

From Dialectical Behavior Therapy List Serve 1-4-18: Blaise Aguirre, MD

Hello all from a snowy Northeast!

I have been reflecting on the role of social media on DBT and have the following considerations. There is much ongoing research and I am happy to provide citations for the assertions, but I think that most of what I am writing is our experience and not likely too controversial.

When Marsha developed DBT back in the early 1990s what could not easily have been foreseen was the impact of social media and modern technology on the Emotion Regulation and Interpersonal Effectiveness skills. As a practical matter for instance, none of the adolescents I work with, will call on the phone for skills coaching. They all insist on texting and in this context, voice tone, severity of distress, and many other factors are missed.

The ubiquity of social media and vastly-capable devices and their impact on self-cognition, emotion regulation and relational functioning continues to be researched and the data is clear that this technology is a massive paradigm shift different than the gradual/incremental technological advances of the past.

What is (at least to me) an unavoidable conclusion based on these “advances” is that for many of our young people, opting to substitute digital media for direct, human-to-human interpersonal communication to either:

- 1) avoid feared situations,
- 2) avoid consequences
- 3) avoid directness and exposure, may in fact be reinforcing these things over time, and

thus making our adolescents even more avoidant and worsening these symptoms.

In terms of interpersonal functioning, **over the past 20 years there has been a 40% decline in measures of empathy in people**, and this has been linked to the rise of digital communication technologies. DBT must address this head-on.

Humans have evolved over millions of years to fundamentally understand their environment through their senses. The human face in particular, communicates to the developing infant vast amounts of information way before they have verbal capacities.

Validation requires accurate reflection of another’s experience and yet there is a *huge difference* between telling someone you are angry at them or saddened by their story in face-to-face real-time, and their experience when this communication is delayed by time and space. Even if a person texts another “I am sad/angry” to a person in another room and then walks over to the other room, the ***delay in the pairing of verbal and facial communication is, by its nature, invalidating.***

Self-regulation is the capacity most affected by technology. Technology-induced distractions are a common complaint among group therapists, parents and teachers, and as we know, the *ability to focus is very closely related to the emotional regulation*. Screen time IS a vulnerability factor and so maybe the **L** in PLEASE skills could be:

LIMIT the use of screen time!

Because technology will not stop advancing our task is less about “getting rid of technology” than to be sure that the *current generation of children develop the attentional skills necessary to deal with interpersonal effectiveness and emotion regulation*.

Here is a proposed idea for integrating mindfulness and devices. It is something that I have been using with clients as mindfulness in my private practice: (see below)

Welcome thoughts/additions/considerations.

Happy New Year!

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### **Practice: Mindfulness with Smartphone**

As practitioners of mindfulness, the forms of practice are generally one of 4 types.

- **Concentrative** (e.g. focus on a candle flame, raisin, itch, etc.),
- **Generative** (e.g. generate loving compassion),
- **Receptive** (zazen open to whatever enters the mind), and
- **Reflective**. This is a reflective practice and the instruction in reflective practices is to: *repeatedly turn attention to a theme or task but then being open to the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise from the experience.*

### **Skill: PHONE**

- Paced breathing
- Hold the phone/device
- One app/text/image in the moment
- Notice sensations
- Experience emotions fully

1. Ask clients to bring in their phone to mindfulness practice. The phone must be powered off.
2. Ring the bell 3 times to mark the start of mindfulness practice.
3. Instruct the client to take three intentional breaths with slow inhale and slower exhale.
4. Have the phone face down resting on the lap or table in front of the client.
5. Three more intentional breaths.
6. Have the client turn the phone over so that the empty screen faces them.
7. Three more intentional breaths.
8. Have client notice emotions, and thoughts, with particular attention on worry thoughts.
9. Ask client to turn the phone on, but not open any app or check any message.
10. Instruct the client to turn their phone on, but not open any app.
11. Three more slow intentional breaths.
12. Instruct client to notice urges to open an app or to read a message. <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>
13. Three more slow intentional breaths.
14. Instruct client to choose one app to open.
15. Three more slow intentional breaths.
16. Have the client choose one message, tweet, image, text. Allow for 30 seconds so that the client is not scrolling through the mass of social media. Have the client focus on that one digital experience.

**Notes for the Clinician:**

- Can take more than three breaths in order to allow client the time necessary to fully experience thoughts and emotions. <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>
- Have clients pair thoughts/emotions with body sensations. <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>
- Typically, clients will notice curiosity, urge to continue scrolling, respond.
- Encourage the labeling of experiences with “Describe.”
- After the practice ask clients to reflect on how these communications influence their life experience.
- Clients may leave the practice with strong judgments.
- Review the “Non-judgmental HOW skill”

Blaise this is wonderful! Thank you so much for taking the time to write what you did and elaborate on what is a real issue that we've often discussed here at our center in team, and in family sessions and in family DBT skills training grps.

Searching for the dialectic hasn't been easy; we've encountered so many parents with black and white thinking and reasoning that's resulted in an increase in tension within our teen's home-life. Their 'back and forth arguing' over "the right answer" has taken hold as opposed to "where is the synthesis"? Definitely an ongoing dilemma.

I LOVE this Mindfulness practice to use with the phone, allowing us to lean into the very issue itself and explore it rather than to focus only on "rules" or "limits"...this is going to be far more helpful in opening up much needed dialogues about the emotions and thoughts (and beliefs) that accompany the phone itself and finding the synthesis per client will be much more individualized. Looking forward to using this immediately!

What a beautiful tool to share with us!

Thanks so much,  
Beth Lewis

*A Heart That's Believed In... Is A Heart That CAN Change!*

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