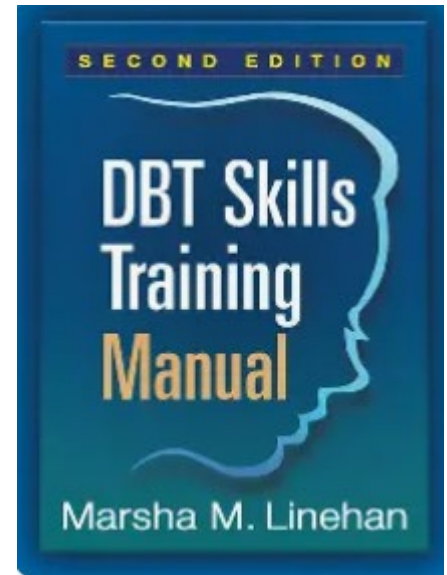


DBT for Patients with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Focus: Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, Emotion Recognition

Caution: DBT requires a therapy license to implement fully. Learning DBT skills through the manual and online trainings are helpful!



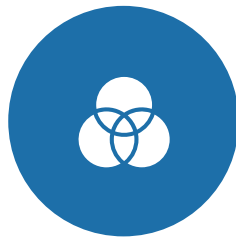
What is DBT?



- SKILLS-BASED TREATMENT



- HELPS PEOPLE MANAGE STRONG EMOTIONS



- BALANCE ACCEPTANCE AND CHANGE



- TEACHES PRACTICAL COPING STRATEGIES



- USEFUL WHEN EMOTIONS DRIVE CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

Why Adapt DBT for IDD?

- Use concrete language, repetition, visuals, modeling, and practice. Avoid jargon and acronyms when teaching clients.

Key modifications:

- Simplify concepts
- Teach one skill at a time
- Use real-life examples
- Involve caregivers/support staff
- Focus on observable cues

Emotion Recognition Comes First



Many clients clearly identify:



Happy



Sad



Angry



More difficulty occurs with:



Mixed emotions



Subtle emotions



Emotion intensity

Use Thoughts and Body Sensations as Clues

- Ask:
 - What is your body doing?
 - What are you thinking?
 - What happened right before?
- Examples:
 - Tight fists + “Not fair” = anger
 - Heavy body + “I miss them” = sadness
 - Fast heart + “What if?” = worry

My Body Gives Me Clues

Sadness can show up in different ways.



FACE

Frown • tears • eyes down

BODY

Slumped • heavy • slow

CHEST

Heavy • tight • achy

ENERGY

Tired • low • quiet

VOICE

Soft • slow • less talking

Emotion Intensity Scale

Use a simple 1–5 scale:

1 = Calm and quiet

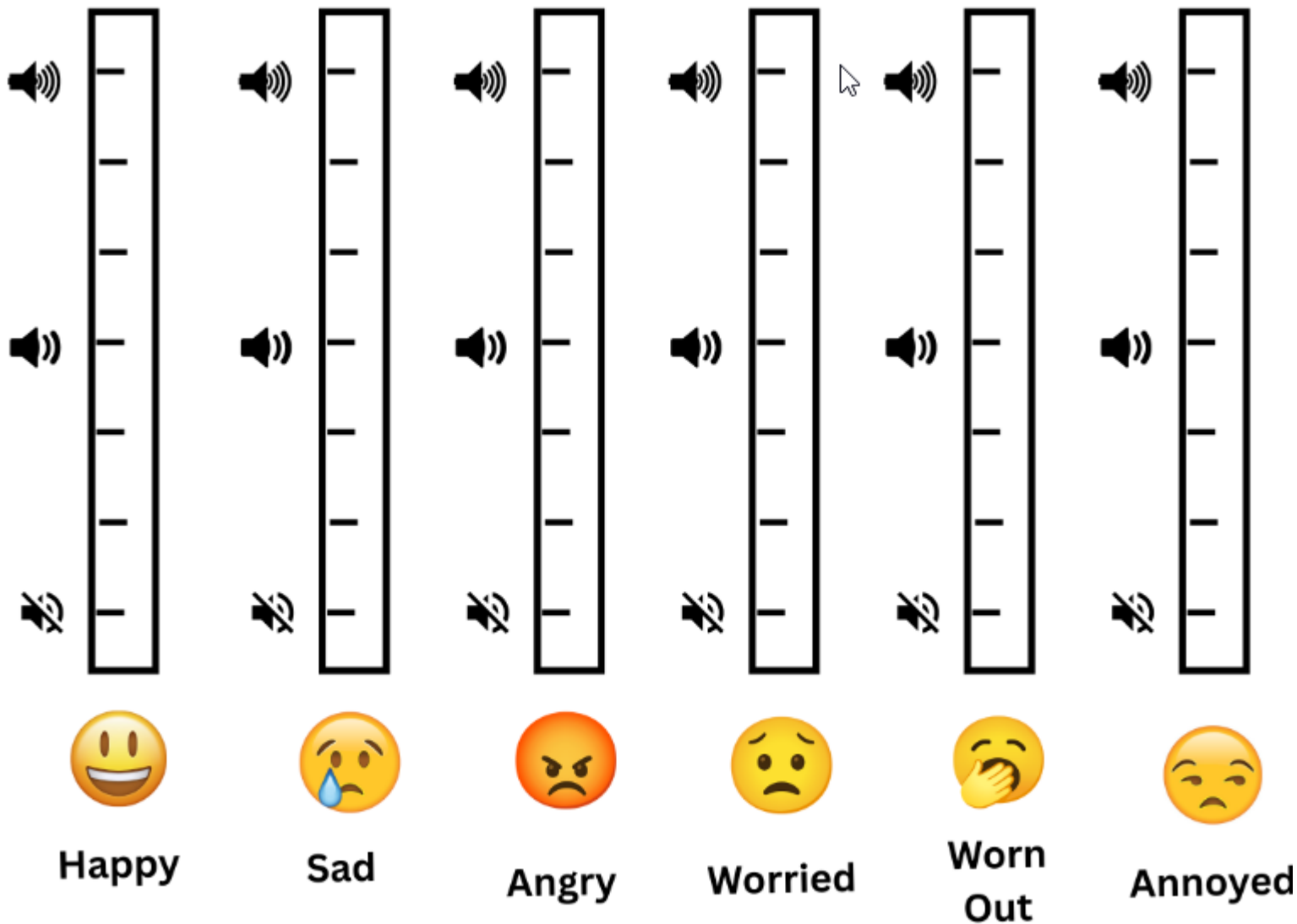
2 = Small feeling

3 = Getting big

4 = Very big emotion

5 = Out of control, too much

Match skills to the level.



Match the Skill to the Level

As distress goes up, the support or coping skill should match the level.

More
Support
Needed

5



5 = TIPP Skill

I'm overwhelmed

Use a crisis skill to calm the body fast.



4



4 = Emotion Regulation

I'm really upset

Use a coping skill.



3



3 = Supports

I need help

Ask for help, take a break, use a visual.



2



2 = Mindfulness

Something is changing

Notice what you feel.



1



1 = Calm

I'm okay

Keep going / practice skills.



HIGHER
DISTRESS

BIGGER
SUPPORT

SAME GOAL
A CALMER YOU

Main idea

The goal is not to use every skill every time.

The goal is to choose the skill that fits the level of distress.

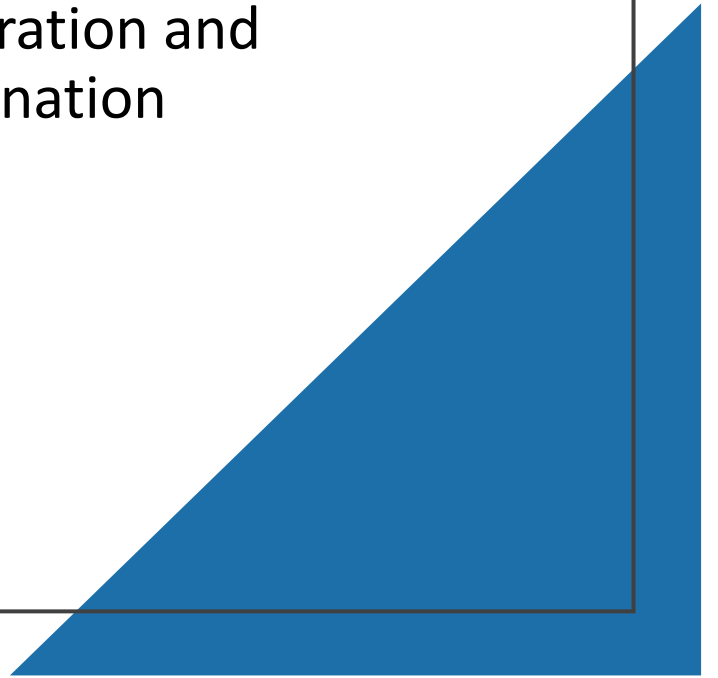
SAME GOAL:
A CALMER YOU

Match skills to the level.

Priority Skill Area:

Distress Tolerance:

- Goal: Survive the moment without making things worse.
- Teach through demonstration and practice rather than explanation alone.



Temperature Change, Intense Exercise, Paced Breathing

- Preferred skill for many clients with IDD:
 - Cold water on face or hands
 - Brief vigorous movement
 - Slow breathing practice
- Concrete, sensory, and easy to coach.



Reduce Vulnerability to Big Emotions

Teach self-care directly:



Physical health needs



Balanced eating



Sleep routine



Physical activity



Use checklists, pictures,
and daily routines.

P

**TREAT
PHYSICAL
ILLNESS**



When we ignore physical health issues, they can add stress and intensify emotions.

L

**BALANCED
EATING**



Eating regularly and nourishing our bodies supports steady energy and mood.

E

**AVOID MOOD-
ALTERING
SUBSTANCES**



Substances like alcohol, drugs, or even excess caffeine can throw off our emotional balance.

S

**BALANCE
SLEEP**



Lack of sleep or oversleeping can make us more reactive, moody, and less able to handle stress.

E

**GET
EXERCISE**



Moving our bodies regularly can ease tension, boost mood, and help reduce anxiety.

Teaching TIPP Skills

Adapting the skill for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities



Body-based skills
can help lower
distress quickly.

The TIPP Skills

These are body-based skills that help bring distress down fast.



Temperature

Use cold water, ice, or a cool cloth to help the body calm down.



Intense exercise

Do brief movement such as fast walking, marching, or jumping to burn off distress energy.



Paced breathing

Slow your breathing to help your body settle.



Paired muscle relaxation

Tighten and relax muscles to reduce tension.

How to Teach It

Practical ways to adapt TIPP skills for greater success.



Replace acronyms with full skill names

Say the full skill names instead of only "TIPP."



Use visual supports

Use pictures, cue cards, checklists, or demonstration.



Short and concrete language

Give simple directions and one step at a time.



Rehearse skills when calm

Practice during non-crisis times so the skills feel familiar.



Include caregivers and staff

Teach and practice together across settings.



Celebrate skill use, not perfection

Praise effort, trying the skill, and small steps.



Take-Home Messages

- 1. DBT can be highly effective when adapted.
- 2. Focus on recognizing emotions through body and thought cues.
- 3. Prioritize distress tolerance and emotion regulation.
- 4. Teach concrete coping skills.
- 5. Practice often and keep it simple.

Selected Evidence + Resource

The IDD-specific evidence base is promising but still developing

- Brown, J. F., Brown, M. Z., & Dibiaseo, P. (2013). Treating individuals with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviors with adapted dialectical behavior therapy. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 6(4), 280–303.
- Jones, J., et al. (2021). The adaptation and feasibility of dialectical behaviour therapy for adults with intellectual developmental disabilities and transdiagnoses: A pilot community-based randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 34(3), 805–817.
- Rosendahl-Santillo, A., et al. (2021/2023). Dialectical behavior therapy—skills system for cognitively challenged individuals with self-harm: A Swedish pilot study. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 69(4), 533–545.
- Linehan, M. M. *DBT Skills Training Manual*, 2nd ed. (core DBT skills resource).

Interpretation: available studies support feasibility and show promising outcomes, but samples are small and stronger efficacy evidence is still needed.