

DBT Mindfulness Strategies for Substance Abuse: A Therapeutic Guide

Mindfulness is a core element of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). For those battling substance abuse, tapping into mindfulness can be transformative. By focusing on the present moment and developing more awareness of thoughts and emotions, individuals can acquire the capacity to respond more skillfully, reducing their reliance on substances as coping mechanisms.

In this handout, therapists will find an overview of several mindfulness techniques within the DBT framework which are specifically tailored for substance abuse treatment.

1 Attention to the Present Moment

- Use the box breathing technique. Instruct the client to sit comfortably and inhale slowly to a count of three or four. They hold their breath for the same count, exhale for the same count, and hold for the same count again. Repeat this cycle.
- During the exercise, emphasize focusing on the present moment, possibly by mentally repeating the word “here” or another selected mantra.
- This technique helps to divert attention from past regrets and future anxieties, which can be triggers for substance use, thus grounding clients in the present and reducing impulsivity.

2 Addressing Automatic Negative Thoughts

- Encourage clients to recognize and document automatic negative thoughts through the use of a thought record.
- Ask them to rate the emotional distress corresponding to each negative thought and then challenge it with a more balanced and positive alternative.
- By understanding and restructuring such thoughts, clients can weaken the power of the negative emotions which often drive substance use. This can diminish self-criticism, a frequent precursor to substance relapse, and boost self-compassion.

3 Self-Soothing Exercises

- Propose different self-soothing techniques to the client, such as taking a relaxing bath, listening to calming music, or even simple tactile actions like rubbing their own hand.
- Such actions can offer immediate relief during cravings or confrontation by triggers, providing an alternative to substance use during heightened moments of anxiety or emotional distress.

4 The Raisin Exercise

- Introduce clients to this mindfulness technique, in which they are asked to eat a raisin slowly, engaging all of their senses.
- This exercise can aid in slowing down their thought processes, beneficial not just for substance abuse but also for disorders like compulsive eating. By connecting mindfully with food, clients learn to appreciate the act of eating, drawing parallels to their relationship with substances.

5 Emphasizing Response Over Reaction

- Guide clients to distinguish between impulsive reactions and mindful responses. Encourage the practice of taking a pause between stimulus (a triggering comment, for instance) and response.
- Emphasize expressing oneself calmly and thoughtfully. This approach reduces the likelihood of turning to substances as an impulsive reaction to distressing situations and fosters healthier interpersonal dynamics.

Key Points

- Deepening present moment attention through techniques like box breathing can help clients to identify and manage triggers, reducing the chances of substance relapse.
- Challenging automatic negative thoughts and employing self-soothing exercises are effective coping tools, minimizing the perceived need for substances.
- Mindful communication, by emphasizing response over reaction, not only encourages thoughtful interactions but also reduces the use of substances as a knee-jerk coping mechanism.