

Dialectical Strategies for Practicing Mindfulness

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Mindfulness practice is at the core of DBT skills, since we cannot be prepared to use other skills—distress tolerance, emotion regulation, or interpersonal effectiveness—if we are not aware of what’s happening for us in a given moment. Therefore, it’s important that we are intentional about the way we practice it.

We are taught the How and What skills of mindfulness practice through DBT, and we are given lots of examples of practice ideas, and if the hundreds of suggestions that are provided by Marsha Linehan and Lane Pederson aren’t enough, there are countless books available on mindfulness.

Below are some suggestions for ways to hone your mindfulness skills that would be helpful to keep in mind while doing any of your favorite practices. Intentionally engaging in practices using these dialectical strategies also sets us up for better understanding of how other skills work.

Formal vs. Informal

When we practice mindfulness formally, we are scheduling time in our day for mindfulness practice. This could be in the form of setting regular alarms in the day to do internal check-ins or scheduling five minutes each morning to sit quietly with a guided practice.

Informal practice is when we take a behavior that we already engage in each day—washing dishes, taking a shower, drinking a cup of coffee, etc. and choose to do it mindfully. Be aware that this will make the activity take longer (and you may find that you’re drinking the best cup of coffee you have ever had).

Formal practice sets us up for understanding the skill and informal practice helps to increase the likelihood that we can be mindful when it most counts!

Eyes open vs. Eyes closed

In her training video on mindfulness practice, Marsha Linehan suggests practicing with your eyes open. When she recommends this way of practice, she suggests that you use a soft gaze, eyes partially open and focusing lightly on a point in front of you. I agree

that this is a valuable way of practicing mindfulness, because when we are in a moment of emotional vulnerability, we may not have the luxury of closing our eyes to focus on our breath.

However, especially as we start out, we may feel self-conscious or uncomfortable with practicing mindfulness, and we feel more comfortable about our practice when our eyes are closed. Additionally, we may find that it’s easier initially to focus internally when our eyes are closed. In that way, we can more effectively observe our uncomfortable feelings with our eyes closed.

Recognizing that this may be the case, I like to recommend varying practice so that sometimes your eyes are open during mindfulness practice, and sometimes, they are closed.

Internal vs. External

When we first begin practicing mindfulness, we may find that it feels uncomfortable to focus internally. One reason for this is that we may have experienced trauma in our past that has made an internal focus very overwhelming, and another reason could be that we have simply been in the practice of spending great amounts of time and energy avoiding what’s happening internally that it’s just difficult and scary to give those emotions space.

Likewise, we may have spent so much time focusing on those thoughts and feelings, or in avoiding those thoughts and feelings, that we’re frequently unaware of what’s happening around us.

That’s why I suggest engaging in both internal and external practices, where we focus on all our five senses as they relate to our environment and what is going on inside our bodies physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

Similar to the How Skills of DBT training, these strategies can be used together. For instance, I can practice mindfulness informally and externally with my eyes opened, like when drinking a cup of coffee mindfully.