

Family Environment Skills

TEACHING NOTES

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Using what we know:

In this module we will be building on the Relationship Mindfulness Skills and looking closely at attitudes that provide the underpinnings for the development of a different family environment. Again in this module, *Family Connections* draws on DBT skills that would seem to be of most use. A key point for us is to understand that the well-being of family members is interconnected.

Not much research to go on

Research on families of people with BPD is very limited. Limiting also is that most of the studies are retrospective and often based on self-reports. There is extensive research on the family burden for schizophrenia, however. Burden is both subjective (e.g., measuring people's feelings: guilt, depression) and objective (e.g., financial, time away from work). While not much is known about families of people with BPD, as was reported in the Family Education Module, we do know from NEA-BPD research that families with a relative with BPD may experience **more** burden, grief, depression, and stigma than family members of persons with schizophrenia.

NEA-BPD Focus group

To begin to understand this better, NEA-BPD hosted a day-long forum at which families of people with schizophrenia and bi-polar (manic depression) disorder and borderline personality disorder came together to share experiences. A brief summary of the discussion is that families of people with borderline personality disorder are where families of people with schizophrenia were 20 years ago. In general, BPD families are concerned with obtaining a diagnosis, determining an effective treatment program, and trying to figure out how to adapt family life to deal with the impacts of the disorder. Families of persons with the other two disorders stressed the importance of advocacy, a family psychoeducation program, and an affiliation with a mental health organization.

Commonalities

Since elements of the impact of BPD are those common to other chronic physical and mental illnesses, it seems logical that family education, though it does not provide a "cure," helps families determine some direction in their actions in dealing with the impacts of the disorder – and maintain a good relationship with someone they love.

**Individual
and
family
well being
(Page 19)**

What is the relationship between individual functioning and family functioning?

Individual and Family Well Being are INTERTWINED

- ▲ Psychological disorders (for example, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, anxiety disorders) negatively affect relationships.
- ▲ Distressed family or relationship distress affect the individuals involved
- ▲ Distress in families ↔ individual distress

They can both feed each other *reciprocally*. Review the Transactional Model

Relationship between individual functioning and family functioning

We are all aware that relationships can make us feel good or bad about ourselves or others. The degree to which someone might be affected can be disturbing, no matter the combination of factors that cause an illness or disorder.

What makes it difficult for us?

There are some factors that make it especially hard for families with someone with BPD. All families experience some distress at some point, and even with most chronic conditions, after a number of months, people can marshal their resources. But with BPD, the disorder can go on, and the level of distress is high because of its chronicity, episodic depression, and other stressful factors. Often families have no feedback to guide them, and so these factors make it difficult to get organized in a useful way. For many people, after six months of trying to deal with chronic irritability, they will just quit. With a chronic condition it's hard to know if you are helping. People often go from anger, to attacking – and end up in an emotional spiral. Such patterns of reactive behavior are not specific to BPD; they can turn up in any chronically distressed family situation. Once you get to the secondary emotion of anger, and people react defensively, then you have a distressing situation for everyone.

Anger and judgment reinforce each other, and in the unpredictable contexts such emotions cause people to stop letting themselves feel vulnerable and to stop expressing themselves accurately. Understanding is impossible without accurate expression (#5). It leads to conflict (#7), lack of acceptance, and becomes a vicious circle.

Family variables (Page 19)

Families: We don't know very much about family functioning in families with a member who has borderline personality disorder (neither family of origin nor current family). However, data are clear that it is very difficult for patients and their family members.

What Makes It Difficult for Us?

(Fruzzetti)

1. Severe individual distress and disorder
2. Bad habits, patterns: forgetting that this is a person you love
3. Judgments (right/wrong; should/shouldn't)
4. Anger (it can be toxic in families)
5. Poor (inaccurate) self-expression
6. Lack of understanding
7. Poor conflict management skills
8. Lack of acceptance

Exercise #1: Using this list, put each factor in the order of relevance for your family. Which one(s) of those do you think can change? What will it require?

Who's to blame?

We can all observe that individual and family functioning are related, and there are very good research studies that show that they are completely intertwined, that development of things like depression and eating disorders are related to family functioning and stress. Family stress is both cause and effect of stress in individuals, and individual stress is the cause of inter-relationship stress. But when we talk about cause and effect, immediately the issue of blame arises.

There are possible combinations in relationships, and in day-to-day family routine it is easy to think in these terms, of one person versus another person, or one person blaming another. Both parties can blame the other. In our Wise Mind, however, we may want to look at the one sector of the quadrant that leads to possible solutions and alternatives.

<p>Who's to Blame (Page 19)</p>	<p>Blame Game: Who's to Blame?</p>		
		<p>FAMILY SAYS</p>	
		<p><i>Your Fault</i></p>	<p><i>Our Fault</i></p>
	<p>PATIENT SAYS</p>	<p><i>Your Fault</i> Contempt, conflict, Bitterness, blame each other</p>	<p><i>Our Fault</i> Suffering, guilt blame the family</p>
	<p><i>My fault</i></p>	<p>Suffering, guilt; blame patient</p>	<p>Suffering together</p>
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contempt, conflict, bitterness: blame each other 2. Suffering, guilt: blame family 3. Suffering, guilt: blame patient 4. Suffering together 	

Alternatives

If we think back to ways to reduce judgments (*Relationship Mindfulness, page 11*) and the importance of stepping back and describing, then we can escape the escalation that comes with the blame game. If you can describe things non-judgmentally (the situation, goals, feelings) then you are better able to understand your own situation and help others to understand it as well.

This mindful approach allows people to share their feelings, say of sadness, and people can be sad together, or recall good times together. You can acknowledge the other person's suffering – and this can be difficult - but it can bring you together, rather than pushing you apart.

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No blame
(Page 20)

Alternative

- ▲ No blame
- ▲ Focus on describing the situation, your goals, emotions, wants, thoughts
- ▲ Understanding the other person's goals, emotions, wants, thoughts
- ▲ Be sad together when things are different from what you want

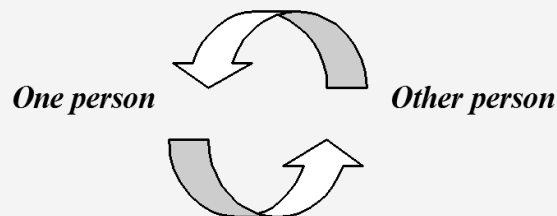
A transactional process *and* reciprocity

We are working at trying to change patterns of behavior, responses, and this is not easy. If we look at the transactional model, and agree that factors influence each other, and that we are trying to change, we may feel that we are doing it all alone. Even if at first, or for a long time, we cannot create a pattern of positive interactions and feelings, simply cutting down on the pattern of negative interactions helps our own distress.

Concentrating on making a validating family environment is something that both the family and the person with BPD can do.

A
transactional
process
(Page 20)

Transactional Model: Factors Influence Each Other (Reciprocal)



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Reciprocity (Page 20)

- ▲ A more validating family environment may be a useful strategy for both the person with BPD and her or his family members
- ▲ It may also be a useful prevention/early intervention strategy

*There is a reciprocity in relationships
where the transactions that occur
create a cycle and pattern of positive feelings
or a pattern of negative reactions.*

Finding the balance

Questions that people often raise have to do with the sense that they alone are trying to change and they wonder how long they have to work at changing. For many people, thinking about the situation or issue in a different way often helps. There is often tension because we think in terms of opposites: "If it isn't this, then it is that." But it is possible to look at things not as opposites, either/or, but as dialectical, i.e. both sides can be true and have value.

Think about what both parties of the dyad want, and see if there is a commonality that allows for resolution, something in common that you both want or would like. In effect, you depolarize your thinking. We don't argue about things we have in common and are agreed on. Few relationships are in conflict all the time, and, perhaps if we accept more from someone else, it is easier for the other person to change, too.

We don't have to be at odds. For example, it might seem that by encouraging a partner to go away to a conference, that in promoting their autonomy, we are in danger of losing our closeness. But, in fact, such increased autonomy can foster closeness: in sharing experiences we have more closeness, not less.

Take, for example, the issues of parents, and nurturing and setting limits. It seems to some people that to set limits is to be unloving, for example, refusing to lend someone money because loans in the past have not been repaid. The attitude you adopt makes the difference: if you are non-judgmental, then saying no can be a loving behavior. The issue is not really whether you believe it when someone says he/she is going to pay you back. You can say that there is the chance that he/she will not pay you back descriptively, in a non-attacking, non-judgmental way. You can explain that you don't want to risk damage to the relationship by your feeling bad if the promise is not kept. He/she may come back and put forward many possible consequences if you do not help. You need to stay consistent: no blaming, no attacking; no threats that the relationship will end; no adding to shame so that neither person is left with more baggage. This is not a problem-solving strategy, but a management issue. Your aim is to depolarize, not to make things worse. It will not necessarily make things better, or provide a solution. But if you give way, it's likely to lead to the kind of cycle of resentment/shame. On the other hand, if a parent consistently sets reasonable limits, then he/she is showing that he/she is a safe, predictable person.

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**Finding
the
Balance
(Page 21)**

**Finding the Balance (or, synthesis):
Primary Polarities or Dialectical Tensions**

- ▲ Acceptance vs. Change
- ▲ Autonomy vs. Closeness
- ▲ One person's desires/goals vs. another's
- ▲ Individual behavior vs. relationship behavior
- ▲ Individual dysfunction and psychopathology vs. relationship dysfunction
- ▲ Nurturance vs. limits ("tough love")

Exercise #2 Using Finding the Balance: Write one sentence on each statement that describes your relationship with your relative.

Basic Assumptions

Our assumptions make a difference, and allow us to act. It's really not so much a question of being right or wrong. We all know that people see things from different perspectives. Even at a physical/perceptual level: people witnessing an accident will recall different aspects, and even recall details in different sequences. Research studies bear this out. People seeing the same car accident will see things from different perspectives.

If we are talking about people and psychology, things are even more complex. When we are talking about changes in relationships, we are not dealing with absolute truths. We are looking at motivations, asking why people do what they do. We have choices in the assumptions we make. For example, if someone is not doing well, we can make the assumption that she/he is not trying and want them to try harder. Or, we can go an alternative route and ask: What is getting in the way? (Assumption: everyone is doing his/her best.) If someone chooses to do something that is really self-damaging, we can assume that the other alternative (we may not know what that alternative is) is worse. Example: Cutting is harmful, but far better than suicide and may be less painful than keeping all the hurt bottled up inside.

Acceptance and change

Some people take "Everyone is doing his/her best" to mean resignation and hopelessness. If we look at making changes in terms of acquiring skills, not exercising will power, then it is easier to accept that changes probably come in small steps. Trying harder means taking one step at a time and the person has to know what the step is. What do you have to try harder at? How do you take the next step? If you break a leg, you don't play a basketball game as soon as you take the cast off: you exercise and follow a regimen and gradually get back into the game. People often need not to "try harder," but to go slower, one small step at a time, in their life as it is now.

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<p>Basic Assumptions (Page 21)</p>	<p>Basic Assumptions (to be effective)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▲ People need to interpret things in the most benign way possible▲ There is no one or any absolute truth▲ Everyone is doing the best they can in this moment▲ Everyone needs to try harder <p><i>Exercise #3 Give an example from your life of each of the Basic Assumptions.</i></p> <p><i>Exercise #4 Give two examples of where Basic Assumption of there being no absolute truth, could have made a difference in an interaction you had with your relative recently.</i></p> <p><i>Exercise #5 Use Benign Interpretation once per day. Note your reaction(s) when you perceive things that way.</i></p>
<p>Acceptance and Change (Page 21)</p>	<p>Acceptance and Change</p> <p>Changes occur in the context of acceptance of life as it is. This is a dialectical concept; acceptance creates the possibility of change – and change requires, and leads to, acceptance.</p>
<p>Radical Acceptance (Page 21)</p>	<p>The most important <i>acceptance</i> skill is Radical Acceptance (Linehan, 1993)</p>

Radical acceptance

This brings us to a really key point: if we accept that change is usually slow and takes place within the context of the reality of our everyday lives, then we are looking at the concept of Radical Acceptance.

Tape on Radical Acceptance

Marsha Linehan described how she had asked some questions: why do some people keep going when they are knocked down, and others stay down? In her work with people who were suffering, she read widely about trauma and why some people made it through. In her instructional tape, she focuses on how to “make it and keep yourself from being destroyed.”

People who grow have some qualities in common.

An infinite number of painful things can happen, but there are only four (4) possible responses to painful events:

- We can solve the problem
- We can try to change how we feel about the problem
- We can accept the problem
- We can stay miserable.

If we talk of skills, we can talk about radical acceptance:

Some traumas are extreme: the loss of a child, a physical disability, a painful childhood, all are very hard to accept. “Radical” means that you accept from the depth of your soul, in your heart, and mind, and body; you stop fighting the reality of the trauma. The problem is actually accomplishing the radical acceptance. It’s very hard to explain and it’s an interior process. Most of us are troubled because we are not happy. If true, do you want happiness? To get that, you must do something different.

Focus on some time in your life when you accepted something radically and totally: something you lost; someone you loved who died; something you really wanted, like a job you didn’t get. Close your eyes and go back in time to the point right before the bad event happened. Then go through the period when you were not accepting, to the time you accepted. Most people have had this experience. When you accept, even though you might still feel sad, then you feel free to move and can move on.

An equation to remember: Pain + non-acceptance = suffering.

One way to look at life is to accept that every event has a cause. The opposite of this approach is to think that things should not be the way they are. If a child is killed in an accident, some might say that it should not have happened, but sad as it is, it did happen; talking about what “should” have happened is not living in descriptive reality. This is not to say that the accident was a good thing, but by being descriptive and accepting what has happened, we can move forward instead of getting stuck in non-acceptance: for example, the mother of the dead child might embark on a campaign to educate people about better ways to protect their children.

Think of a time when you asked: Why me?

The first step in accepting is to practice. You have to accept that the rules of the universe are the rules of the universe. Practice letting go: release your body tension; go out at night and just say “yes” to the universe. Accept that every event has a cause.

We can make a life worth living even in limited circumstances or with pain. Even in jail where the options are limited, people can figure out how to make their life worthwhile. People can move from unacceptable agony, to acceptable pain. Believing that you can make life worth living makes it easier.

Obstacles in the way to Radical Acceptance: approving bad behavior, being passive, being resigned, and avoiding. Radical Acceptance seems to be the opposite of standing up for yourself. But if you really want to change something, you first have to accept it, take the reality as it is. It is very easy to accept reality when everything is going our way and we are happy. But when we have anger, or disapprove, or have pain, Radical Acceptance is harder. The higher the pain, the more the anger, the harder the Radical Acceptance is. And the more effective we can be if we do radically accept our situation.

**Acceptance
(Page 22)**

- ✓ Acceptance may be the only way out of hell. Acceptance is YES to reality and says every event has a cause.
- ✓ It is the only way we can take suffering that feels as if it can't be tolerated and turn it into pain that can be tolerated.
- ✓ The distress tolerance skills in DBT are about tolerating and surviving crises while accepting life as it is in the moment...allowing for the use of other skills to improve the next moment in a more enduring way

**Grief and
Grieving**

Grief and Loss: Steps in Grieving (Fruzzetti, 2016)

Elements of my life are not what I planned or hoped for, and elements of my loved-one's life are not what I planned or hoped for.

Radical acceptance helps us live with reality. However, it is important to notice the losses, grieve the losses, fully:

1. Start with a cue about a loss, maybe a small one.
2. Describe what you wanted and didn't get, without judgments, "shoulds" or "what ifs"
3. Allow your sadness to come and go: notice the sadness as you breathe in, let it go as you breathe out-try this for a few breaths or even a few minutes.
4. Notice that your sadness, disappointment makes sense; self-validate
5. Soothe yourself as needed
6. Consider seeking validation from someone else
7. Re-engage, re-activate your life right now...do what you need to do in the present; engage it fully, bringing your attention fully to it.
8. Repeat this whole process as needed, over time

Exercise #6 Name one thing you had to radically accept in your life.

Exercise #7 Choose one relatively minor situation and practice the skill of Radical Acceptance. Describe what the process was like,

Exercise #8 Identify something about your relative that you want to work on to radically accept.

Exercise #9: Begin the process of grieving. Choose one (small) elements of your life that is related to your loved one's problems and go through the steps above.

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We can practice acceptance in everyday life. Begin with some easy examples. For example, when you cannot get a drink from a soda machine. You can kick and pound on the machine, or you can direct your energies to find another way to quench your thirst for the moment, and also leave a note on the machine and hope that tomorrow it will be repaired. We can scream and shout and have a tantrum, or we can direct our energies to change. We still do not like the situation, but we do something about it.

Some situations are much harder to deal with, especially in personal relationships when we try to communicate with someone. How much energy do you put into the relationship? You can accept what is not working so far.

Practice Exercises (Page 23)

Practice Exercises

1. Using the list of items listed on Page 19, "What Makes It Difficult for Us," put the items in the order of relevance for your family.

Which one(s) of those do you think can change?

What will it require?
2. Using Finding the Balance: Primary Polarities or Dialectical Tensions (Page 21), write two (2) sentences on each that describe your relationship with your relative.
3. Give an example from your life of each of the Basic Assumptions (Page 21).
4. Give two examples of where Basic Assumption #2 (Page 21), "There is no absolute truth," could have made a difference in an interaction you had with your relative recently.
5. Use Benign Interpretation one time per day with one person.

Note your reaction(s) when you perceive things that way.
6. Name three things you had to radically accept in your life.

Describe what the process was like for you.
7. Choose one relatively minor situation and practice the skill of Radical Acceptance.

Describe what the process was like.
8. Identify something about your relative that you want to work on to radically accept.
9. Begin the process of grieving. Choose one (small) element of your life that is related to you loved one's problems with BPD, and go through the grieving step outlined above.