DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT): THEORY, TECHNIQUE & APPLICATION
An Integrated Approach for Recognizing and Intervening with At-Risk Students In the Public School Setting
L Dewayne Sneed JD, MSN APRN PMHNP-BC
Caroline McKinnon, PhD, PMHCNS-BC
Augusta University College of Nursing

Traditional Approaches to Disruptive Behavior in School Settings
- Frequently perceived as invalidating which precipitates withdrawal from learning and/or the classroom environment.
- Invalidating perception may result in negative transference with teachers, staff, and peers. This transference may lead to chronic frustration and angst.
- Do not support teaching and strengthening new skills in a classroom while also dealing with the student’s struggles with motivation, disengagement, and emotional lability at any given moment.

Student and Teacher Interactions
- Difficult students influence teacher and staff in two ways:
  - Subconsciously the student reinforces the teacher behaviors: the student stops "attacking" the teacher when the teacher changes the subject or allows the student to move to an activity that is uncomfortable or difficult to a more pleasant or neutral line of discussion or activity.
  - Punishes the teacher for actually doing the job: The student escalates disruptive behaviors or becomes verbally abusive when the teacher insists that the assignment is done or enforces a rule or limit.
Principles of DBT

- Derived from cognitive-behavioral psychotherapeutic interventions, but emphasizes social emotional learning.
- Recognizes that individuals who often engage in self-destructive behaviors may lack important interpersonal, self-regulation and distress tolerance skills.
- Multiple personal and environmental factors may inhibit behavioral skills, contribute to and reinforce the dysfunctional behaviors.

- The term “dialectical” is meant to emphasize a synthesis of opposites. This is accomplished by recognizing:
  - There are different ways of viewing the world
  - Rigid, dichotomous thinking can drive conflict or emphasizes destructive behaviors
- The work of the DBT approach is to bring validation and acceptance of the student "as they are" while simultaneously helping them change.

Application of DBT to Educational Settings

- The model challenges administrators, teachers, staff, and parents to recognize that they also bring experiences, expectations, and experiences to the relationships that impact the school environment.
Goals of the DBT Approach in Schools

- Get dysfunctional and maladaptive students actions and behaviors under control
- Reduce negative student emotions such as anger, anxiety, frustration and report fewer episodes of overwhelming emotional turmoil.
- Resolve interpersonal relationship conflicts, difficulties in daily activities, and achieve stability.
- Promote the student’s movement forward in their personal goals, objectives and to find greater contentment in their circumstances.

Techniques in the DBT Model:

- Techniques in the DBT model are based on the following five functions:
  - Enhancing behavioral capabilities
  - Improving motivation to change by modifying inhibitions and reinforcing contingencies
  - Assuring that new capabilities generalize to the learning environment
  - Structuring interventions in ways that support both student and teacher capabilities
  - Enhancing teacher capabilities and motivation to work with the at-risk student more effectively

Techniques in the DBT Model:

- Acceptance in DBT includes mindfulness (e.g., attention to the present moment, assuming non-judgmental stance, and focusing on effectiveness) and validating the student’s experience as “real”.
- Change in DBT occurs through the behavioral analysis of maladaptive behaviors and application of problem-solving techniques.
Techniques of the DBT Model:

- Technologies of Acceptance: "WHAT" Skills
  - Drawn from principles of eastern Zen and western contemplative practices — MINDFULNESS
  - Emphasizes the capacity to pay attention, non-judgmentally, to the present moment
  - Teaches the student to pause in the moment to more fully experience emotions and senses without reaction; gain perspective
  - Develops the student’s ability to let feelings and experiences pass without allowing those emotions to dominate reaction in thoughts or behaviors

- Technological Change: "HOW" Skills
  - Based on principles of learning and crisis theory
  - Focuses on recognizing and describing facts, not thinking about what is "good" or "bad," "fair or unfair"
  - Takes circumstances in small pieces and understand the situation. Does not allow the mind to stray into emotion or reaction before a clear perception is formed
  - Simply do what works to effectively address the present moment. Do not respond or react based on emotions, thoughts, or perceptions about the past or future events. Recognize the immediate consequence and deal only with that reality.

- The DBT model alters the idea that the teacher-student relationship is created from an adversarial point of view in which the teacher is placed in the role of "bad cop...good cop" in order to motivate the student to change.
  - We want the teacher to feel empowered and to be a proactive instead of a reactive participant in the process.
  - The techniques used in the DBT process might best be described as an alliance of intersubjective tough love.
Teacher Characteristics

- Unwavering Centeredness
  - A strong belief in oneself, the student, and the process.
  - Empowerment and Control

- Compassionate Flexibility
  - The ability to take in relevant information about the student without judgment and to accept the student as he or she is, and to validate the student's experiences as real to him or her.
  - May involve modifying his or her positions, including the ability to experience personal frustration and willing to accept and admit to personal mistakes in the alliance and to repair them with the student.

Teaching Style and Approach

- A Nurturing Style
  - Teaching, coaching, and assisting the student through the difficult process of change and to resist the temptation to give up when the student is resistant or rigid in the work.

- A Benevolently Demanding Approach
  - Recognizing the student's capabilities and capacity for change, pushing and often dragging new behaviors from them and supporting, in the real world, the student's independence to do for themselves, rather than doing for them.

Implementation of the DBT Model:

- The Components of DBT are structured to include the following core elements:
  - Individual Counseling
  - Structured Group Skills Training
  - Coaching/Reinforcement
  - Consultation Team Conference
Individual Counseling

- The counselor and student meet weekly to discuss issues and to review concerns based on a treatment target hierarchy:
  - First Priority is given to self-harm, suicidal thoughts or ideations, and self-destructive behavior.
  - Second Priority is given to behaviors which, while not directly harmful to self or others, interfere with the student's ability to remain in the classroom or general school environment (e.g., non-compliance with recommendations, absences, lateness, missed appointments, etc.).
  - Third Priority is given to general quality of life issues and identification of challenges the student may perceive in interpersonal relationships or other environments that create conflict for the student.

Structured Group Psychoeducation

- A group usually meets once weekly for a two or two and a half hour session in a didactic setting during which specific skills are broken down into four skill modules:
  - Core Mindfulness
  - Interpersonal Effectiveness
  - Emotional Regulation
  - Distress Tolerance

Coaching/Reinforcement

- The purpose is to encourage and reinforce the application of coping skills as the student develops them. The goal is to avoid crises.

- In the team setting, coaching may be done by another member of the team and does not necessarily have to be the sole responsibility of the primary teacher. Alternatively, coaching may also occur informally during group meetings or other contact with the student.

- As the student progresses and improves with personal coping ability, coaching is focused on moving the student forward and supporting independence and personal responsibility and decision making.
Consultation Team Conference

- The purpose is to provide the teachers and staff with supervision and support in working with particularly difficult students and to maintain the relationship.
- The consultation team conference allows the teacher to explore strategies, express personal frustrations, and identify barriers to student goals and objectives in order to avoid personal "burn out" and frustration in the process.

Parental Engagement:

- Develop a student syllabus for intervention that outlines activities, expectations for participation, and identifies core curriculum
- Use established communication processes such as Individualized Educational Plan meetings and reviews to review student participation and progress toward objectives
- Provide for monthly parent support activities such as group education, coaching, and open forum discussion
- Assist parents to coordinate additional support and resources within the community when necessary

Concluding Remarks and Summary:

- DBT can provide an evidence-based intervention model for implementation within the school setting that is effective and supports social emotional learning.
- DBT materials and core curriculum are readily available and can be adapted to individual needs and resource availability.
- The integrated approach supports and empowers school administrators, teachers and staff to identify at-risk students, while maintaining focus on learning environment. The model allows for the management of high-risk students that coordinates referral, service delivery and educational support.