



**Dialectical Behavior Therapy
With Suicidal Adolescents**

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What is DBT-A?

Dialectical Behavior Therapy with Suicidal Adolescents (DBT-A) is an outpatient psychosocial treatment designed specifically for suicidal thoughts, urges, and behavior, as well as non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI; e.g. cutting or burning the self). Many individuals with these behaviors also have symptoms of borderline personality (BPD). A meta-analysis of DBT-A by Kothgassner et al. (2021) confirms that DBT-A reduces suicidal ideation and NSSI in adolescents. In another meta-analysis of treatments for children and adolescents with traits of personality disorders, Arany and Wang (2023) found DBT-A to be the only psychosocial treatment to reduce BPD symptoms with adolescents. DBT-A is therefore recommended as a frontline treatment for adolescents with suicidal behaviors, NSSI, or symptoms of BPD.

DBT increases:	DBT decreases:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Performance • Treatment retention • Positive self esteem • Social adjustment • General adjustment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency care utilization • Suicidal behavior • Non-suicidal self-injury • Substance dependence • Eating disordered behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impulsiveness • Hopelessness • Depression • Anger

Standard outpatient DBT-A should offer all of the following for 6-12 months:

Standard DBT Mode	Primary Function
Weekly 1.5 hour multi-family skills group	To teach clients and their caregivers skills
Weekly 1 hour individual therapy	To motivate clients to use skills and stay with the treatment
Telephone coaching as needed	To assist clients in using skills in their everyday life
Caregiver support as needed	To prevent dropout and enhance environmental support
Weekly 1.5 hour consultation team	To enhance motivation and skill of the therapists

What you need to know:

- DBT-A replaces destructive habits with distress tolerance, emotion regulation, interpersonal, and mindfulness skills to enhance a client’s experience of a life worth living.
- Referrals for DBT-A should include adolescents who are suicidal, self-harming, or exhibiting symptoms of BPD. *DBT-A does not take involuntary clients.*
- DBT-A has a pre-treatment phase of approximately four weeks of individual therapy. During that time, all existing mental health services should continue until treatment begins. When DBT-A starts, all individual talk therapy should stop except for the DBT-A therapist.
- DBT-A is most effective with as little contact with emergency services as possible, including inpatient hospitalization, residential treatment, mobile crisis, and emergency room services.