

Presented at NAMI Westside LA
October 21, 2009

Communicating Acceptance: The Meaning of Validation in Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Cheryl A. Kempinsky, PhD
Clinical Psychology

10921 Wilshire Boulevard
Suite 610
Los Angeles, CA 90024

Tel 310.724.8718

The Borderline Personality
Disorder Initiative
at the Semel Institute at UCLA

Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder

- Emotional Dysregulation
 - > Affective lability
 - > Problems with anger
- Interpersonal Dysregulation
 - > Chaotic relationships
 - > Fears of abandonment
- Self Dysregulation
 - > Identity disturbance / difficulties with sense of self
 - > Sense of emptiness
- Behavioral Dysregulation
 - > Intentional self-harm behavior
 - > Impulsive behavior
- Cognitive Dysregulation
 - > Dissociative responses / paranoid ideation

Theory of Borderline Personality Disorder in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

Borderline Personality Disorder

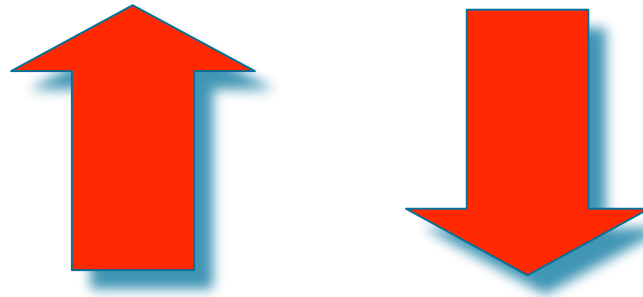
BPD is a Pervasive Disorder of the Emotion Regulation System



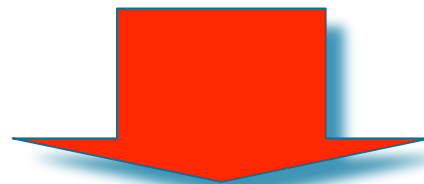
BPD criterion behaviors function to regulate emotions or are a natural consequence of emotion dysregulation

Biosocial Theory of BPD

Biological Dysfunction in the
Emotion Regulation System



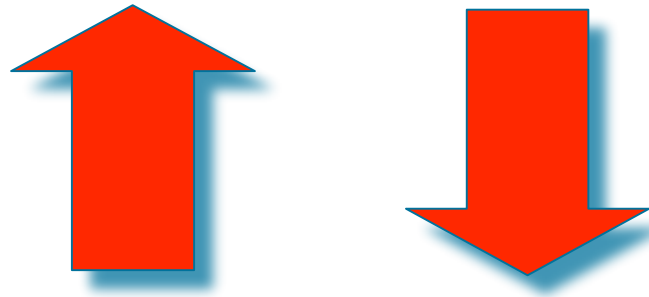
Invalidating Environment



Pervasive Emotion Dysregulation

Emotion Dysregulation

Emotional Vulnerability



Inability to
Modulate Emotions

Behavioral Patterns in Emotion Dysregulation

- Emotional Vulnerability
- Self-invalidation
- Unrelenting Crises
- Pushing down, or denying feelings
- Desperate Behaviors
- The Mask

Invalidating Environment

Pervasively NEGATES or
DISMISSES behavior
independent of
the actual validity
of the behavior

“Dialectical” Behavior Therapy

Philosophy of Treatment

Dialectical means that *2 ideas* can both be true at the *same time*.

- There is always more than one TRUE way to see a situation and more than one TRUE option, thought, or dream.
- Two things that seem like (or are) opposites can *both* be true.
- All people have something unique, different, and worthy to teach us.
- A life worth living has both comfortable and uncomfortable aspects (happiness AND sadness; anger AND peace; hope AND discouragement; fear AND ease, etc.).
- All points of view have both TRUE and FALSE within them.

“Dialectical” Behavior Therapy Philosophy of Treatment

Examples:

You are right **AND** the other person is right.

You are doing the best that you can

AND

you need to try harder, do better,
and be more motivated to change.

You can take
care of yourself

AND

you need help and
support from others.

“Dialectical” Behavior Therapy Philosophy of Treatment

Being dialectical means...

**Finding a way to validate the
other person’s point of view**

Goal of Treatment: A Life Worth Living

Behaviors to Decrease

1. Confusion about Self
2. Impulsivity
3. Emotional Instability
4. Interpersonal Problems

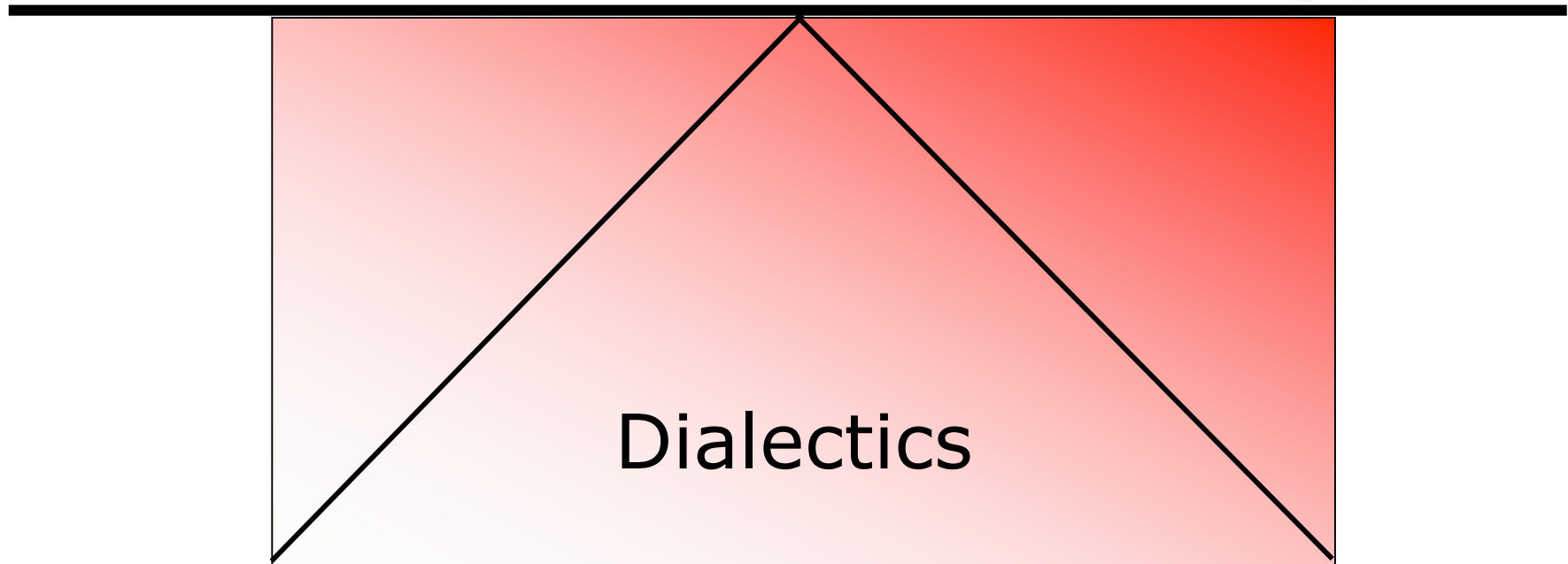
Behaviors to Increase

1. Core Mindfulness
2. Distress Tolerance
3. Emotion Regulation
4. Interpersonal Effectiveness

Balance Core Strategies

VALIDATION

PROBLEM
SOLVING



Validation: What it is, Why it is Important

In Alan E. Fruzzetti (2006). *The High-Conflict Couple: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, and Validation*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press. Used with permission of the author.

What is Validation?

Identifying and Communication Your Understanding in a CLEAR Way

- **Communicate what you understand about the situation**
- **Legitimize the “facts” (including the fact of the other’s responses)**
- **Explain your own feelings after expressing understanding**
- **Acknowledge the situation, the other’s opinions, feelings, etc.**
- **Respect emotions, desires, reactions and goals**

In What Ways Can Things Be Valid?

- Based on facts or experiences in the past or present, or on logic
- They are a person's present experience either descriptively or factually
- They can help achieve "wise-mind" goals regarding ways we can be effective

Why is Validation Important?

Validation:

- *Is the core of communication along with accurate disclosure*
- *Reduces negative emotional arousal*
- *Builds trust and slows negative reactivity*
- *Maintains fairness and decreases anger*
- *Enhances self-respect*
- *Is the key to getting through "rough" spots in your relationship*
- *Makes problem-solving, closeness, & other kinds of support possible*

**Invalidation is toxic to relationships
and to individuals**



Remember . . .

Validating is NOT necessarily agreeing

Validating doesn't mean you like it

Only validate the valid

What to Validate

In Alan E. Fruzzetti (2006). *The High-Conflict Couple: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, and Validation*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press. Used with permission of the author.

What Should I Validate?

- Feelings or emotions
- Legitimacy in wanting something
- Beliefs, opinions, or thoughts about something
- True values about something
- How difficult a task is
- How hard a person is trying to accomplish something
- Things a person does that are effective for herself or himself
- Things a person does for another

What Should I Validate?

Examples of things you can validate:

- Feelings
- Thoughts (notice them, even if not necessarily factual)
- Intentions and wants (including goals and desires)
- Facts
- Worries and fears as worries and fears (but not as facts)
- Actions that are likely to work, or be effective for a given goal
- Self-initiated behaviors (by the person, for the person, consistent with her or his own values, feelings, & wise-mind wants)
- Task or problem difficulty
- Value of your relationship with another person
- Value of your relationship with yourself
- All behavior from wise mind

When to Validate

In Alan E. Fruzzetti (2006). *The High-Conflict Couple: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, and Validation*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press. Used with permission of the author.

When to Validate

- Individual feels distressed and/or confused, uncertain
- Individual is not being effective
- Individual feels joy or satisfaction
- Individual is being effective
- Relationship difficulties, including following invalidation
- Relationship is going well
- Teaching situation - helping someone learn a new skill

Factors to Remember

- Notice if the timing is right
- Try to take turns: when it's your turn to listen, listen mindfully and don't think about what you're going to say next
- Use an effective voice tone
- Keep eye contact natural and respectful
- Be aware of "personal space" (stay close enough, but don't invade)
- Don't hesitate to ask if the other person actually feels "validated"
- Practice non-blaming, non-black & white thinking (validating the other does not mean your perspective isn't also valid)
- When providing difficult feedback or disagreeing, do so only when the other person is ready and willing to discuss this; always validate first and remind the other of your goals and caring
- Remember that one effective, step forward is better than ten backwards

How to Validate

In Alan E. Fruzzetti (2006). *The High-Conflict Couple: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, and Validation*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press. Used with permission of the author.

How Do I Validate Another Person?

ANY WAY you can search for understanding and communicate that understanding.

Different ways to validate verbally, in a conversation:

- 1) *Pay attention, listen actively***
- 2) *Reflect her or his feelings descriptively (non-judgmentally)***
- 3) *Summarize his or her or my perspective descriptively, for accurate understanding ; not to disagree, criticize, or judge, or change his or her mind; and not to get him or her to do something differently***

CLARIFY what it is that you hear, that you understand and ask questions

How Do I Validate Another Person?

- 4) **Show tolerance**; give the “benefit of the doubt” and put the thing you are trying to validate into a *broader context*; see how the behavior is valid in the other person’s life, given one’s history and experiences
- 5) **Be mindful** of the other person & the relationship; stay non-judgmental; *normalize* thoughts, feelings, and wants in present circumstances
- 6) **Practice willingness**, be genuine; *treat the other as an equal*, not as fragile or incompetent
- 7) **Self-disclose** your own vulnerability (this is a form of validation) if the other person is vulnerable with you, it is very validating to be vulnerable in return, especially concerning your relationship

How Do I Validate Another Person?

Also, you can validate without talking:

- Respond in a way (action, not just words) that takes him or her seriously
if hungry, get him or her something to eat; if wanting company, join him or her or go do something with him or her; if wanting some “alone” time, allow it; if not wanting to talk right now, let the issue go - at least temporarily
- Provide nurturance and support
*Think: “How would I like someone to treat me in this situation?”
Ask: “What would you like me to do? What would be soothing?”*
- Use “Interpersonal Effectiveness” skills: *Balance the importance of your relationship with your self-respect*
- What would work? What is important?

REMEMBER: *just because you can do something doesn't mean that you have to; and just because it's not your job doesn't mean that you can't*

Invalidation: What to Notice, How to Repair

The Many Ways to Invalidate the Valid

- Do things to diminish safety (make threats, be coercive or aggressive)
- Ignore or don't pay attention (or pretend not to pay attention)
- Minimizing feelings or their legitimacy
- Be critical or judgmental; put the worst possible "spin" on the behavior
- Let miscommunication stand unrepaired
- Be willful (focus on being right instead of effective or decent)
- Insist on your solution to the problem instead of solving the problem
- Make assumptions about another person that are not mindful, are judgmental, not consistent with the facts, or the worst "spin"

Invalidation: What to Notice, How to Repair

The Many Ways to Invalidate the Valid Continued...

- Up the ante: escalate conflict
- Try to win an argument by being more hostile or attacking
- Don't pay attention to another's pain or suffering
- Engage in "controlling" behavior
- Engage in crazy-making behavior (e.g., "gaslighting," be dishonest, or patronizing, insist she or he feels or thinks something even though they say they don't – even if you are "well-intended")
- Don't validate enough
- Treat the person as though she or he is fragile

Getting Yourself to Validate

- Take the other person's perspective (relational mindfulness)
- Remember the foundation: this is your family member, your own nest
- Empathy = understanding and validating the other person
- Reality acceptance (what "is" versus what "should be")
- Effective assumptions promote effective behavior: when in doubt, identify assumptions, remember goals, and proceed from wise mind

Feelings May be Valid While Explanations for Them May Not be Valid


- What are good explanations?
Those that lead to effective action
- Reasons versus causes
- The futility of arguing over THE TRUTH
- Not understanding the cause of something does not preclude validation

Judgments are Not Validating

Descriptions May Lead to Understanding and Then Be Validating

- Label judgments and let them go; use relationship mindfulness
- Focus on describing behaviors (including thoughts and feelings) in detail to facilitate understanding; wear the other's shoes

Practice, Practice, Practice



“When you understand, you cannot help but love. You cannot get angry. To develop understanding, you have to practice looking ... with eyes of compassion. When you understand, you love. And when you love you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

- Behavioral Tech, LLC
www.behavioraltech.org
- Behavioral Research & Therapy Clinics
University of Washington
<http://depts.washington.edu/brtc>
- National Education Alliance for BPD (NEA **FOR** BPD)
www.borderlinepersonalitydisorder.com
- Borderline Personality Disorder Los Angeles
www.bpdla.com
- UCLA BPD Initiative
www.semel.ucla.edu/bpd/

The Borderline Personality Disorder Initiative at the Semel Institute at UCLA

We are:

Robin Kissell, MD, Clinical Director

James E. Rosser, LCSW, Program Manager

Daniel Kupper, PhD, Assistant Clinical Professor

Cheryl A. Kempinsky, PhD, Individual Therapist

Tel 310.825.7447

Reconnecting the Family With Validation

Alan E. Fruzzetti, Ph.D., University of Nevada, Reno

What is a Validating Response?

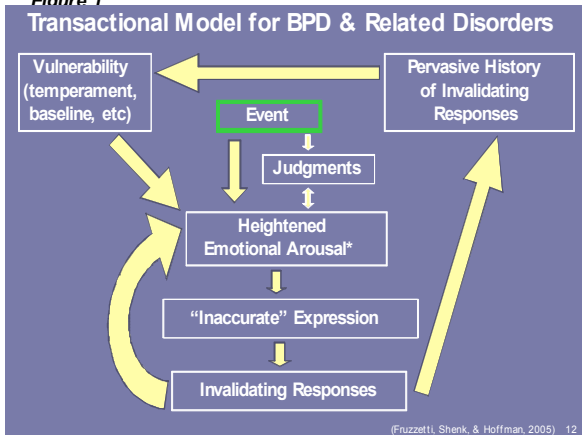
Basic communication in relationships is built around two parts: 1) accurate expression; and 2) validation.

When others **validate** how we feel, what we think or want, etc., it is typically very soothing. Being validated helps calm us, reassure us, and helps us figure out (and express) what we are really feeling, thinking and wanting. Consequently, validation increases closeness and understanding in relationships.

However, everyone has had experiences in which others, including loved ones, **invalidate** our accurate disclosures of emotion (I feel ___) or desires (I want ___) or other private experiences (e.g., descriptions of thoughts, beliefs, sensations, pain). Not only is being invalidated disappointing (and sometimes hurtful), it also almost always increases our emotional arousal and distress, which makes it more difficult to express ourselves accurately and effectively. When invalidation is common it results in reduced closeness, increased conflict, and a variety of other relationship problems. Of course, when we do not express ourselves accurately it is extremely difficult for others to be validating.

This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Validation, therefore, involves *being aware* of the other person (and bringing minimal biases so that you can really focus on the other person's experience), *understanding* the other person's experience, and *communicating* acceptance and understanding of that experience: His or her experience is legitimate in one or more ways; it is whatever it is.

Although this description of validation is fairly easy to understand, in many circumstances it is very difficult to do.

Invalidating responses are not *necessarily*:

- Mean, cruel, abusive
- Neglectful, uncaring, dysfunctional
- Pathological

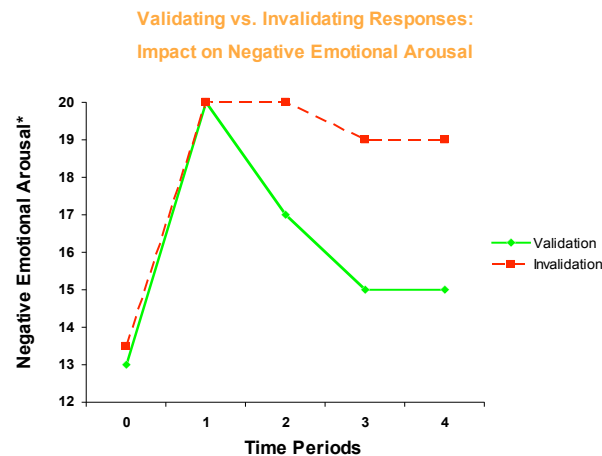
Invalidating responses occur when:

- Valid behaviors, especially what a person wants or feels, are regularly missed (no attention to them), disregarded, misunderstood, criticized, pathologized, etc....or,
- Invalid behaviors, especially passive or dangerous behaviors, are legitimized

Why Does Validating Matter?

There are many implications of this process, both for individuals and for families. Chronic invalidation (along with chronic inaccurate expression) may be a central process in the development or maintenance of certain psychological disorders such as borderline personality disorder and may contribute mightily to couple and family distress and dysfunction. As you can see below, in Figure 2, even while going through stressful tasks, being validated soothes emotion and makes the experience more tolerable. In contrast, being invalidated (even by a stranger, as was the case in this experiment) kept the person's negative emotional arousal very and painful.

Figure 2



*Negative emotional arousal was measured both by self-report of negative emotional intensity and by multiple psycho-physiological indicators (such as heart and respiration rates, heart-rate reactivity, and galvanic skin response).

Validating Responses

- Listening, paying attention
- Acknowledging the other's points
- Working to understand; asking questions
- Understanding his/her problems in context, non-judgmentally
- Normalizing his/her responses when they are normative ("of course")
- Treating the other as competent, not fragile, as an equal
- Matching with your own vulnerability (e.g., "me, too!")
- With actions that convey understanding

Figure 3

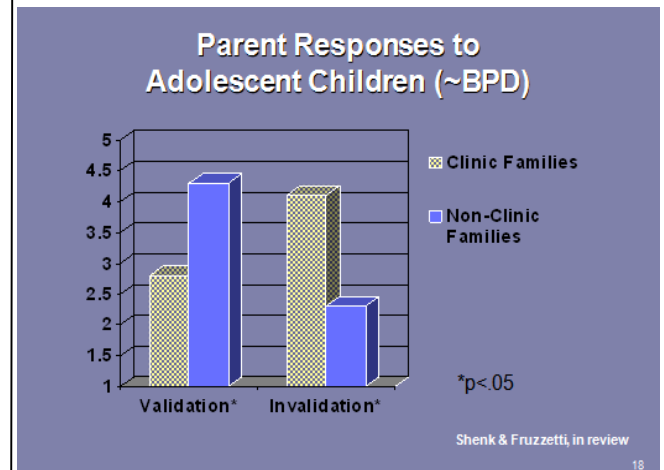


Figure 3 shows how different clinic and non-clinic families can be in terms of how validating and invalidating they are. Recent studies have shown that reducing invalidating responses and increasing validating ones can be a key part of successful outcomes for both the individual with BPD and his or her family and other loved ones.

Conclusions

- Families can play a key role in the development & course of BPD
- Validating and invalidating responses may be a key part of the process that leads to emotion dysregulation and interpersonal chaos
- Families also suffer (should not be blamed)
- Families are relevant to treatment & relapse
- Families should be included in treatment for themselves and for their relative or loved one with BPD
- More longitudinal, controlled research is needed