

When Clients Say, “The Skills Don’t Work.”

Assessing for factors inhibiting effective
outcomes

Dr Christine Dunkley
Prof Michaela Swales

Thanks

To Dr Jennifer Sayrs



For inviting us to write
about the topic for a special edition of
Cognitive & Behavioral Practice, in press

'Principles of Skills Assessment in DBT'
Swales and Dunkley

When the client says
'the skills don't work'

Believe them!

Your mission is to troubleshoot
until they do work

Acquisition assessment checklist



1. Client knows the name of the skill
2. Client understands the situation in which the skill is used
3. Client understands the function and rationale of the skill

Acquisition assessment checklist

4. Client understands steps or components of the skill
5. Client can demonstrate the skill with help
6. Client can demonstrate the skill without help





Client obstacles to skill acquisition

1. Poor attention (e.g., dissociation, distraction, going off topic, ADHD, leaving the room)
2. Poor understanding (e.g. learning difficulties, language problems, dyslexia, literacy problems, physiological hearing or sight problems)
3. Unhelpful cognitions (e.g. assumptions, judgements, self-invalidation)
4. Strong emotion (e.g. anger, embarrassment, anxiety, boredom)
5. Cannot see relevance of skill being learned to his/her own problems





6. Low confidence in either his/her ability to perform the skill or likelihood the skill will work
7. Intensity or pervasiveness of the problem makes learning the skill more difficult
8. Exhaustion; the client is overloaded, has low energy, poor sleep, medication effects
9. Trying new things is more uncomfortable than the status quo

Structural obstacles

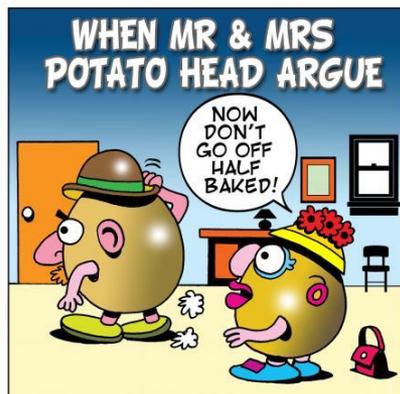
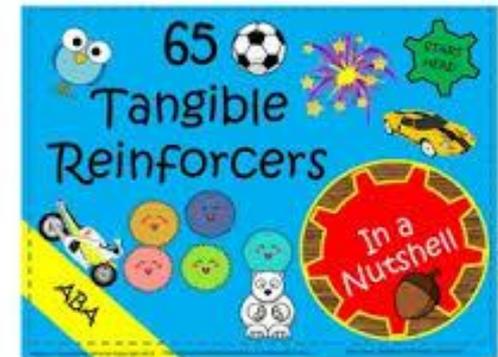


1. Trainers have a capability deficit in either their understanding of the skills or in how to teach skills in an accessible manner
2. Trainers have a motivational deficit related either to the DBT program as a whole, skills training in particular or as a result of personal difficulties.
3. Trainers experience unhelpful cognitions (e.g., I don't know how to teach this, the clients don't want to learn)
4. Trainers have strong emotion (e.g., frustration, fear,)
5. Trainers do not manage and/or remove distractions in the teaching environment (e.g., interruptions, noise)



Assessment questions for skills strengthening

1. What consequences function as reinforcers for this particular client? Can a reinforcer be utilized in session?
2. What components of the skill were completed effectively (at home or in session)?
3. What components need further coaching and shaping?
4. Has the client demonstrated the skill in front of the therapist?



5. Are other responses resulting in stronger reinforcement, inhibiting the strength of the new skill?
6. Can the client rehearse any component of the skill now?
7. Can effectiveness be improved (e.g., rehearsal and shaping in session, problem solve contingencies and other obstacles)?

Obstacles affecting strengthening

1. History of reinforcement for unskilful behaviour (e.g., relief after having a drink, or a teen missing school after self harm)
2. History of punishment for trying new skilful behaviour (e.g., the thought, "It won't work," or a spouse saying, "You don't need skills, you're fine!")
3. Client is not receiving any reinforcement/receives insufficient reinforcement for the new skill
4. While the client understands the skill, implementation of the skill is not yet effective

...obstacles



5. Inadequate assessment of controlling variables (e.g., assuming praise will reinforce a skill; not knowing what functions as a reinforcer for this client)
6. The client and skills trainer do not rehearse the skill
7. The client does not receive corrective coaching (e.g., not provided, too distracted or emotional to hear the feedback)

Assessment questions for telephone contact



1. Can the client identify when a skill is needed?
2. Does the skill chosen fit the situation?
3. Did the client apply the skill completely and accurately?
4. Did the client apply too much or too little intensity?

5. Can the client identify obstacles and problem solve (e.g., emotions, thoughts, forgetting, environmental factors)?

6. Is the client able to combine additional skills as needed?

7. Can the client monitor effectiveness of the skill?

8. Can the client be challenged to try the skill in a more complex situation?



Obstacles to Skills Generalisation

1. Client does not recognise a skill is needed in a particular situation, does not recognize an opportunity to practice
2. Client forgets to practice the skill, no reminders in place
3. Client does not understand how to implement the skill in a particular situation
4. Client knows a range of skills but cannot select an appropriate one



Generalization Obstacles



5. Thoughts and or emotions interfere with successful practice of skills in vivo
6. Client/ therapist rely on a narrow response repertoire eg distraction
7. Client/ therapist oversimplify or are non-specific with skills plan e.g. use emotion regulation when your spouse starts a fight
8. Client has difficulty tolerating the distress of trying a new behaviour