

Four Ways to Solve a Problem

DBT: Emotion Regulation Skills

handout

According to Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), there are only four ways to respond to a problem.

This infographic reviews each of the four ways and links to worksheets that can help you learn more.

1

Problem-Solve

- Change the situation: figure out the problem, check the facts, brainstorm ideas, and choose a solution
- Leave the situation or do something to avoid harm

2

Change Your Emotions

- Change or reduce your emotions so that you can feel better (even if the problem remains) through opposite action

3

Radically Accept

- Acknowledge that neither the situation nor your emotions can be changed
- Willingly accept this reality - which should reduce your suffering

4

Do Nothing

- Stay miserable
- Or, make things worse (!)

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*



Problem Solving

DBT: Emotion Regulation Skills

If the situation is the problem (the emotion fits the facts) - how do we solve the problem?

If your emotion **fits the facts**, that means that the situation is causing your distress - and changing the situation through solving a problem might alleviate your distress. Let's go through problem-solving step by step. We've provided an example on these 3 pages and the next 3 are blank.

1 Name the emotion

Emotion: Worry

Intensity (1-10): 8

2 Describe the problem prompting your emotion

What is problematic or difficult about the situation? Focus on the facts (who, what, when, where), potential consequences, and challenges to solving the problem.

I just took my certification exam for the second time and failed again. If I don't pass by the end of the year, I won't get promoted to the position I've been working toward for a long time. Everyone at work will look down on me - what if it's so bad I have to leave? Also, it's really hard to find time to study, and the exams themselves are really expensive.

3 Re-read what you just wrote and check the facts

Does your description include **interpretations (the why)** or **assumption mixed up with the facts**? Are you catastrophizing or jumping to conclusions? Double-check.

I'm assuming everyone at work will look down on me if I don't pass and get promoted

I'm jumping to the conclusion that it may be so bad that I can't tolerate it and will have to leave

Re-write the facts if you need to:

I just took my certification exam for the second time and failed. If I don't pass by the end of the year, I won't get promoted to the position I've been working toward for a long time. I'm worried people at work will think poorly of me for failing and I won't be able to tolerate this. Also, it's really hard to find time to study, and the exams themselves are really expensive.

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Opposite Action

DBT: Emotion Regulation Skills

Opposite action is a technique from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) that can help you change how you feel. By purposely doing the opposite of your emotion urge, you can reduce a feeling that is too intense or doesn't "**fit the facts**" of the current situation. When we practice opposite action, we strengthen our ability to tolerate difficult feelings and make choices aligned with our goals.

When might you want to use opposite action?

Opposite action is a tool you can choose to use when:

- ➔ Acting on your emotion urge would not help you in the long run
- ➔ Your emotion does not **fit the facts** of the situation at hand, or is too intense
- ➔ You would like to stop feeling the emotion

Below are examples of situations in which opposite action can help for nine common emotions people may want to reduce or change:



Fear: You need to take a public speaking class to graduate, but you get scared when you think about standing up and talking in front of others.



Anger: You and your partner had a fight and they genuinely apologized for misunderstanding you. You want to let the situation go, but your angry feelings are very tough to shake.



Disgust: You just started working with a coworker who reminds you of a person you greatly dislike. You don't want your old feelings of contempt to affect your new working relationship.



Sadness: In the midst of a hard month, someone turns you down for a date. Even though in your rational mind it's not a big deal, your feelings of sadness are really hard to overcome.



Shame: You're trying hard to break your old habit of never speaking up for yourself. When you give it a try, you feel proud at first, but then you feel ashamed that you seem "selfish."



Guilt: An urgent problem comes up and you have to reschedule with a friend who has been having a hard time lately. You know emergencies come first, but you keep feeling guilty.



Envy: You and your coworker applied for the same position at work, and your coworker got it. You don't like that your thoughts about why you deserved the job are affecting your work.



Jealousy: A close friend tells you all about his new romantic relationship and how much fun it is. You want to be happy for him, but inside you worry she'll take up all his time and attention.



Love: You end a friendship with someone who really hurt you. You know you made the right choice, but sometimes you can't help missing them and the good times you had together.

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On these pages, we'll review the "facts" and urges for each emotion, and ideas for opposite actions.

Fear

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- A threat to your* life, safety, health, wellbeing, or reputation

fear

escape or hide

To reduce feelings of fear, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Stay in the feared situation
- Get closer to the person, place, thing, or activity you are afraid of ("avoid avoidance")
- Do what scares you over and over again
- Pay attention to the feared situation with all your senses

Posture:

- Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, put your hands on your hips
- Make eye contact
- Breathe deeply and slowly

Anger

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- Someone threatens, attacks, insults, or offends you
- Something keeps you from reaching a goal

anger

fight or defend

To reduce feelings of anger, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Avoid the person or situation you are angry with; take a time out
- Intentionally be kind to the person you are angry with
- Try to understand and empathize with the person you are angry with - see things from their point of view
- Use a gentle tone of voice

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly
- Exercise to blow off steam (in a nonviolent way)

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Disgust

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- Something could make you sick
- Someone's influence or thinking could harm you
- Someone you dislike is touching you

disgust

recoil or get away

To reduce feelings of disgust, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Get closer to the person, place, thing, or activity you find disgusting
- Intentionally be kind to the person you feel contempt for
- Welcome and take in the situation that seems repulsive with all your senses
- Try to understand and empathize with the person you feel disgusted by - see things from their point of view

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly

Sadness

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- You lose (or might lose) someone or something you care about forever
- Things do not turn out the way you hoped

sadness

slow down and grieve

To reduce feelings of sadness, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Stay in the sad situation
- Get closer to the person, place, thing, or activity making you sad ("avoid avoidance")
- Do **joyful or challenging** activities
- Pay attention to present moment with all your senses

Posture:

- Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, sit up tall
- Move or engage in gentle exercise (stretching, walking, jogging, etc.)

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Opposite Action

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Shame

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- You do something (or have qualities) that others may think is wrong if they find out about it

shame

hide, shrink,
withdraw

To reduce feelings of shame, do the **opposite** of the urge:

- * When your behavior does not actually go against your values or others':
 - Tell people (who won't reject you) what you did, or do the behavior over and over
 - Do not apologize or try to fix the situation
 - Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, sit up tall; make eye contact
- * When your behavior does not actually go against others' values, but does go against your own:
 - Tell people (who won't reject you) what you did
 - Apologize and try to fix the situation
 - Accept the consequences, forgive yourself, and let it go

Guilt

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- You do something (or have qualities) that go against your values, morals, or ethics

guilt

fix the problem,
apologize

To reduce feelings of guilt, do the **opposite** of the urge:

- * When your behavior does not actually go against your values or others':
 - Tell people (who won't reject you) what you did, or do the behavior over and over
 - Do not apologize or try to fix the situation
 - Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, sit up tall; make eye contact
- * When your behavior does not actually go against your values, but does go against others':
 - Think carefully: is it important to be accepted by this group of people or to stay in the group?
 - If yes: keep the behavior to yourself, use interpersonal skills to explain yourself, or try to change the group's values
 - If no: join a new group with values more like your own; repeat the behavior
 - Validate yourself

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Opposite Action

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Envy

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- Someone else has something you want or need

envy

work harder to get what you want, or attack or criticize

To reduce feelings of envy, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Resist urges to attack or criticize the person or damaging what they have
- Resist urges to exaggerate what you don't have or what someone else does have
- Make a list of things that you are grateful for

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly

Jealousy

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- Something might damage or destroy a relationship or object you care about

jealousy

try to control, accuse, question, or cling to the person or object

To reduce feelings of jealousy, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Resist the urge to control others' actions
- Resist the urge to question, accuse, or cling to the person you fear you will lose
- Welcome and take in the situation with all your senses
- Intentionally share with others

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly

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Love

The **facts** of the situation...

- Someone makes your life better and brighter
- Someone does something admirable or helps you reach your goals

prompt an **emotion**...

love

which creates an **urge** to...

get closer, express yourself, share time or experiences

To reduce feelings of love, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Avoid the person, animal, or object you love, including reminders of them, communication with them, and places that remind you of them or that you know they will be
- Distract yourself when thoughts of the person come up
- Remind yourself why love does not fit the facts in this situation

Posture:

- Resist urges to lean towards, touch, or keep your eyes on the person

* Important Note *

When considering doing an opposite action:

Do not do an opposite action if it is likely to harm you. For example, spending more time around someone who has seriously hurt you in the past and is likely to hurt you again is likely not a safe choice.

Also remember that *discomfort* does not necessarily equal harm. Pushing through discomfort is part of how opposite action teaches our systems a new way of reacting to difficult situations and builds our confidence. Staying in an challenging conversation rather than making an excuse to leave is very likely to cause discomfort - and is a great example of opposite action - but very unlikely to cause harm. You are the expert on your circumstances and should use your best judgment.



Opposite Action

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Try opposite action yourself

The next time you feel a strong emotion, you can give opposite action a try. This page shows an example, and the next is blank.

Which emotion are you feeling? Fear

How strong is the feeling, from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong)? 7

What do you feel the urge to do? Call in sick and skip the meeting I'm really worried about today

Why do you want to use opposite action?

- ☒ Acting on the emotion urge would not help you in the long run
- ☒ Your emotion does not **fit the facts** of the situation at hand, or is too intense
- ☒ You would like to stop feeling the emotion

Use the table below to brainstorm ideas and keep track of how well they work:

You can use the previous pages to help you brainstorm ideas specific to your emotion

After trying your opposite action, re-rate the feeling you are trying to reduce or change from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong)

Opposite actions I can try	Effort	Feeling
Write out questions I'm likely to get and good answers		
Practice talking out loud about the problem the meeting will address	70%	6.5
Practice starting the conversation I'm scared to have out loud	90%	4
Stand with confident posture for 5 min	100%	3

Note how much effort you put into the opposite action from 0% to 100%. Are you just going through the motions, trying hard but quickly giving up, or giving it your all?

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Opposite Action

DBT: Emotion Regulation Skills

Try opposite action yourself

The next time you feel a strong emotion, you can give opposite action a try

Which emotion are you feeling?

How strong is the feeling, from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong)?

What do you feel the urge to do?

Why do you want to use opposite action?

- ☐ Acting on the emotion urge would not help you in the long run
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Problem Solving

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4 Identify your goal

Decide on a short-term, realistic, simple goal. What needs to happen for you to feel better? Don't worry about solutions yet - just think about *outcomes*.

I need a new approach to studying - my old approach isn't working - so I have the best chance of passing on my third try by the end of the year

5 Brainstorm potential solutions

Write as many ideas as you can. Ask for help brainstorming if you need to. Don't throw out any ideas yet - all ideas are welcome right now.

- take PTO and study a lot
- hire a tutor
- pay for an online prep course
- skip things like socializing and exercise to study
- get advice on the best way to prepare
- get up an hour earlier each day to study
- borrow money and take the exam until I pass
- find a book on preparing for the exam
- cheat on the exam
- ask my roommate to quiz me
- study at work

6 Select a solution

Above, circle 1-2 solutions that best meet your goal and are possible and realistic to do. Using your wise mind, think through the pros and cons of your solution(s).

	Solution 1: Get advice	Solution 2: Online prep course
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people who passed might have good ideas - others might know strategies I don't, or other ways to cover the exam fees? - I could learn if failing a few times is typical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a course <i>should</i> teach me the essentials - I might have access to practice tests - if it has an app, I could study on the bus or the treadmill
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - it may be that others found the exam easy and won't have good advice for me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - could be really expensive

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Problem Solving

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7 Time for action

Pick the best solution for you. If the solution has multiple parts, you can keep track of them below:

Steps for: Getting advice	Done?	Outcome
Decide who to talk to at work	✓	Picked 5 coworkers who passed
Set up short meetings with coworkers	✓	4 agreed; had 4 meetings
Research online advice	✓	Found advice in forums and exam site
Write down all advice	✓	Tons of different approaches
Summarize main advice themes	✓	3 major ideas
Make a plan to study in a new way	✓	Will try flashcards + free practice tests

8 Evaluate

Original emotion: Worry Intensity (1-10): 8

Did your solution solve the problem?

☒ Yes → process complete!

☐ No → try the next solution

☐ I have a new problem now → start again

Emotion now: Worry Intensity (1-10): 2



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1 Name the emotion

Emotion: _____ Intensity (1-10): _____

2 Describe the problem prompting your emotion

What is problematic or difficult about the situation? Focus on the facts (who, what, when, where), potential consequences, and challenges to solving the problem.

3 Re-read what you just wrote and check the facts

Does your description include **interpretations (the why)** or **assumption mixed up with the facts**? Are you catastrophizing or jumping to conclusions? Double-check.

Re-write the facts if you need to:

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Problem Solving

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Decide on a short-term, realistic, simple goal. What needs to happen for you to feel better? Don't worry about solutions yet - just think about *outcomes*.

5 Brainstorm potential solutions

Write as many ideas as you can. Ask for help brainstorming if you need to. Don't throw out any ideas yet - all ideas are welcome right now.

6 Select a solution

Above, circle 1-2 solutions that best meet your goal and are possible and realistic to do. Using your wise mind, think through the pros and cons of your solution(s).

	Solution 1:	Solution 2:
Pros		
Cons		

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Time for action

Pick the best solution for you. If the solution has multiple parts, you can keep track of them below:

Steps for:	Done?	Outcome

8

Evaluate

Original emotion: Intensity (1-10):

Did your solution solve the problem?

☐ Yes → process complete!

☐ No → try the next solution

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Emotion now: Intensity (1-10):

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