

Thinking and Acting Dialectically is Challenging and Freeing: Tools for Teaching Dialectics

Andrea L. Gold¹ & Jesse Finkelstein²

¹Alpert Medical School of Brown University and ²Columbia University Irving Medical Center

IT IS CRITICAL for providers and consumers alike to cultivate their understanding and application of dialectics to practice skillful Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Dialectics represents the worldview of DBT, establishing its framework, principles, strategies and skills. This applies not only to the content or “what” of DBT but also to the process of “why,” “how,” and “when.” In a nutshell, dialectics acknowledges that opposite sides or ideas can be true at the same time. By asking “What is being left out?” from either extreme and by considering multiple sides together, we can think and act dialectically. This involves balancing opposites to identify new ways of viewing a situation. Sometimes this means arriving at a “synthesis” or “middle path” that holds both sides at the same time and offers a new truth. Other times doing this is not possible or effective (at least not at the moment). Dialectics reminds us to allow and embrace confusion, to enter the paradox of “yes and no” or “true and not true” (Linehan 2015; Rathus & Miller, 2015).

While defining dialectics may appear simple and straightforward, teaching and applying dialectics to real-life can be complicated, challenging, and, frankly, overwhelming. This is particularly true in the context of heightened emotional reactivity, exquisite emotional sensitivity, and a history of invalidation, as is often the case in DBT and with DBT clients. The goal of this article is to offer new tools in the instruction and application of dialectics.

Specifically, we introduce two new ways of teaching the principles of dialectics. In the Plaid Venn Diagram metaphor, we highlight the principles of synthesis, distinguishing it from compromise. In the Cylinder metaphor, we illustrate how seemingly contradictory perspectives can coexist, calling attention to the qualities of flexibility, curiosity, and connectedness inherent in dialectical thinking.

Among the countless ways that dialectics appears in DBT, two prominent examples stand out as receiving the most “airtime” in discussions about dialectics: (1) the opposites of acceptance and change, and (2) the DBT states of mind skill, in which Wise mind is taught as the synthesis of the opposites of Emotion mind and Reasonable mind. This makes sense given that both examples are taught at the outset of DBT—both for clinicians new to DBT and for clients/family members learning DBT skills in a treatment setting. The goal of moving back and forth between the two opposites of acceptance and change is a defining feature of DBT, differentiating it from other treatment models, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). When introducing DBT, providers also frequently teach states of mind by drawing a Venn diagram of two overlapping circles, each of which depicts one of two polar opposites/extremes. One circle representing thesis is labeled as Reasonable mind; the other circle representing its opposite or antithesis is labeled Emotion mind; and

the conjunction, or overlap, of the two circles is labeled Wise mind to illustrate synthesis.

There is a potential limitation in presenting dialectics using this Venn diagram metaphor. If we were to draw the Venn diagram of states of mind with Reasonable Mind as a blue circle and Emotion Mind as red, often trainers and learners will label Wise Mind as purple (see Handout). This makes sense given that when blue and red mix, they create purple. AND, Wise Mind is not purple. Purple reflects a watered down version of red and blue. With purple we lose the essential redness and blueness of each state of mind.

Though often described as such, synthesis does not represent a compromise or blend of opposing sides. Synthesis does not mean combining watered down versions of each polarity. Doing so is ineffective as it tends to invalidate each side – purple is neither red nor blue. A common misconception of dialectics is to insist that being dialectical means you must hold both sides at once and equally. Rather, dialectical thinking emphasizes understanding each perspective’s complexities and integrating them into a richer understanding. Insisting on equal balance oversimplifies dialectics, limiting its fluidity and depth. Moreover, there are times when the effective way to think and act dialectically is to spend time observing and understanding one side.

We encourage you to consider this practice: try visualizing Wise Mind or any synthesis as a plaid, rather than a blend of two colors (see Handout). The plaid is a playful way to represent a synthesis of thesis and antithesis. Our plaid contains red and blue, and purple, and also new colors entirely! We encourage you to think and talk about each of the colors/patterns both on their own and together. For example, in DBT individual and family sessions we discuss the Plaid metaphor in the context of

specific examples and ask, “What is the red? What is the blue? What is the kernel of truth for each side (color)? What are those new funky colors? What does the pattern look like up close? If we step back, what else is there to notice?” Sometimes, this inquiry involves embracing confusion and entering the paradox of how the same situation can be viewed as different colors and textures entirely. When viewing a plaid, or synthesis, we observe how the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Additionally, some plaids may contain more strands of thread from one color than another. In other words, finding a “middle path” or synthesis is not about establishing an equality of truths. Doing so may have the unintentional impact of invalidating each side, which in turn furthers polarization. Instead, seeing a plaid allows each side to validate the other perspectives and strands of truth.

The Plaid Venn diagram metaphor helps to explain how two opposing ideas, when held together, can inform a new truth and a new way of viewing the situation. To further enhance our understanding of dialectical thinking and its emphasis on perspective, we offer an additional teaching tool of the “Cylinder metaphor” (see Handout). This metaphor depicts opposing shadows of a square and a circle from different perspectives of flashlights shining on a three-dimensional cylinder. These shapes illustrate how thesis (square) and antithesis (circle) are both true, depending on which way we look at the same situation; both coexist in synthesis (cylinder).

For the person holding the green flashlight on the right, they see a square and that is true. For the person holding the blue flashlight on the left, they see a circle and that is also true. These shapes in this configuration illustrate a key takeaway from dialectics: there is more than one way to view the same situation, or in this case, cylinder. Without taking a step back and seeing multiple perspectives, two people may argue

about circles versus squares and invalidate each other’s experience, increasing hurt and emotional dysregulation. When we recognize these simultaneous truths and ask what is missing, we can arrive at a synthesis, or the cylinder.

Of note, the original source image¹ labeled the cylinder as “this is truth.” We have modified the current version for our handout to label the cylinder as “this is true.” This revision is important to highlight when teaching the cylinder metaphor. Participants may have the urge to argue that the cylinder is “clearly the truth and most representative of reality.” However, this point would be undialectical.

Instead, we label all three (thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) as true and none as truth, illustrating how each is true and each is partial. Dialectics reminds us that truth is neither absolute nor relative. Rather, meaning and truth evolve over time, and change is the only constant (Linehan 2015). Thus, finding the synthesis or middle path of two opposites is not a “one and done” process, but more like the instructions on the back of a shampoo bottle: “Rinse and repeat.” Upon finding the synthesis between two opposites, that synthesis over time becomes a new thesis, which has its own opposite or new antithesis. And so it goes.

As DBT providers, we practice DBT and its worldview of dialectics as an all-in life philosophy. As such, we know² that the practical application of dialectics in understanding our own and others’ experiences is liberating across situations, well beyond the DBT therapy hour. Together, the Plaid and Cylinder metaphors both illuminate how thinking and acting dialectically does not mean that one has to give up, dilute, or invalidate their own perspective in order to observe and validate others’ perspectives. Given the ample benefits of validation—of both self and others—these tools for understanding and

applying dialectics can be freeing. Dialectical thinking frees the mind from rigid viewpoints, enabling a more holistic and adaptable perspective of our reality. As helpful and freeing as it is, the practical application of dialectics is also challenging. That is why we lean on a range of ways to effectively understand and teach dialectics. Sometimes it’s a plaid Venn diagram and other times a cylinder. We use our mindfulness “effectiveness” skill to do what works. Our hope is that these tools can be applied by anyone (not just DBT providers!) to approach extremes and get unstuck from polarizations with curiosity to build understanding, acceptance, growth, and a (middle) path forward.

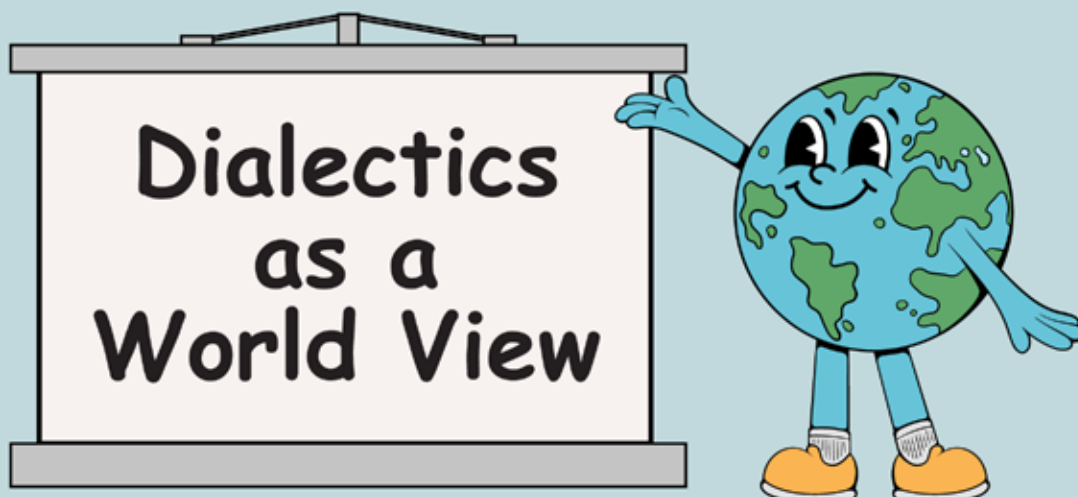
¹If you are the creator or know the identity of the creator of the original cylinder art, please contact us at andrea_gold@brown.edu so we can give credit.

²This knowledge is based on a wise mind state of knowing as both intuitive and learned from experience, which is yet another dialectic!

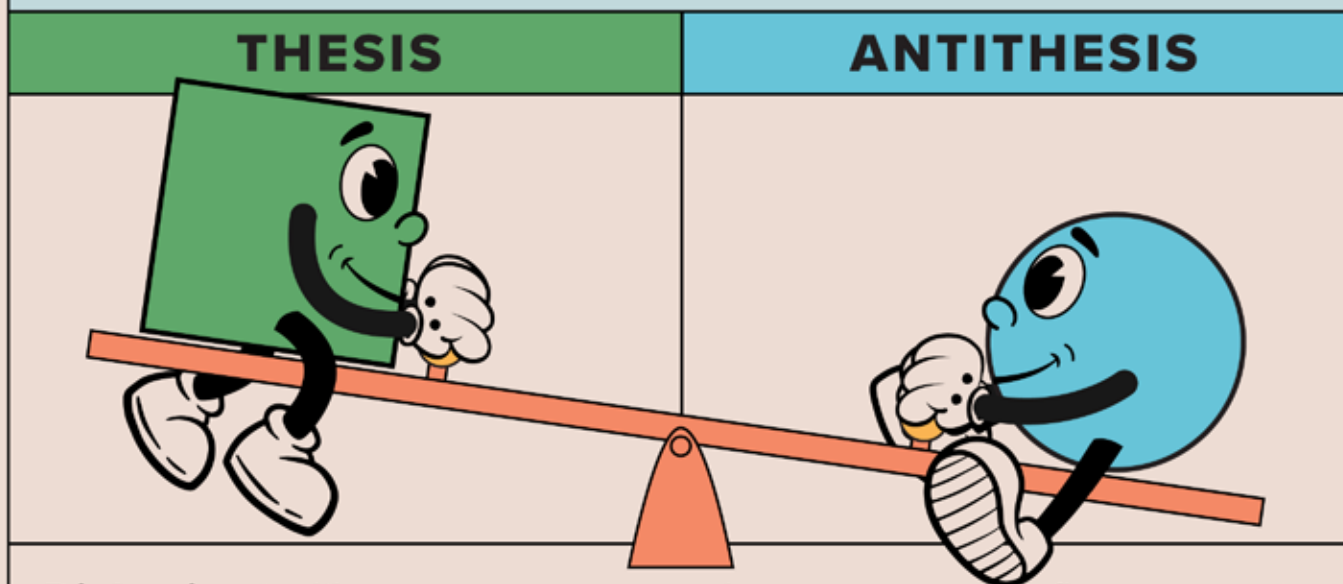
References

- Linehan, M.M. (2015). *DBT skills training manual* (2nd ed). Guilford Press.
- Rathus, J.H. & Miller, A.L. (2015). *DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents*. Guilford Press.

UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)



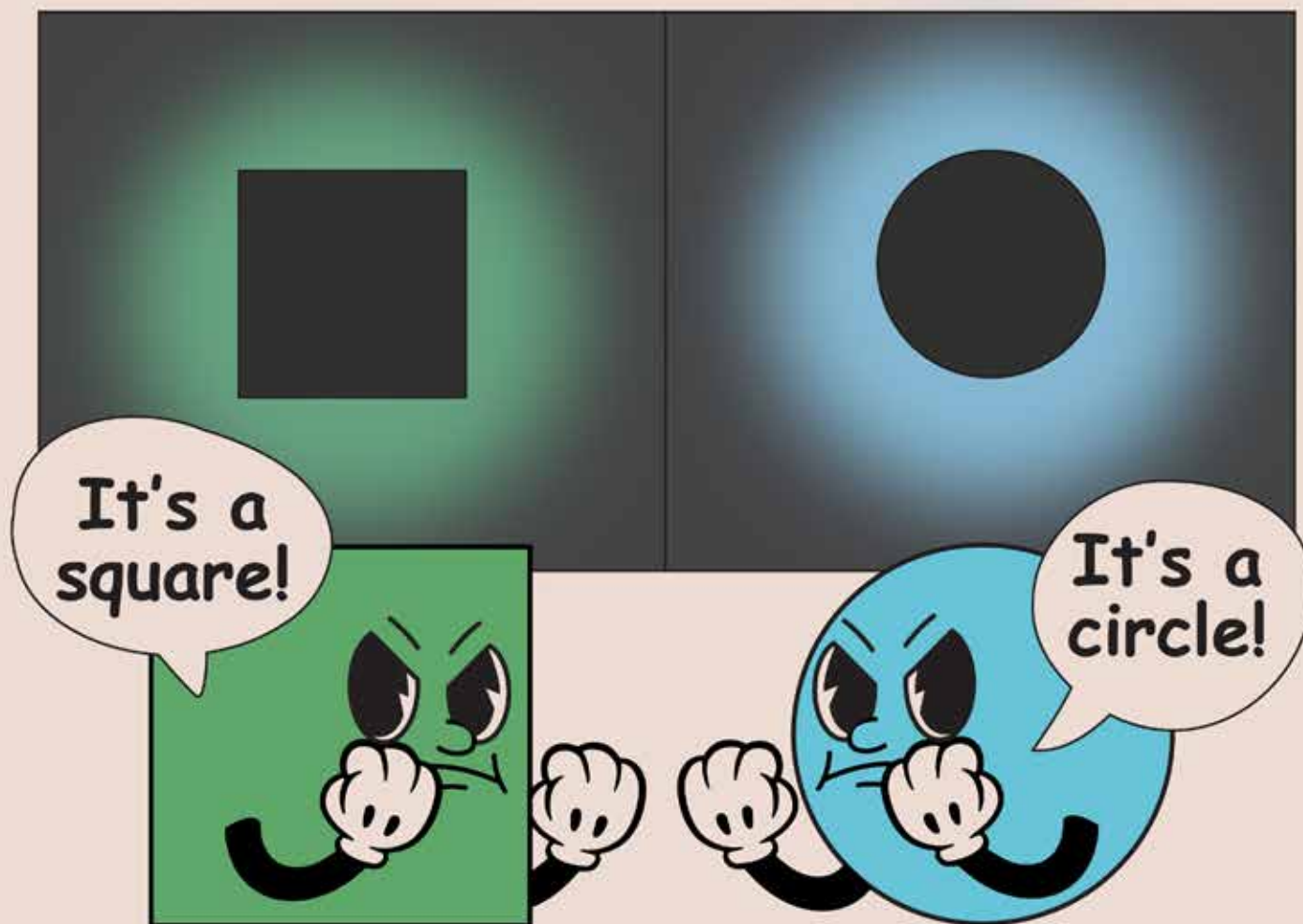
A **dialectical** philosophy guides **DBT**. It assumes that everything is interrelated, that tension is inevitable, and that change is constant. To adopt a dialectical worldview means to strive to embrace that seemingly opposite ideas can both be true and to accept change as a natural occurrence.



Dialectics is like a teeter-totter: the two seats reflect opposite sides or truths that can exist at the same time. These opposites sides are called **“thesis”** and **“antithesis.”**

UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)

SHINING A LIGHT ON MULTIPLE TRUTHS



THE PROBLEM

When we get stuck in one “truth,” we don’t see things from different perspectives, which can intensify negative emotions. And when we don’t consider other viewpoints, it’s hard to find solutions that will help us manage our emotions and communicate effectively with others.

UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)



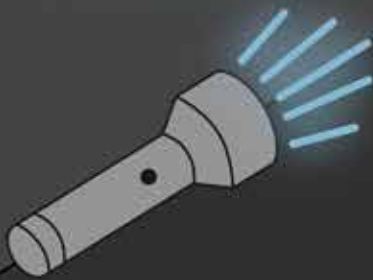
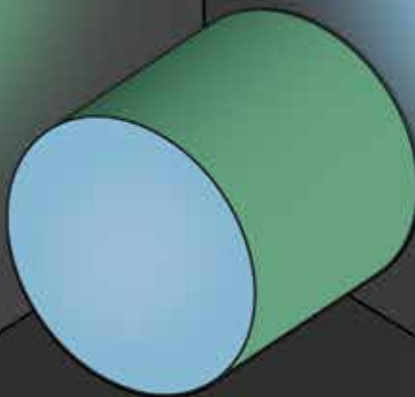
**LOOK AT
THE BIGGER
PICTURE**



THIS IS TRUE



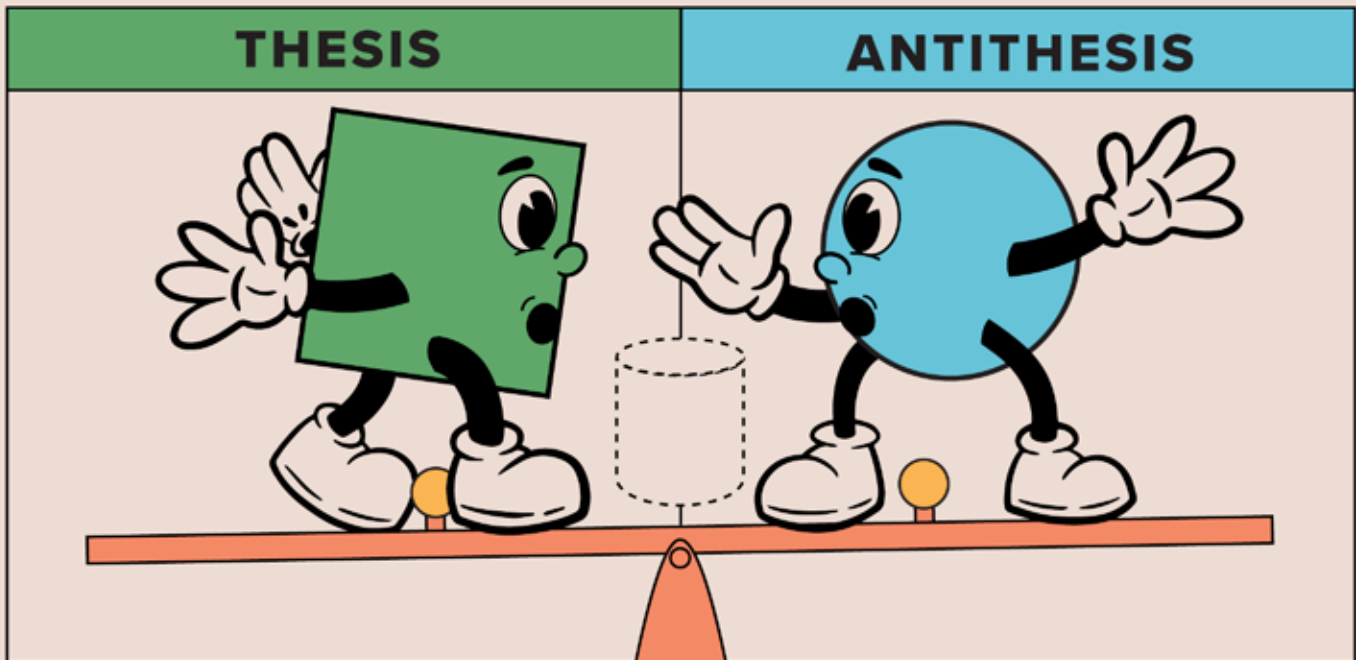
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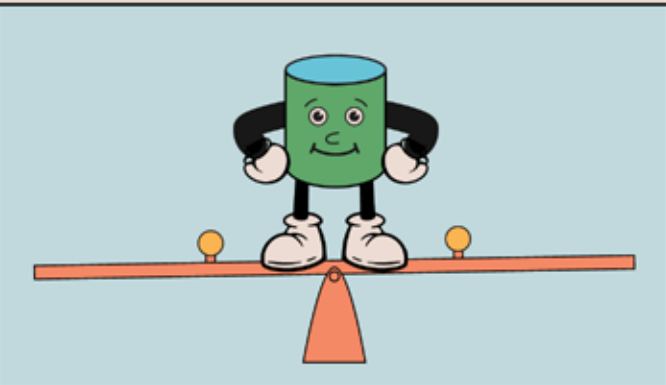
UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)



Being **dialectical** means sliding back and forth on the teeter-totter to balance both sides. Then we can move to the middle and achieve a greater level of understanding called a...

SYNTHESIS

A **synthesis** is a new way of seeing a situation by balancing the opposites of **thesis** and **antithesis**.



A balancing of opposing ideas to find a "middle path" or new truth.

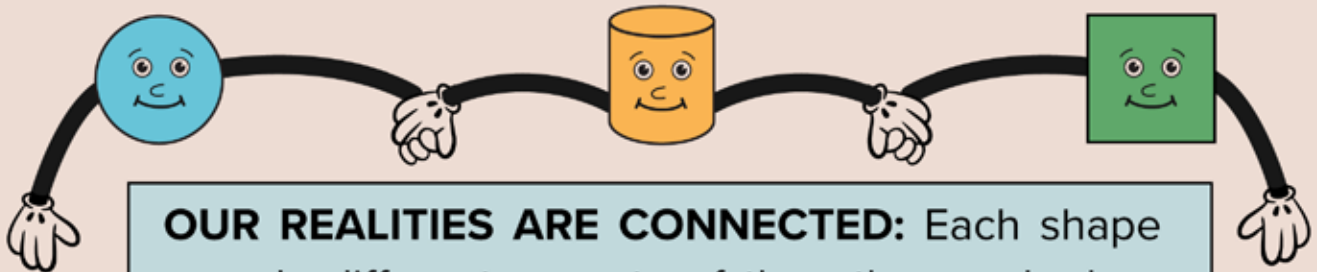
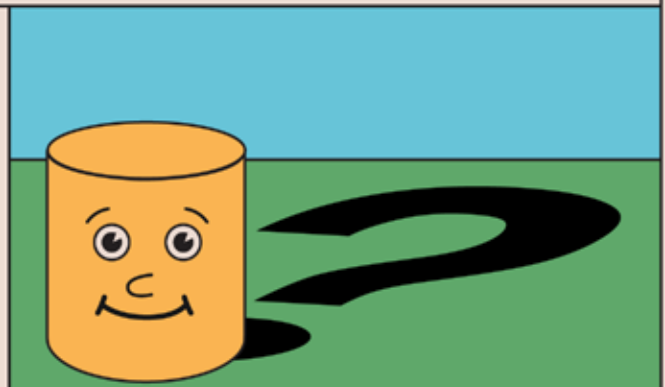
UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)

DIALECTICS REMINDS US:



THERE ARE MULTIPLE TRUTHS: Just as the cylinder casts both a square and a circle shadow, every situation contains more than one perspective or truth. Multiple truths can exist at the same time.

THERE IS ALWAYS MORE TO SEE: Looking just at the shadows, we miss the full picture. Thinking dialectically means asking, “What am I missing?”

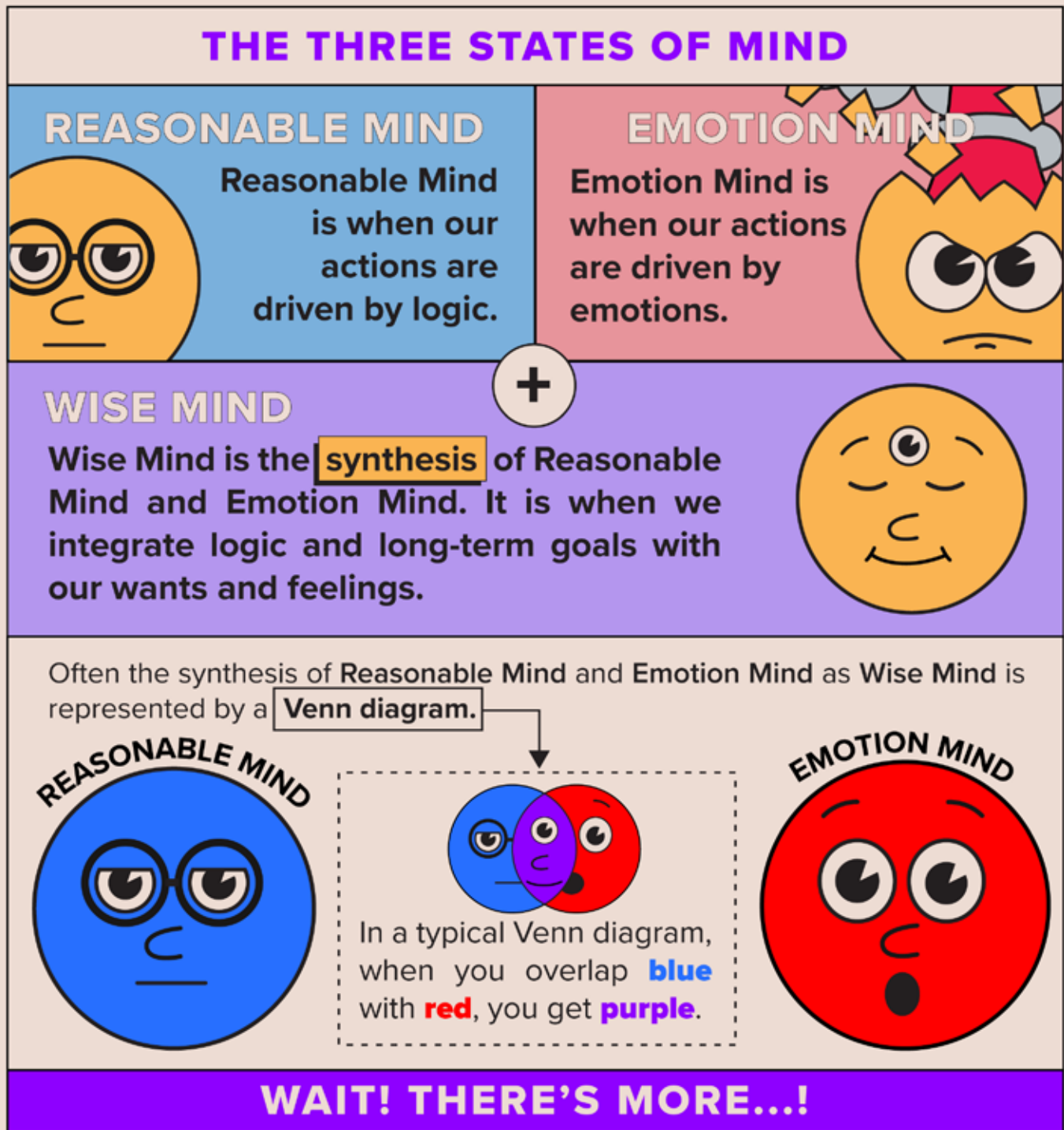


OUR REALITIES ARE CONNECTED: Each shape reveals different aspects of the other, and when combined form a fuller understanding, or a synthesis, which is represented by the cylinder.

UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)

WISE MIND AND SYNTHESIS

A common example of dialectics in **DBT** is the **States of Mind**. DBT identifies three primary **States of Mind**.

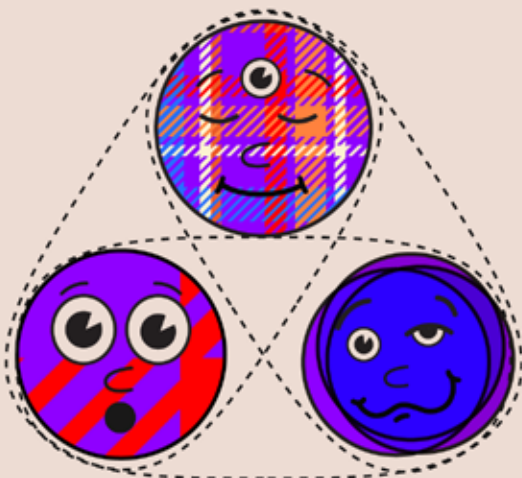
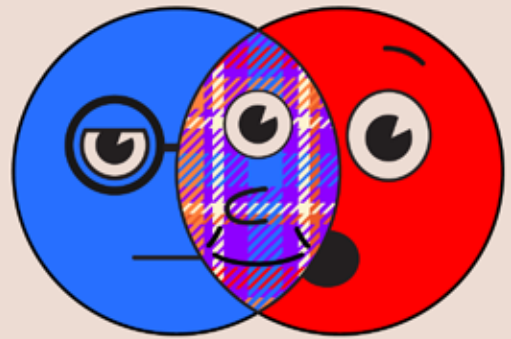


UNDERSTANDING DIALECTICS IN DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT)

DIALECTICS REMINDS US:

SYNTHESIS IS NOT COMPROMISE:

Synthesis is not just a blend of **red** and **blue** into **purple**. Rather, synthesis is a **plaid**, integrating the original colors while also introducing new shades and textures.



TO EMBRACE PARADOX AND

CONFUSION: From far away plaids can blur into a single color, from up close they can look like a mish mash of interweaving threads. Dialectics challenges us to see situations from various perspectives and embrace complexities, without erasing either side.



SYNTHESIS LEADS TO NEW TRUTHS: Opposing truths can coexist, leading us to a richer understanding. The plaid pattern shows how our combined insights are deeper than the sum of individual perspectives.