

*a n i n s t a n t h e l p b o o k f o r t e e n s*

# don't let your emotions run your life for teens



**dialectical  
behavior  
therapy skills**  
for helping  
you **manage**  
**mood swings,**  
**control angry**  
**outbursts,**  
and **get along**  
with others

SHERI VAN DIJK, MSW

*“Don’t Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens* examines many areas that teenagers (and subsequently parents) struggle with. Sheri Van Dijk offers tangible tools to deal with emotional upheaval, volatile emotions and difficult relationships. The exercises that Van Dijk includes in each chapter will assist teens by offering them options for coping with their emotions. Having raised three teenagers, I strongly believe these skills should be taught in schools as part of the curriculum!”

—Kathy Christie, ADR, mental health case manager at York Support Services Network in Newmarket, ON, Canada

“Van Dijk has written a workbook that any teen struggling with emotions will find very helpful. Using clear and concise language, this workbook offers awareness-enhancing exercises and practical help for recognizing, sorting out, and changing the way painful emotions can be handled. I found this book useful and easy to read, and I will recommend it to my teenage patients.”

—Mark R. Katz, MD, FRCOP(C), staff psychiatrist at the Southlake Regional Health Centre and assistant professor at the University of Toronto in Canada

“I highly recommend this well-written, user-friendly workbook written especially for teens. It provides easy to use tools for harnessing unruly emotions and calming uncontrolled thinking. By following the suggestions in this workbook, teens will feel more capable of controlling their mood, have more harmonious relationships, gain confidence, and live happier lives.

—Linda Jeffery, RN, cognitive behavior therapist in private practice in Newmarket, Ontario

“Emotions are generally undervalued in Western society. Many of us receive negative messages about emotions and come to experience them as worthless, problematic, or dangerous. However, emotions are powerful motivators and valid sources of knowledge. Van Dijk addresses these, and other important issues, in this book. She presents information about a range of emotional issues in an accessible manner. She also includes activities that will help deepen the reader’s understanding and integration of the material.”

—Karma Guindon, MSW, RSW, RMFT

“Strongly recommended for teens whose moods interfere with their ability to enjoy life and relationships. Van Dijk has presented Linehan’s dialectical behavior therapy skills in a manner that is user-friendly and easy to understand. Van Dijk first describes why these skills can be useful, then presents exercises that give the reader an opportunity to practice the skills.”

—Marilyn Becker, MSW, RSW, clinical supervisor at Addiction Services for York Region

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*For Mom and Dad,  
Lisa, Roop, Caleb, Makenna.  
And, of course, for Sydney—I miss you.*



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# Introduction

Something about this book caught your attention—maybe you’ve been feeling sad a lot lately; maybe you’re finding yourself snapping at the people you care about; or perhaps you’ve noticed that you’ve recently been feeling more anxious or nervous. Whatever emotional issues you’re dealing with, this workbook can help. The main goal of this book is to help you learn to manage your emotions so that they don’t get the better of you and make you do things you end up regretting.

So what does it mean to manage your emotions? We all have emotions; they’re a necessary part of being human, and we wouldn’t want to get rid of them even if we could. Learning to manage your emotions means becoming more aware of your feelings and figuring out what to do with them so that you’re not hurting yourself or other people because of how you feel. It means learning to put up with your emotions, even when they’re painful, instead of trying to avoid them.

Think about how you deal with your emotions right now. Do you let yourself feel them or do you fight them? Do you avoid them? Do you drink or use drugs to try to escape them? Do you lash out at people you care about because you’re in pain and don’t know what else to do to help yourself feel better? Or maybe you use humor to try to hide from your feelings and prevent others from seeing that you’re really hurting inside.

Whatever techniques you’re using to try to not feel your emotions or to cope with how you’re feeling, they’re probably not working, or you wouldn’t be looking at this workbook. This book will teach you the skills you need to manage your emotions in a healthy way. When you can do that, you’ll see that you’ll feel better about yourself, and your relationships will go more smoothly. You’ll be able to live a healthier, happier life where your emotions are no longer in control.

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is a treatment that was created by Dr. Marsha Linehan (1993), a psychologist in Seattle, Washington. She developed this therapy to help people who had a really hard time regulating their emotions (this is also known as *emotion dysregulation*). Quite often, people with this type of emotional problem end up hurting themselves physically, or at the very least, they do things that actually make their lives worse—like using drugs or alcohol, shoplifting, gambling, or having unprotected sex and multiple partners. They tend to lead chaotic lives because their emotions are often so out of control, which can lead to problems in their relationships. You might have noticed some of these consequences in your own life and that your inability to manage your emotions sometimes leads to problems at school, at work, and with the law.

## Introduction

This workbook will teach you the DBT skills you need to help yourself live a healthier, less-confusing life. These skills are separated into four categories. The first, *mindfulness skills*, will help you get to know yourself better and have more control over your emotions and how you act in situations. In the second set of skills, *emotion regulation*, you will learn important information about your emotions that will help you manage them better and increase the positive emotions in your life. *Distress tolerance* skills will help you get through crisis situations without making things worse by falling back on behaviors you may have used in the past, like drinking, avoiding things, or throwing temper tantrums. The final set of skills, *interpersonal effectiveness*, will help you develop healthier relationships with other people.

So before you read further, take a closer look at yourself and decide what you think you need to change. Following is a list of behaviors that are sorted into the four sets of DBT skills. Check each of the following statements that apply to you. If you notice that you have more checks in certain sections, this will be the set of skills you will want to be especially focused on as you work your way through this book.

## Mindfulness

- I often say or do things without thinking and later regret my words or actions.
- I usually feel like I don't really know who I am, what I like and dislike, and what my opinions are.
- I often change my opinion and go along with the opinions of others so that I won't feel different.
- I sometimes feel "bad" or "upset" without knowing exactly what I'm feeling or why.
- I often judge myself or other people critically.
- I frequently try to avoid things that make me uncomfortable.
- I often find myself saying things like "This shouldn't have happened," "It's not fair," or "It's not right."

## Emotion Regulation

- I try to avoid my emotions by sleeping, partying a lot, immersing myself in video games, or doing other things that take me away from my feelings.
- Emotions are scary for me. I try to push them away or get rid of them in other ways.
- I tend to dwell on the negative parts of my life.
- I'm not very active and don't have regular activities that I enjoy.
- I neglect setting short- or long-term goals for myself; for example, I avoid thinking about where I'd like to be in a year, in two years, or in five years from now.
- I often don't have events or situations coming up in my life to look forward to.

## Distress Tolerance

- I regularly dwell on negative things that have happened to me.
- I often find myself having painful emotions because I think about things that have happened in the past or might happen in the future.
- I tend to ignore my own needs; for example, I don't usually take the time to do things that are relaxing or enjoyable for me.
- When I'm in crisis, I often find myself making the situation worse by drinking or using drugs, lashing out at others who are trying to help, and so on.
- I tend to lose friends or the support of my family because they don't like the things I do to cope with my emotions.

# Interpersonal Effectiveness

- I feel like I give (or take) more in my relationships rather than having a balance of give *and* take.
- I often feel taken advantage of in relationships.
- When relationships aren't going well, I tend to end them without first trying to fix the problems.
- I often feel like others end relationships with me before I'm ready for them to end.
- I tend to be more passive in communicating with others; for example, I don't stick up for myself or I go along with the other person all the time.
- I tend to be more aggressive in communication with others; for example, I try to force my opinion on the other person.
- I tend to get into unhealthy relationships with people who, for example, use drugs or drink a lot, or who get into a lot of trouble with their parents or even with the police, or with people who don't treat me well or who bully me.

Each of the check marks indicates an area you need to work on. You may also have some other ideas about how you would like to change your life. In the following space, write down any ideas you have about what else you would like to do differently in your life:

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Now that you have some ideas about the specific things you need to work on improving in your life, let's start to look at skills that can help get you there.

# Chapter One

## Mindfulness: Learning Self-Awareness

*Mindfulness* is about living your life in a way that most of us aren't used to. It's about paying close attention to what you're doing in the present moment, noticing when your attention wanders, and bringing it back to what you're doing. It's also about accepting, or not judging, whatever you happen to notice in the present moment, whether it's thoughts you're having, emotions that are coming up, things that are distracting you, or whatever.

Have you ever noticed how hard it can be to concentrate and how frustrated you can get, for example, when you're trying to do your homework, but the house is noisy because your little brother is running around wild? Or maybe you're trying to talk on the phone to a friend, and your parents keep interrupting you to ask questions about school or if you got your chores done? Distractions are part of life, but sometimes they make it harder to get things done; and sometimes they can get you feeling so overwhelmed that you just can't control your emotions.

Mindfulness is a skill that is helpful in many ways. It can help you concentrate better; it can help you improve your memory; it can help you get to know yourself better as you become more aware of what you're thinking and feeling. Mindfulness can help you reduce your stress level; it can improve your physical health; and it can help you sleep better. Mindfulness is also really helpful with a lot of emotional problems that people sometimes experience, like feeling anxious, angry, or depressed.

In this workbook, we're going to focus on using mindfulness to help you manage your emotions more effectively. Mindfulness can help you control yourself and your emotions better so that you will be more able to choose how to act in situations, instead of just reacting.

## Mindfulness and Your Thoughts

The idea that you are often not aware of what you're thinking might seem rather strange, but consider it for a minute: Have you ever had someone ask what you were thinking

## Chapter One

about and realized that you weren't actually sure? Do you ever suddenly notice when you're reading a book or watching television that your attention has drifted and you have no idea what's going on in the book or the TV program? The fact is, it isn't often that we really *are* paying attention to what we're thinking about—usually, we let our minds wander wherever they want to go without paying much attention to them and without trying to control them. This can cause problems.

Imagine you're sitting in class. Your teacher is talking, and you find it really hard to concentrate on what she's saying. So instead of trying to focus, you just let your thoughts drift off and you start to think about whom you're going to sit with at lunch, about the fight you had yesterday with your best friend, or about what you're going to do this weekend. Your mind jumps from one thing to another. Maybe you get caught up in a daydream for a while about what it will be like after you graduate and you don't have to sit through these boring classes anymore but can go out and get a job and live on your own. While all these thoughts are going on, while your mind is wandering from place to place, taking you along with it for the ride, for the most part, you probably aren't very aware of what you're thinking about—not to mention the fact that you've just missed your teacher's instructions for the next test.

# The Consequences of Being Unmindful

This is how most of us live much of our lives—with our minds taking us wherever they want to go. Our minds tend to control us, instead of the other way around. They flit from the past to the future; then they might come back to the present for a while before launching back into thoughts about things other than what we're doing right now.

Think for a moment about how this affects you. If you're doing one thing but thinking about something else, what happens? You might be able to come up with a few possible outcomes: your memory isn't as good when you're not fully focusing on what you're doing; or you might make more mistakes when you're not thinking about the task at hand. But the most important consequences for the purpose of this workbook are the emotional ones. If you're not thinking about the present, you must be thinking about the past or the future. And when you're thinking about the past or the future, you're likely not thinking about happy things—instead, the tendency is to think about things that trigger painful emotions. Thinking about the past, you may notice that you start to feel sad, angry, ashamed, and so on, about things that have happened, things you've done, or things that

others have done to you. Likewise, thinking about the future tends to trigger anxiety. *Anxiety* is that sense of fear, or intense worry or nervousness, that often goes along with uncomfortable physical sensations. For example, you may notice that you get the jitters or butterflies in your stomach, or that your heart starts to race or flutter while you're worrying that things might go wrong.

Living in the past or the future is the opposite of mindfulness. Mindfulness is about living in the present moment, with awareness and with acceptance—realizing that things are okay just as they are, right now in this moment. In other words, it's about focusing on what you're doing in the here and now, not judging whatever is happening, and bringing your attention back when your thoughts wander from what you're doing in the present. This probably sounds pretty complicated, and it's definitely not how most of us are used to living our lives, so let's look at an example to help make sense of this idea.

## Jacob's Story

Jacob had been invited to a party at a friend's house. At first he was happy he had been invited and was looking forward to the party, but as the party got closer, Jacob began to think about what it might be like. He thought about the last time he had gone to a party; some people there had teased him and made fun of him, embarrassing him in front of his friends. Thinking about those past events made Jacob angry and brought back the embarrassment all over again. It also made him start to worry that the upcoming party would be like the last one, and he got anxious about going.

Jacob went to the party, but the entire time he was worrying that something was going to happen like the last time and that he would end up looking foolish again. As a result, he missed out on a lot of the fun, because he was so caught up thinking about the past and worrying about the future that he was too distracted to enjoy a lot of what was happening in the present moment.

The present might not be wonderful and full of happy emotions, but think of it this way: If you're living in the present moment, you have to deal only with what's actually going on in that moment. If you're not living in the present, you still have to deal with whatever's happening in the present moment, and you also have to deal with the emotions being

## Chapter One

brought up by the thoughts you're having about the past or the future. It's like bouncing between three realities at once, which can be exhausting.

Mindfulness has you noticing how you're feeling, acknowledging it, and then focusing on what's going on for you in the moment. If Jacob had been practicing mindfulness about the party, it might have looked something like this:

Jacob had been invited to a party at a friend's house. At first he was happy he had been invited and was looking forward to it, but as the party got closer, Jacob noticed that he had started to worry about what the party might be like. He noticed that his thoughts kept turning to the last time he had gone to a party, when some people there had teased him and made fun of him, embarrassing him in front of his friends. Jacob also noticed that whenever he started to think about those past events, he began to get angry, embarrassed, and ashamed all over again. It also made him start to worry that the upcoming party would be like the last one, and he got anxious about going.

Being aware of these things, Jacob went to the party and focused on being mindful while he was there: being in the moment, with awareness and with acceptance. Sometimes he would start to worry that something was going to happen like the last time and that he would end up looking foolish again; but as soon as he noticed the worry and the thoughts that were triggering it, he would bring himself back to the present moment and would really focus on what was happening then and there. He would say to himself, "I notice I'm feeling anxious. My palms are sweaty and my heart is racing." He'd then take a deep breath and bring his attention back to whatever was happening in the present.

Jacob found he really had to work at it at first, but as the night went on, he was able to relax more, spending less time having to focus on his straying thoughts and more time just enjoying what was going on around him.

Mindfulness can be really helpful in many different ways, but it's also pretty hard to practice, especially when you first start. You might have noticed in Jacob's story that he was working on being aware of his thoughts and his present experience. Most of us aren't used to being this aware, and it can take a lot of work. To help you with this, you'll be practicing lots of different mindfulness exercises throughout this book. The following exercise will help you start thinking about how mindfulness can be helpful in your life.