

# DBT's Mindfulness Skill: HOW Part 2



In Part 1 of DBT's mindfulness skills, we looked at the first of the [HOW skills of mindfulness](#) – nonjudgmentally.

# Mindfulness in DBT is broken up into WHAT and HOW skills

The WHAT skills are *what you do* to be mindful.

You:

- [Observe](#)
- [Describe](#)
- [Participate](#)

The HOW skills of mindfulness are *how you do the WHAT skills*.

You do the WHAT skills:

- Nonjudgmentally
- One-Mindfully
- Effectively

This post will focus on the One-Mindfully and Effectively HOW skills of mindfulness.

# One-Mindfully in DBT

One-Mindfully is being fully present to the moment, not lost in the past or thinking about the future.

It's **doing one thing at a time, with full awareness** (rather than splitting your attention between things – like having a conversation on the phone while checking your email).

## Why multi-tasking isn't effective

Doing one thing at a time is the antidote to our fast-paced world where you can feel like you have to juggle three things at once.

When you juggle three things at once, it's unlikely that you can slow down enough to [get in touch with your wise mind](#) to help you make decisions.

## You miss the beauty

One-mindfulness opens you up to the potential beauty in small moments – to the sound of a loved one's voice on the phone, to the warmth of the sun on your skin, or to the sweet scent when peeling an orange.

If the moment is a painful one, one-mindfully helps you be present to just the pain of one moment. *Why add on pain by thinking about the past or worrying about the future?*

# How to practice One-Mindfully

Take an everyday task and focus your full attention on it.

*For example*

When you're washing your hands, notice the temperature and pressure of the water, smell the scent of the soap, feel the sensation of hands rubbing hands. Notice how the towel feels drying your hands and how your clean hands feel afterwards.

## Effectively in DBT

### Why focus on Effectively

This skill is about acting effectively, which means **doing what works vs. sitting on your hands and wishing reality were different.**

Effectively in DBT is about shifting the focus away from concepts of fair and unfair, or who is right and who is wrong, in order to do what works.

When you're not focused on doing what's effective, you may act in ways that are more about being right or proving a point. Trying to be right can get in the way of getting what you want or need.

### How to practice Effectively

First, figure out what you want.

To act *effectively*, you have to know what you want out of a situation. Once you know your goal, you can choose the most effective means to reach that goal.

*For example*

If someone cuts you off in traffic, you might be tempted to lean on your horn in response.

Or speed up to tailgate them.

Or pull up next them, roll down your window and shout obscenities at them.

This is an extreme example, but can you see how this isn't effective if your goal is to arrive safely and calmly to your destination?

To practice being effective in this example would be ***to not escalate***. Instead, use skills to calm yourself down (such as deep breathing). Remind yourself that your goal is to get to your destination safely, not to punish someone who did something dangerous or to be the king of the road.

# DBT's mindfulness skills are the foundation of DBT

**When you are mindful, you are in control** (instead of feeling like your emotions are running the show).

When you practice the WHAT and HOW skills of mindfulness, you can be present in each moment – with awareness and without judgment.

# Mindfulness and DBT: Observe



In our last post, we explored the [power of mindfulness](#).

Now that you know the benefits of mindfulness, you may be wondering what you should do to be mindful.

[DBT](#), or Dialectical Behavior Therapy, teaches you *what to actually do* to practice mindfulness and *how to do it*.

These are called the “What” and “How” skills of mindfulness.

### ***What skills***

Three skills comprise the “What” of mindfulness in DBT.

These skills are practiced one at a time:

- Observe
- [Describe](#)
- [Participate](#)

### ***How skills***

Three skills comprise the “How” of mindfulness.

The “How” skills teach you how to do the “What” skills and they are practiced all together:

- Nonjudgementally
- One-Mindfully
- Effectively

So what you do when you practice mindfulness in DBT is you **Observe, Describe and Participate**.

And the way you Observe, Describe and Participate is Nonjudgementally, One-Mindfully and Effectively.

I’ll describe each of these skills in detail in future posts. For now, I’ll talk about the Observe skill.

# The Observe Mindfulness Skill

Observe is noticing direct sensory experience. It's what you feel, sense, see, taste, touch and hear without labeling it, reacting to it or judging it.

This is tricky for most people at first; our minds want to label what is happening rather than just being with the bare sensations of an experience.

When you practice the **Observe** mindfulness skill you are allowing your immediate experience to just happen – without pushing it away or trying to change it.

Observe, like all the skills, is experiential. This means that intellectual understanding of the skill isn't enough; you have to experience the skill for yourself to truly get it.

## Here are some exercises to practice the Observe mindfulness skill:

- Listen to the sounds around you, just noticing what you hear without adding any commentary.
- Watch your breath. Observe the sensation of inhaling and exhaling, noticing your belly rising and falling as you breathe.
- Sit outside on a bench and watch what passes in front of your direct line of sight, without turning your head or labeling what you see.

The Observe skill can help you feel alive in the moment you are actually in, not lost in the past or anticipating the future.

**You are in the here and now**, experiencing reality as it is; you are awake.

When you are awake to what is in each moment you are much more likely to be calm, centered and aware.

In other words, when you practice Observe, you are much more likely to [be in your Wise Mind](#).

# Mindfulness and DBT: Describe



## The “What” skills of mindfulness in DBT

In last week’s post, I explained [the first “What” skill of mindfulness in DBT, which is Observe.](#)

Now I am going to explain the second “What” skill, which is **Describe**.

# The Describe Mindfulness Skill

Describe **builds on** Observe.

Observe is just bare-bones attention – noticing without adding a story.

***Describe is putting words to what you Observe***, whether that's a sensation, emotion or thought.

Here's the tricky part: to practice the Describe mindfulness skill in DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy), **you describe by just sticking to the facts**, without adding your own interpretations or assumptions.

When you Describe, you label emotions as emotions, thoughts as thoughts and sensations as sensations, without adding any:

- Opinions
- Labels
- Concepts
- Assumptions
- Judgements

The **Describe** mindfulness skill is a great tool to help you *not* mistake your every thought or feeling for a fact.

*For example:* Feeling like you are unlovable doesn't mean that it's true.

**If you are emotionally sensitive, this skill is key in reducing reactivity.** Describe helps you not jump to conclusions that make you feel bad about yourself or your relationships without checking the facts.

# Let's look at an example of Describe in action

Imagine you're at a coffee shop with a good friend. Your friend keeps shifting in her seat and turning her head while you talk which makes you feel anxious.

You then begin to interpret her behavior and jump to conclusions like she's mad at you, or bored, or doesn't care about you anymore.

If you mistake your interpretation of her behavior as factual, you may start to get angry or hurt, thinking *"What did I do wrong, why is she mad at me?"*  
Or

*"This always happens, my friends turn on me, I can't trust anyone,"* creating a painful story in your head that changes the way you interact with your friend.

**The Describe mindfulness skill keeps you from weaving negative (or positive) stories about what you notice without checking the facts.**

*The facts in this example are that your friend is shifting in her seat and turning her head – that's it.*

Sticking with the facts might peak your curiosity about what's going on with your friend, prompting you to talk with her about what you're noticing. Who knows what you'll find out – maybe her back hurts or she's worried about running into an ex or something completely different.

Whatever your friend tells you, you've saved yourself a lot of unnecessary suffering by not buying into your perception of the facts.



# Mindfulness and DBT: Participate



## The “What” skills of Mindfulness in DBT

In the last two posts, I explored the first two “What” skills of mindfulness in DBT, [Observe](#) and [Describe](#).

To review quickly, the “What” skills teach you **what to actually do** to practice mindfulness, and you practice each “What” skill one at a time.

The “What” skills are:

- Observe
- Describe
- Participate

# The Participate Mindfulness Skill

What does Participate mean in [Dialectical Behavior Therapy](#)?

Participate is just as it sounds; it is throwing yourself completely into an activity, letting go of self-consciousness, judgements and fear.

***Participating is the opposite of sitting on the sidelines and watching.***

Most young children are great at participating, immersing themselves completely in play without inhibition.

**Participate looks different depending on the activity.**

*For example:*

If you’re in a classroom discussion, it means letting yourself participate fully in the conversation without worrying what your classmates think of you.

If you’re dancing, it means throwing yourself 100% into the dance, moving with the music, not worrying about how you look.

You can practice the Participate mindfulness skill **during mundane everyday activities as well**, like washing the dishes.

Instead of thinking about how much you hate washing the dishes, or planning what you're going to do after you're finished with the dishes, you immerse yourself completely in the activity of washing the dishes.

## Participating fights feelings of alienation

*Self-consciousness and self-criticism separates you from your experience.*

This can lead to painful feelings of alienation from other people and from life in general. The Participate mindfulness skill **helps you feel like you are a part of, not apart from.**

Participate is also an antidote to feeling like you are sleepwalking through life or to chronic feelings of emptiness.

Not participating hurts; it keeps you forever on the outside, witnessing your life rather than actually living it.

When you Participate in DBT, you are fully immersed in whatever you are doing – instead of just going through the motions while thinking about something else.

## Addictive Behavior is not Participating

If you struggle with an [addiction](#), you may wonder if engaging in your addiction is a form of participating.

Addictive behaviors are often ritualized to such an extent that it can feel like you are being present in the moment.

This is not participating mindfully, though, because participating in DBT includes acting intuitively from [Wise Mind](#), so your actions are in service of your long-term goals.

# Participate is about your Experience

Remember, participating is not about the quality of what you are doing, it's about the quality of your experience.

Throwing yourself into dancing doesn't necessarily mean that you are going to be a fabulous dancer, but it does mean that you are going to have a fabulous time doing it.

# What is Wise Mind in DBT?



## What is Wise Mind?

Wise Mind is a foundational DBT concept.

[Dialectical Behavior Therapy is an evidence-based therapy](#) that was originally created to help people who feel overwhelmed by the intensity of

their emotions. *The concept of Wise Mind, though, can be beneficial to everyone.*

**Wise Mind is an internal state of wisdom, or knowledge.** Intuition, feeling centered, or feeling grounded are also other ways of thinking about Wise Mind. It is a certain *knowing* about **what feels right**. Some people sense Wise Mind in their body – in their heart, their gut or in the middle of their chest.

**Wise Mind is actually made up of two other states of mind:** Emotion Mind and Reasonable Mind.

To understand the DBT concept of Wise Mind, you first need to know what Emotion Mind and Reasonable mind look like.

## What is Emotion Mind?

Emotion Mind is hot; it's a state of mind when emotions run high and awareness is solely focused on whatever feeling is strongest in the moment. If you're angry, that's all you see. If you're sad, that's all you see.

When you act from Emotion Mind, you make quick decisions without thinking about factors other than your emotions.

*For example,* Emotion Mind might lead you to walk out from your job in anger because of a conflict with a co-worker.

If you make decisions just from Emotion Mind, you create havoc in your life, burning bridges, prematurely ending relationships and potentially hurting yourself and those you care about.

## What is Reasonable Mind?

Reasonable Mind is cool; it's a state of mind where facts and logic predominate. Reasonable mind is devoid of emotion.

*To go back to the job example,* Reasonable Mind might have you stay in a job you hate because you're just focusing solely on facts – like needing income or benefits – while completely ignoring that the job makes you miserable.

# Emotion Mind + Reasonable Mind = Wise Mind

Wise Mind is the combination of Emotion Mind and Reasonable Mind. But it's something more, too.

**It's that quiet place inside you that just *knows* what's right.**

Wise Mind draws on emotion *and* reason to help you weigh options about the right course of action to take.

*In the job example,* Wise Mind helps you figure out whether you need to talk with your co-worker, ask a supervisor for help or look for a new job.

**Accessing and listening to your Wise Mind** helps you move forward in your life. And when you act from Wise Mind, you can trust that your decisions are coming from a whole and centered place, aligned with what's most important to you.