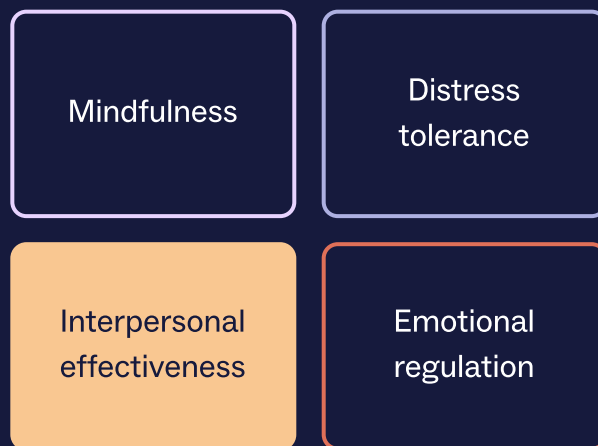
All of these skills can work in a crisis, but everyone has different preferences about which skill they like to use. Ask your loved one:

What is your go-to crisis survival skill?

How do you know if a crisis is coming on or happening?

How can I support you in practicing your go-to crisis survival skill if I notice you might be struggling?

Building Healthy Relationships



Everyone (including you!) is lovable, but building healthy relationships takes effort. This is a dialect: both are true!

Part of keeping and improving healthy relationships is learning how to ask for what we need and committing to navigating challenges together.

The way you act impacts other people, which is something to keep in mind when you're asking for your needs to be met. People are more likely to do what you're asking them when they feel cared for and respected.

You are also more likely to feel good about yourself when you treat others with care and respect.

There are tools you can use to ensure you ask for things and resolve conflicts in a healthy way, which is important for maintaining a healthy relationship.

Skills

DEAR MAN: A skill for better communication

Describe the situation:

Stick to the facts and tell the person exactly what you are reacting to. This can help prevent misunderstandings and ensure you and the other person are on the same page.

Express your feelings:

The other person won't know how you feel until you tell them. Remember to use "I" statements rather than "you" statements.

Assert yourself:

Explain what you need in a clear and direct way. This can include asking for something or saying no to something.

Reinforce your position:

Explain the positive effects of getting what you need so that the other person can see where you are coming from.

(Stay) Mindful of the other person:

Be sure to keep the conversation focused on the other person's feelings and needs even when communicating yours.

Appear confident:

Keep eye contact, keep your arms uncrossed and fists unclenched, and use a calm, commanding voice.

Negotiate:

Be willing to give to receive, offer, and ask for solutions.

GIVE: A skill used to maintain relationships

Particularly good to use when you are asking for something or saying no.

Gentle:

Be nice and respectful in your approach. Don't use attacks, threats, name-calling, =disrespectful language, or aggressive body language.

Act interested:

Listen to the other person and their point of view with open-ended questions and open body language.

Validate

Communicate to the other person that their thoughts and feelings are understandable. Use words like "I realize this is hard for you" or "I can see that you are upset." Also, use non-verbal language like nodding your head.

Easy manner:

You can be assertive and friendly at the same time. Use humor and smile.

Let's practice at home

People feel better—especially when they're under stress—when they're connected with others. But, when we're stressed, it can be easy to forget to reach out to the people who are there to help. Think about who your supporters are and write them down below. Remember: these are the people you can go to for help and with whom you want to build healthy relationships. Using communication skills like DEAR MAN and GIVE makes it more likely that these people will be there for you and that you will build healthy relationships with them.

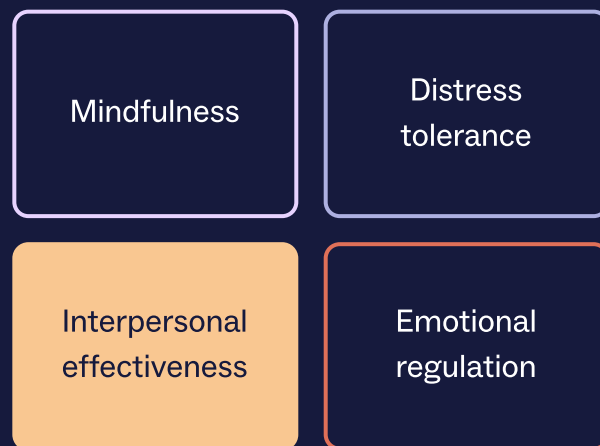
Family

Friends

Co-workers

Other

Repairing Relationships and Ending Destructive Relationships



Relationships should be equal; you should all give and take equally. But, sometimes, we get into toxic relationships that can negatively affect all aspects of our lives.

If you can answer “yes” to any of these questions, you might be in a toxic relationship:

- Does this person put me down?
- Are they asking me to change parts of myself?
- Am I only doing things they want to do?

If you realize that the relationship is unhealthy, build boundaries and stick to the ones that you want to set (e.g., spending less time with that person).

Remember: look out for yourself. You won’t be treated with love and respect unless you believe that you deserve these things.

Some relationships, though, can be repaired. If you think that the relationship is not toxic, consider using skills like DEAR MAN and GIVE to see if you can change patterns and move towards repairing.

Skills

Set boundaries

To end a toxic relationship, you’ll need to set boundaries and stick to them. Here’s how to do that:

- **Identify your boundaries:** Reflect on what you are comfortable with in the relationship and what behaviors or actions you find unacceptable.
- **Communicate assertively:** Clearly and assertively communicate your boundaries to the other person. Use “I” statements to express your needs and feelings.
- **Enforce your boundaries:** Be consistent in upholding your boundaries. If someone violates them, calmly communicate that you’re not okay with what happened and reiterate the boundary. For instance, if you set a boundary of not texting past 10 pm and the other person texts you, don’t respond and discuss this with them the following day.
- **Take care of yourself:** Setting boundaries is about taking care of your emotional and mental needs. Remember that it is okay to say no and prioritize yourself.

Forgiveness

For relationships with room for repair, forgiveness is can be a gift.

You can give this gift to people who are willing to communicate with you and make changes to be in a healthier relationship.

Forgiveness is a way to release feelings, let go of resentments, and move forward.

Let's practice at home

If you are uncertain if your relationship can be repaired or is destructive and needs to end, try talking with someone you trust about it. Consider these questions:

How do you feel when you're around this person? If they put you down, it could be a sign that this is a toxic relationship and might not benefit from forgiveness.

Is forgiveness a possibility?

What might be the benefit of forgiveness to the relationship? To you?

What are the consequences of not forgiving them to your relationship? To you?

Impermanence of Feelings



It can be really hard to regulate your feelings, in part because when feelings happen, they trigger biological changes—like a boost of adrenaline—which can make your thinking more reactive.

It's normal to have big feelings, but it is our responsibility to take care of ourselves and others by managing them.

Managing feelings requires skills (like the ones outlined above and below). It's important to practice these skills when you are not upset so that they are easier to put into practice when you are struggling. Focus on the skills that work for you, and leave the rest.

- Remember: feelings don't last forever. It's important to notice your feelings and then use skills to manage them.

Skills

Urge surfing

Like an ocean wave, feelings will gradually gain strength, peak, and then fade away.

When a feeling peaks, it often feels like it will never go away. You might feel like you have to do something in order for the feeling to go away, but remember it is just a feeling and it will pass.

Use urge surfing to manage the feeling: ride it out by noticing where you are in the wave (is the urge gaining strength, peaking, or beginning to fade?), or use deep breathing or other mindful exercises to regulate your emotions in the moment.

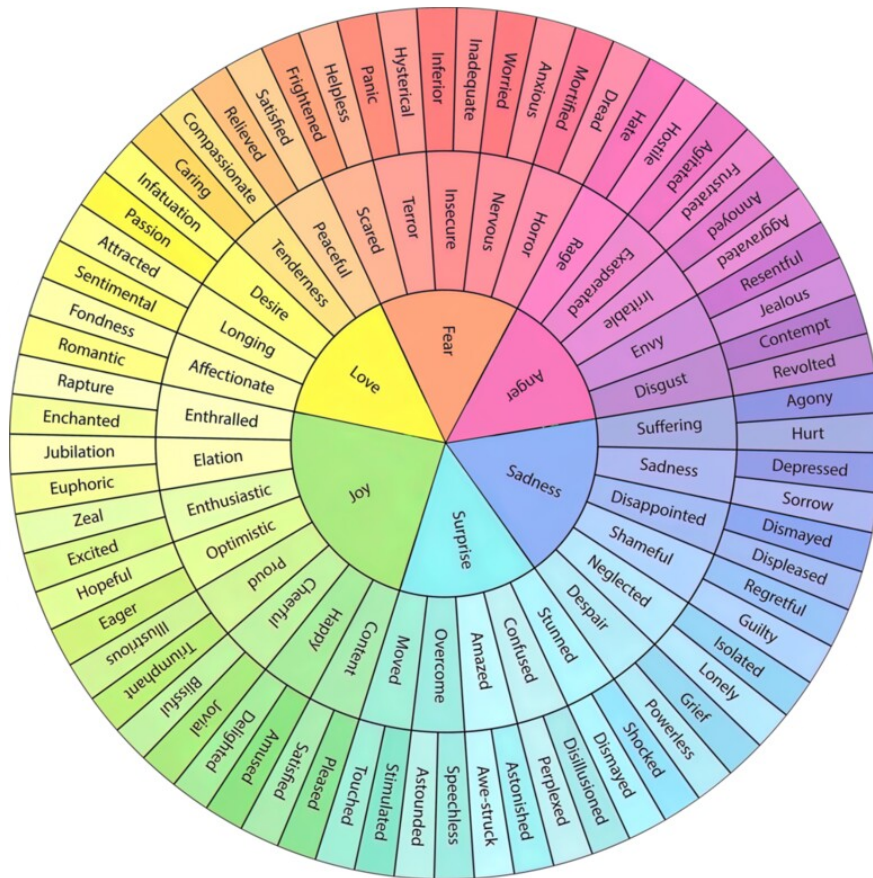
Opposite action

Feelings may come with the urge to do act. For example, when you feel angry with someone, you may have the urge to yell at them. With opposite action, though, you can practice doing the opposite of your urge. Doing the opposite action may feel uncomfortable at first, but the more you try it, the easier it will be. Here are the steps for practicing opposite action:

- Identify the feeling and acknowledge it (e.g., anger)
- Notice the impulse or urge that comes from your feeling (e.g., yelling)
- Choose the opposite action (e.g., speak calmly and assertively instead of yelling)

Let's practice at home

In order to regulate your feelings, you need to be able to name what you're feeling. Start a daily check-in about feelings, and have family members all talk about what emotions they felt today. Use this feelings chart as a jumping-off point.



Daily check-in

Co-Regulation



Co-regulation means holding big feelings with the help of someone else.

As we have discussed, we can use skills to improve the regulation of our emotions — and we don't have to practice them alone.

With co-regulation, we can learn how to hold big feelings while improving our trust and communication with others.

Skills

Active listening

This communication technique involves not only hearing the words being spoken but also making a conscious effort to understand what is being said, both in terms of content and the feelings behind it.

The main skills of active listening are:

- **Validating emotions:** Let the other person know that their problems and feelings are real and important with language like “it sounds like you’re feeling XYZ.” Remember: validating feelings doesn’t mean agreeing with them, it’s just acknowledging that you take the feeling seriously.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Shift your focus away from advice-giving or blame by asking open-ended questions like, “How did that make you feel?” or “What did it mean to you when that happened?”
- **Use open body language** (like eye contact) and non-verbal listening cues (like head-nodding) to convey that you are fully present.

Dos:

- ✓ Validate emotions
- ✓ Use open body language: eye contact, nonverbal listening cues
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions

Don't's:

- ✗ Give advice
- ✗ Invalidate feelings: dismissing feelings can lead to acting out
- ✗ Place blame

“I” statements

It can be really difficult to talk about feelings, particularly when we feel hurt or disappointed.

Using “I” statements is an easy way to start. Try this formula:

I felt [feeling word] when [what happened?]. Next time I would appreciate [what do you need next time when this happens?].

- Example: I felt disappointed when your teacher told me you didn’t turn in your homework. Next time I would appreciate you letting me know if you need help.
- Remember: Saying “I feel like you....” doesn’t actually describe a feeling! If you need help, take a look at the feelings chart on page 33 and find a feeling that fits.

Let's practice at home

→ Give every family member a chance to check in about their day for five minutes.

→ When you are talking, use “I” statements to talk about your day.

→ When you are listening, practice active listening, use non-verbal cues, and respond with validation and open-ended questions.

→ Everyone should take a turn talking and listening.

