

# The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook —— *for* —— PTSD

Practical Exercises for  
Overcoming Trauma &  
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

KIRBY REUTTER, PhD

FOREWORD BY DAWN DEPASQUALE, LMHC

“Kirby Reutter delivered again! His dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) self-help book teaches trauma survivors to go beyond numbing their pain; rather, they are guided in restoring the balance of their thoughts and emotions. Reutter breaks down ‘applied mindfulness’ into eye-opening sections that can speak to all. The enlightening flow from acceptance to action, accompanied by his therapeutic tools, such as the RAIN DANCE technique, will work to navigate through relationships, life, and self. His adaptation of DBT for post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers will help to facilitate healing the pain now and in the future with supportive exercises throughout this book.”

—**Iva Svancarova**, clinical mental health counselor and DBT enthusiast currently practicing in New York, NY

“Kirby Reutter has used his knowledge, passion, and experience to write a workbook that is applicable to individuals that struggle with trauma. His approach through real examples, along with his unique sense of humor, is truly captured in his work. I have worked alongside him; the workbook reads as many of his therapy sessions would play out. He uses language that is understandable and relatable, and offers a vantage point that allows individuals to feel comfortable and as though this is a journey and not a life sentence. He provides the education and tools needed, offering support throughout the process of healing.”

—**Nicole Johnson-Smith, MS, CCTP, LMHC-A**, director of the LaGrange County Northeastern Center, and adjunct faculty of the Jannen School of Arts and Sciences at Trine University

“Restoring balance! Kirby Reutter has compiled many useful exercises to aid anyone in the healing process. I have used his exercises in my own life and in my practice with counseling women who have experienced trauma, and I have recommended his work for individuals to use on their own. Reutter frames concepts in a way that is very practical and useful. These exercises are easy to use and demonstrate growth. I am excited to have this resource published and available for a wider population to access for their own healing.”

—**Charla Leman, LCSW, CADAC IV**, supervising counselor at Gateway Woods Family Services, cofounder of the drug and alcohol program at Gateway Woods Residential Services, and cofounder of BASICS at Ohio University Counseling and Psychological Services

“Very engaging from the first page. Kirby Reutter does a great job of taking twenty years of trauma psycho-education and breaking it down into terms that are understandable. Each chapter has a brief explanation followed by an exercise to work through. I enjoy the ‘congratulations’ at the end of each exercise. It makes you feel like you accomplished something. I also like the fact that you can work at your own pace and make choices about the action you will take. I feel that this is very empowering in trauma work. I cannot wait to use this with clients!”

—**Vikki Heins, MA, LMHC**, twenty years of work in the field of trauma and addictions

“Drawing from a growing body of evidence-based support for the use of dialectical behavior therapy in treating those suffering lasting effects of trauma, Kirby Reutter delivers an incredible collection of skills and exercises to help foster healing for these individuals. This workbook provides invaluable tools in an encouraging and accessible manner, while also offering honest and realistic guidance on when seeking additional professional help may be most prudent. *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook for PTSD* is most assuredly a crucial, cutting-edge resource for clients as well as clinicians.”

—**Sheresa Wilson-DeVries, PA-C, LMCHA**, physician assistant in the family medicine and addictions clinic at the ProMedica Coldwater Regional Hospital; and adjunct professor in the department of physician assistant studies at Trine University

“This workbook has extremely well-thought-out organization and techniques to follow, which allows those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to use this workbook for self-help or with a therapist. It is a workbook that truly guides the PTSD sufferer toward healing, rather than mainly a study guide that teaches the reader only information. These workbook exercises are clear, easy to understand, and easy to apply.”

—**Harriet Farney, PhD**, education management consultant

“Having had the privilege to take one of Kirby Reutter’s workshops, I was delighted to know that he had created *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Workbook for PTSD*. What a wonderful way to explain dialectical behavior therapy in common, everyday language. This is a workbook that can be considered the light at the end of the tunnel for those suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as so many other disorders. Simple steps and amazing exercises to calm the chaos in our minds is what I found, and I include myself in dealing with my own PTSD.”

—**Annemarie Maroney, AMFT**, creator of HELP from Ana Maroney

“As a US Army corpsman serving as a combat medic and a medical lab tech at the 93rd Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh, Vietnam, I was exposed to far too much human carnage, body bags, drug abuse, and waste of young lives. Then after my tour of duty, I returned home to continue what I thought was a normal life. But after I experienced these traumatic events, they just didn’t go away. For over forty years, I realized that no matter what I tried, I could not just ‘get over it.’ At the urging of my family, and having a VA disability rating that provided mental health treatment, I sought professional help and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). After a few counseling visits, my journey to recovery began. Kirby Reutter’s *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook for PTSD* was prescribed early on in my treatment, and I could see myself over and over again. Each chapter covers a different segment of the reoccurring theme of ‘restoring balance’ in all aspects of life, followed by ‘The Last Word,’ which made it not only understandable, but also applicable. This is a very well-written workbook, and I highly recommend this workbook for any PTSD-recovering combat soldier.”

—**Duane Boyd**, US Army MOS 92B10, 92B20; Vietnam veteran from 1970–1972

“Kirby Reutter presents a unique, fresh, and user-friendly perspective applying dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) concepts and skills to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His use of short, simple acronyms to remember critical concepts with clients is refreshing and most importantly useful! Clinicians want to turn to something they can use with clients NOW. Reutter provides us with that and more. He created flow and explanation in this workbook that are easy to learn and easy to teach clients. I have taught and developed DBT programs for twenty years and will be keeping this book front and center in my work!”

—**Beth Robbins, PsyD**, licensed clinical psychologist

“Kirby Reutter expertly guides the mental health practitioner and the trauma sufferer, alike, through the pursuit of balance, utilizing dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) techniques cherry-picked for their utility. Reutter patiently and effectively explains the processes with a teacher’s heart, building on and reinforcing concepts previously delivered. He is a delight to learn from in person; reading his writing is the next best thing to listening to him directly! This book will be a go-to compendium many times in my work with clients!”

—**Roger Gasser, LPCC, LMHC, CADAC IV**, worked in both public and private school settings; as a faith-based counselor in a teenage residential facility, and as a therapist in a national denomination’s call-in agency

“Few pastors are prepared to truly understand the impact of abuse and other forms of trauma when they begin their service—much less understand how to provide counseling support that is effective. Kirby Reutter’s workbook provides structure and guidance in a form that is easy to follow. It is written in simple language that all can understand. His humor-tinged approach invites engagement and encourages follow-through each step of the way. I wish I would have had this workbook years ago!”

—**Mike Leman, LICM**, served as the overseeing pastor of churches in the United States and Mexico since 2002, providing counseling to numerous trauma survivors

“This workbook is a gift for everyone who struggles with trauma-related mental health challenges. The approach is supportive and caring. The language is easy to understand, with examples, activities, and tools that facilitate change. Although created for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder, it can be useful for anyone that struggles with emotional or relationship issues. Kirby Reutter has developed a therapeutic approach that empowers clients to take control of their mental health, and he now shares it with us. Clinicians will find this to be an excellent adjunct to therapy, and clients will treasure it as a resource to revisit during difficult times.”

—**Silvia M. Bigatti, PhD**, professor at the Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis

“Kirby Reutter does an excellent job of incorporating evidence-based concepts, practical skills, and real-life examples. Greatly simplifies the coursework, making it easy to follow for the reader. Encourages and motivates one in their journey through their own path of healing. This workbook is an excellent tool that would benefit trauma survivors and those working in the field of trauma.”

—**Danette Montoya, MSW, LCSW**, psychotherapist and military sexual trauma coordinator at the San Francisco VA Health Care System

“A one-of-a-kind self-help workbook that conquers various essential aspects regarding taking control of your symptoms and getting back in the driver’s seat of your life. A very thorough, straightforward, and hands-on approach to overcoming trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Kirby Reutter really nails the therapy toolbox. I would highly recommend this book as a complementary source to therapy, or for one who chooses to attempt to work through things on his or her own.”

—**Amber Weiss, LMHC, NCC**, in private practice in Manhattan

“Kirby Reutter has created an invaluable resource for applying scientifically proven dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) skills to treat anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Written in easy-to-understand, nontechnical language, *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook for PTSD* is a welcome addition to the field and will help clinicians and clients alike master the necessary skills in regulating emotions while discovering new ways to tolerate stressful situations in the context of mindfulness.”

—**Allan J. Katz, LPC/CSAT**, director of Rediscovery Counseling and Coaching in Memphis, TN;  
and coauthor of *Experiential Group Therapy Interventions with DBT*

“Kirby Reutter’s *The Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Skills Workbook for PTSD* is an accessible, intelligently written, and hope-inspiring resource for trauma survivors and professionals working with survivors. Through encouraging exercises, memorable acronyms, supporting research, and use of humor, Reutter has crafted a workbook that provides clients the opportunity to improve their relationship to self, others, and their environment. Effectively and thoroughly described techniques help illuminate the path of healing and growth. There is a harmony between skill development and self-reflection presented, which supplies survivors with the direction needed to construct the life and change they desire.”

—**Jennifer Young, MA, LPC**, private group practice practitioner

“Kirby Reutter’s workbook fills a critical need for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder to embark on a journey toward improved emotion regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal relationships, and self-esteem in a compassionate and validating manner. I especially appreciate the inclusion of a strong empirical foundation, in true scientist-practitioner form, that is often lacking in other self-help books. As a psychologist in independent practice for over twenty years who regularly uses dialectical behavior therapy approaches with a variety of patients, I strive to find effective, engaging, and evidence-based tools to supplement psychotherapy. With contagious enthusiasm, and the use of vivid metaphors and handy mnemonics, the author has produced a workbook that is fresh and relatable, sparks curiosity, and keeps one’s interest to the very end with practical and effective exercises. I will be using this with my patients!”

—**Cheryl L. Hall, PhD**, psychologist and past president of the Texas Psychological Association

“Kirby Reutter provides simple techniques to follow that can help many people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He teaches us to be aware of our emotions and respond in a way that can be helpful for all of us, leading to better relationships and ultimately a better quality of life.”

—**Tabor Dizon, PA-C, MHS**, psychiatry and urgent care medicine





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# Foreword

It never fails. Whenever the topic of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) comes up, people have really strong feelings about it. Maybe it's all that Latin in there? I feel that DBT, for whatever reason, has been severely misunderstood and undervalued. For goodness' sake, I have worked with professionals in the field who told me that they don't bother to learn about DBT because they have no intentions of working with personality disorders!

"It's so much more!" I would argue. "You can use it for almost anything, and you should!"

Then they would inevitably look at me like I had two heads (super appropriate) and dismiss the argument. Such small-mindedness!

Well, luckily, along comes the very talented Kirby Reutter to not only herald the great value of dialectical behavioral therapy but also create a delightful workbook that applies DBT to post-traumatic stress disorder, one of our most significant and difficult-to-manage diagnoses. Here, in this informative volume, you will find all you need to quickly apply even the most complicated aspects of DBT to manage your trauma symptoms.

In my practice, I find that people are often shocked at how easily accessible DBT is. Most of the time, people are already using it and don't even know they are! When I went to my first Marsha Linehan (she's the grand dame of DBT, don't you know) training, I'll be honest: I was one of the naysayers as well. My boss was forcing me to go, and I honestly had no real interest in it: I just needed some CEUs. Then Marsha herself showed up with no shoes! She explained that she simply had forgotten to pack her shoes and decided barefoot was the way to go until she had time to manage the problem. DBT in action!

I was spellbound: Here was a practitioner who focuses on loving yourself, warts and all, practicing what she preached. Got a problem? Solve it based on what is available to you, and don't stress about what isn't or what you could have done differently. She was no nonsense, no holds barred, and I loved every minute of that training. A DBT-phile was born!

Now, I am a very eclectic therapist, and I feel that every patient is an individual who needs to be treated with respect and patience to help them find their best life. Sometimes that means introducing people to DBT. The very next time I see them, they will tell me that they Googled it (never Google mental health disorders, never!) and inevitably they ask me if I think they have a personality disorder. Sometimes they are quite offended. This is why books like the one you are holding in your hands are so important: They help break down the stigma of this unique treatment protocol so it can be expertly applied to many different disorders.

Specifically, I have used DBT with PTSD and found it to be wonderfully rewarding for my patients, and now Kirby has given me so many more new options for my therapy toolbox. Being the ninja therapist that I am means that I have to stay on my game, and having visionaries like Kirby around keeps me on my toes.

So dive right in: Poke around this beautiful tome and enjoy it like a great meal. Sample it, mull it over, doggie bag it for later. This is a book you will find yourself reaching for again and again in the future. I always tell my patients, “I don’t treat broken people. I treat beautiful people who need a little polish every now and then so they can shine like they’re meant to.”

—Dawn DePasquale, LMHC

## INTRODUCTION

# Losing Your Balance: The Effects of Trauma

Trauma affects different people in different ways. But there's one thing trauma always does: It throws you off balance. In fact, the effects of trauma can leave you feeling so out of sync that you may wonder if anyone understands you—including yourself!

But you are not alone. Every year millions of people experience the effects of trauma. They feel as if their lives have been shattered. But here's the good news: Both modern science and ancient wisdom can help us not only restore our balance but also create a beautiful new mosaic out of the shattered pieces.

*Trauma*, by definition, is an extreme situation that forces us to react in extreme ways. Trauma drives us to respond in ways that are different from our normal way of doing things. And that's precisely why we feel so "off" during and following a traumatic event.

Sometimes the symptoms of trauma last long after the traumatic situation has ended. This is what psychologists call *post-traumatic stress disorder*—in other words, the "trauma after the trauma." This happens when the aftermath of the trauma ends up causing even more ongoing problems than the original trauma itself.

If you have been traumatized, then you know what it's like to live at the extremes, to feel out of sync with others, and even to feel at war with yourself. Sometimes you completely space on details...and sometimes you obsess over minutia. Sometimes you overreact...and sometimes you feel completely paralyzed. Sometimes you experience a million contradictory emotions at once...and sometimes you just feel numb. Sometimes you overthink with constant worries...and sometimes you make impulsive decisions by not thinking enough. Sometimes you over-rely on other people by acting too needy and clingy...and sometimes you burn bridges that you cannot afford to burn.

In short, not only do you feel like your entire life is off balance and out of whack, you also feel like a complete walking contradiction. With just about everything in your life, you experience either one extreme

or the other—and sometimes both extremes at once! In fact, trauma has a way of throwing people off balance in five key areas: *awareness*, *reactions*, *emotions*, *thoughts*, and *relationships*. So it's no wonder that sometimes you feel "crazy."

## THE THERAPEUTIC APPROACH USED IN THIS BOOK

But here's the bright side: There is an entire treatment model that is designed to restore balance in your awareness, your reactions, your emotions, your thoughts, and your relationships. The model is called *dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)*. "Dialectical" is just a fancy philosophy term that means "bringing together opposites." (What a perfect concept for someone who feels like a walking contradiction!) DBT is all about finding the middle path between overreacting and underreacting, between overfeeling and underfeeling, between overthinking and underthinking, and between overreliance and underreliance on others. In short, DBT is about restoring balance to the parts of your life that trauma has forced to the extremes. In fact, if I could rename DBT using the same initials, I would probably call it *developing balance therapy*!

So how does DBT restore balance? So glad you asked! DBT works by teaching a variety of skills that will help you regain the balance that trauma has disrupted. In particular, DBT will teach you how to:

- Become more aware—and accepting—of yourself and others
- Cope better with stress and triggers
- Better regulate your thoughts and emotions
- Improve your relationships with other people

Many therapeutic models are effective in treating trauma symptoms. I chose to emphasize DBT in this workbook for several reasons:

1. DBT has been shown to be effective in treating each of the imbalance issues caused by trauma, as described above.
2. DBT is a very practical model that teaches concrete skills you can apply immediately—right here, right now.
3. All of the skills included in this workbook can be learned and practiced on your own, regardless of whether you are currently in therapy.
4. Research has found DBT to be effective with a host of other disorders closely associated with trauma, including insomnia, anxiety, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, oppositional defiance, various eating disorders, and borderline personality disorder.
5. DBT is very compatible with other models for treating trauma symptoms; the skills you learn in this book will only enhance the insights you can learn from other sources.



## WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

The structure of this workbook is straightforward and easy to follow. It is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter is designed to restore balance in a specific area that has been affected by trauma. In addition, each chapter is subdivided into specific lessons. These lessons will teach you important skills for coping with trauma symptoms and for living a balanced, satisfying life.

In the first two chapters, you will learn how to become more aware and more accepting through a process called *mindfulness*. In the third chapter, you will learn more effective ways of coping with stress and triggers. In chapters 4 and 5, you will learn how to manage your thoughts and feelings. In the sixth chapter, you will learn how to develop healthier relationships. And in the final chapter, you will learn how to apply all of the skills you have learned in this workbook so that you can continue your journey toward health, healing, and happiness.

To be clear, working your way through this workbook will require...*work*! You will be prompted to provide lots of processing and personal reflections as you learn various skills and concepts. Some of these skills and concepts might be difficult to grasp at first—and even more difficult to *apply*.

There should be enough space in this workbook itself to jot down your initial thoughts. However, it may be a good idea to also have access to your own personal journal in case you need more space.

Because each chapter builds on themes from previous chapters, it will usually make the most sense to proceed in the order in which the chapters are presented.

To get the most out of this workbook, I recommend spending about thirty minutes a day on these exercises. I also recommend revisiting these chapters as many times as necessary for the skills and concepts to sink in. I especially recommend working through this workbook with the support of a trusted friend, pastor, rabbi, mentor, sponsor, or professional counselor. Change does not happen overnight; it may take several months of time and patience before you start to see some of your efforts pay off. Don't give up!

I hope you enjoy the journey. Let's get started!