Preventing Student Meltdowns

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behavioral strategies, dialectical behavior therapy, crisis management, cognitive behavioral interventions, teachers

Student meltdowns can be a frequent source of discouragement for teachers (Maag, 2008). Mild to moderate verbal outbursts, anger, defacing instructional materials, and withdrawal can cause the most seasoned teacher to wonder if there is a way to help students constructively deal with their frustrations without losing control.

Behavior problems interfere with student learning and teacher efficacy (Sprague & Golly, 2005). Teachers need to know how to intervene and maintain consistent instruction in the classroom. Some successful approaches teach students how to resolve their own difficulties. For example, if a student is hungry, learning to request a snack can be an immediate solution. However, other problems cannot be fixed right away. If a family faces eviction, the student can do little to resolve the issue while at school. The possible eviction can trigger fear and anger in the classroom that is seemingly beyond the control of the teacher and student.

The teacher should be aware that disapproving of a student’s negative thinking about an event such as a pending eviction can cause an escalation of negative behavior. If the student continues to think about the fear or anger, those thoughts might lead to an outburst and a missed opportunity for teaching the student important coping skills. This can lead to the teacher feeling stuck in a no-win situation. The teacher and student might find it more helpful to learn how to tolerate the difficult feelings and thoughts until the situation can improve.

Distress tolerance skills, as outlined in dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993a), may be a useful strategy for teachers in these situations. These tools constructively distract the student from his or her emotionally charged thoughts and feelings. When the student’s crisis has passed and the heightened emotional experience has subsided, changes in thinking and behavior can be productively considered. Distress tolerance

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skills allow teachers to provide direct instruction of social skills at critical moments, as advocated by Johns, Crowley, and Guetzloe (2002), while reducing the risk of worsening the problematic interaction or situation.

**Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions**

Many useful interventions are available that provide ways to change student behavior (Maag, 2006). One such tool, cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBI), is used extensively with students who show behavioral problems (Robinson, Smith, Miller, & Brownell, 1999). Beck, Rush, Shaw, and Emery (1979) described CBI as an intervention that focuses on a person’s misinterpretation of events. From this perspective, people’s perceptions about themselves, the future, and the past are frequently negatively distorted, which results in ineffective behavior and destructive attitudes. Reducing, changing, or modifying these inaccurate beliefs and inappropriate behaviors can alleviate a person’s emotional difficulties (Beck et al., 1979).

When a teacher attempts to use CBI in the classroom, however, unanticipated difficulties can occur. The student may not believe that the events are misinterpreted and may view his or her behavior as an effective and reasonable response to the situation. Furthermore, labeling the student’s attitudes as distorted can convey a message that the student is inept. When trying to help, the teacher can actually create an invalidating environment. An invalidating environment occurs when the student’s experience of distress seems to be ignored or punished. When a student feels invalidated, he or she may react with anger or strong feelings of sadness that result in verbal and physical outbursts or refusal to engage in work. In this instance, the teacher inadvertently and unintentionally creates a dilemma because the attempt to help results in a situation that invalidates the student and makes the classroom situation worse. DBT was developed to respond to this type of dilemma because in some cases CBI can convey an invalidating message to the people it was intending to help.

**Dialectical Behavior Therapy**

Dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan, 1993a) is a comprehensive treatment program originally developed to treat adults suffering from borderline personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). It focuses on teaching skills to people who can easily become emotionally disregulated (i.e., people whose emotions are expressed in less effective ways, such as angry outbursts, self-harm, or other impulsive behaviors). The goal of DBT is to teach individuals more skillful ways to regulate their emotions, manage distressing situations, and improve close interpersonal relationships and other functional outcomes.

One of the unique characteristics of DBT is that it stresses change and acceptance of one’s difficulties. This makes DBT distinct from other CBI skills. For example, suppose a student is loudly protesting a writing assignment that he or she believes is too difficult, even though the teacher knows the student has the needed skills to finish the assignment. A CBI approach would gently acknowledge the student’s perceived frustration, suggest that the student consider what skills exist, and then encourage the student to use those skills to resume work. For a student who can easily become emotionally disregulated, this approach could escalate the frustration and result in disruptive behavior. In contrast, a DBT approach would also acknowledge the student’s aggravation, inform the student of different ways to handle the frustration, and offer an alternate activity to help the student accept the feelings of annoyance and frustration until the negative intensity of emotions has subsided and the student has regained control of his or her behavior.

This example illustrates the DBT concept of distress tolerance (i.e., not all difficulties can be immediately solved). Distress tolerance is the ability to remain constructively engaged, despite the difficult feelings, until things improve. This teaches students an important skill: that accepting a difficulty in the short term is different from approving of the difficulty. It simply means the situation cannot and need not be fixed immediately. Once the student learns that a difficult feeling can be tolerated, there may be a willingness to try the assignment despite the uncomfortable feelings it generates. This is an important advantage of and outcome to this intervention.

**The ACCEPTS Toolkit**

The standard DBT program for the treatment of adult personality disorders includes individual psychotherapy, group skills-based therapy, and consultation among all treatment providers (Linehan, 1993b). The classroom application, called the ACCEPTS Toolkit, is an adaptation of this comprehensive package. ACCEPTS is an acronym which refers to a keyword in each of the seven skill areas. Those keywords are: Activities, Contributing, Comparison, Emotions, Pushing away, Thoughts, and Sensations. The protocol developed for the classroom uses a one-to-one, teacher-to-student training in the core skill area of distress tolerance and does not include the individual or group psychotherapy or consultation components.

The ACCEPTS Toolkit will require several hours for a teacher to develop the skill packets and to train a student for this intervention. A typical classroom will contain all the materials needed to create the skill packets.

**Step 1: Select a Student**

The teacher starts by choosing at least one student whose difficulties with negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, fear)
To experience opposite emotions, the student seeks to feel something different from the troubling emotion that is experienced. The key is to select a task that helps the student feel differently than the current emotion. Many students like to listen to music or read a story that is funny, exciting, scary, or has a happy ending.

**Other thoughts.** Other thoughts include getting the student’s mind busy with something that distracts from painful feelings. Some students like to work a puzzle or count things in the room. Other students choose to take a walk and describe what they see.

**Other distracting sensations.** Other distracting sensations involve using the student’s physical senses. A student’s senses can provide powerful distractions from the thoughts and feelings that cause emotional pain. Students need to select actions that involve the senses of smell, touch, hearing, sight, or taste. Many students enjoy squeezing a ball or smelling pleasant hand lotion. Some students hold an ice cube for 60 seconds because the cold feeling in the hands will distract them from the problem.

**Instructions to the teacher and student.** The following instructions refer to the worksheet provided in Table 1. The worksheet is designed to help develop a packet of distress tolerance skills the student can use in the classroom.

1. Print both a copy of a blank worksheet from Table 1 and the completed worksheet with examples. Place them between the teacher and student.
2. Read the following instructions with the student: Things happen that make a student angry, sad, or afraid. Sometimes these events cannot be controlled (e.g., when a parent loses a job, a friend moves away, or a pet is sick or dies). Efforts to fix the problem do not work. This learning project will create a packet of materials that serves as a reminder to use new skills for problems that cannot immediately be solved.

### Step 2: Build a Skills Packet

A core strategy of DBT is to balance the teaching of problem-solving skills with skills that validate the emotional difficulty of the student’s daily experience. It is likely that problem-solving skills are already part of a teacher’s toolbox (Maag, 2006). However, a teacher is less likely to have tools that enable a student to get validation for negative emotional experiences. The original DBT protocol (Linehan, 1993a) described five clusters of strategies that can help validate and enable the tolerance of short-term negative thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. A common outcome of all the distress tolerance skills is the teaching of a more functional skill to replace the less functional or less effective behavior (Linehan, 1993a).

The ACCEPTS Toolkit uses a variety of hands-on tasks that are developmentally appropriate and easily understood by students with a broad range of ages and academic abilities. The seven ACCEPTS skills are designed to increase the ability of the student to tolerate a stressful situation until the emotional intensity of the situation has subsided and he or she can engage in more productive behavior.

**The seven skills described.** Because a student often knows what is most helpful, the student and teacher work together to create a kit with reminders of actions to take when faced with an emotionally charged situation. Including the student in the development of the skills kit will enhance compliance and participation because the kit will be tailored for that student and the student will have made an initial investment in the process. The key is to come up with things that can help a student manage problems constructively. As a mnemonic acronym, the seven skill labels contain the first letter of the words that spell “ACCEPTS.”

**Activities.** Activities are things a student can do constructively at school to take the student’s mind off the problem without getting into trouble. The activity may not feel as good as yelling at somebody or crying or being sent home, but the activity has the advantage of being something that will help the student feel a little better without causing more problems. Some students, depending on their age, choose to play with a favorite toy or draw a picture.

**Contributing.** Contributing refers to doing something for someone. It moves the student’s focus onto someone or something else and away from his or her current problems. Some students find it useful to help another student, volunteer for a job in the classroom, or send an encouraging e-mail to parents.

**Comparison.** Comparison involves contrasting the student’s problems with someone having worse problems or feelings. The student could also compare how he or she is doing now as opposed to a time when the student had more problems. Some students find it beneficial to compare current and previous writing samples. By comparing the differences, the student can realize that progress is being made.

**Pushing away thoughts or feelings.** Pushing away thoughts or feelings means realizing that some thoughts or feelings do not stay with the student forever. Students can gently push away thoughts or feelings. It helps to imagine pushing away the thought or feeling the way a student does when an annoying commercial comes on the TV. Some students find it helpful to imagine they are putting the thought or feeling into a box and putting the box away for a later time.

**Other thoughts.** Other thoughts include getting the student’s mind busy with something that distracts from painful feelings. Some students like to work a puzzle or count things in the room. Other students choose to take a walk and describe what they see.

**Other distracting sensations.** Other distracting sensations involve using the student’s physical senses. A student’s senses can provide powerful distractions from the thoughts and feelings that cause emotional pain. Students need to select actions that involve the senses of smell, touch, hearing, sight, or taste. Many students enjoy squeezing a ball or smelling pleasant hand lotion. Some students hold an ice cube for 60 seconds because the cold feeling in the hands will distract them from the problem.
Table 1. ACCEPPTS Skills Worksheet With Examples of Student Tasks and Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill area</th>
<th>Student-selected tasks with an example</th>
<th>Actions and materials for skill packet with an example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>1. Request 5 minutes to draw and color</td>
<td>1. Coloring book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing</td>
<td>1. Help a fellow student with math.</td>
<td>1. “Be a helper” icon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>1. View news of people with big problems</td>
<td>1. News clippings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing away thoughts</td>
<td>1. Imagine putting thoughts in a box</td>
<td>1. A small cardboard box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other thoughts</td>
<td>1. Count to 100 slowly</td>
<td>1. A picture that contains 100 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting sensations</td>
<td>1. Hold an ice cube for one minute</td>
<td>1. Picture of an ice cube</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Read the description of the first skill area (Activities) to the student.

4. Look at the examples of activities in the description and note the example on the sample worksheet.

5. The teacher and student need to brainstorm ways to carry out the skill. These can be similar to the examples or modified to allow the student to practice the skill in a way that is more applicable to the student’s needs.

6. Write at least two student-selected tasks on the worksheet next to the activities skill area.

7. Write down the actions and materials on the worksheet that will enable the student to finish the skill.

8. Go to the next skill (Contributing) and do Steps 3 through 7.

9. Finish Steps 3 through 7 for the remaining five skills.

10. To ensure appropriateness, the teacher has the final say on the tasks that are selected.

11. Once the worksheet is finished, label seven large, locking plastic bags to hold the materials. These containers will hold the items needed by the student for the seven skill areas.

12. Gather the available materials that are listed on the worksheet, such as books and CDs. Place the Activities materials into the Activities container or bag. Do the same for the remaining six skill areas.

13. Some of the skills involve a task that does not require a specific resource material. An example would be helping a fellow student. The teacher or the student can create an action prompt by drawing a picture or making an icon of a student helping someone. This will remind the student of the possible actions to be taken for each skill area.

13. Decide the best location to store the seven skill containers. This will vary with the age and maturity of the student.

Step 3: Coach the Student to Use the Skills

Elksnin and Elksnin (1998) described strategies for teaching social skills to students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Their model is a six-step process that provides an instructional model to coach a student in the effective use of this and other social skills interventions.

1. The teacher needs to define the social skill clearly. Instruct the student that ACCEPPTS is a menu of actions from which a student can choose. The skill is to choose and do things from the menu rather than the actions the student often does when faced with a problem.

2. Give the student a brief list of the steps to follow when performing the skill.
   a. Verbal steps: The student requests the skills packet by speaking and asking to use the skills, or the student listens and responds to the teacher’s suggestion to use the skills.
   b. Nonverbal steps: Instead of making the request verbally, the student may place a signal card on his or her desk to request the skills packet, or the teacher places a signal card to cue the use of the skills. The student then gets the packet and selects an item from one of the bags of skill materials.
   c. Follow-up verbal steps: If the timing is not right for the requested skill (e.g., the student requests to help a student with math when it is recess time), an alternative skill is negotiated between the teacher and student. Once the teacher and student agree on the skill, where to engage in it, and a reasonable length of time to use the skill, the student is ready to start using the skill.
   d. Cognitive steps: The student needs to think about the skill that he or she is doing rather than think about the problem that triggered the request for the skill packet.

3. Give a reason for the skill. Remind the student that the goal is to distract oneself from the problem and
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However, a teacher does not have to supervise the use of the ACCEPTS skills for about 60 hours to achieve desired results. Growing evidence suggests (Gresham, Van, & Cook, 1998) that teachers often need to conduct social skills training from feelings that he or she cannot immediately change. It might be expected that staff time needed to carry out the intervention would decrease over time as the student becomes more independent and proficient with ACCEPTS. In the first few weeks of implementation, 60 to 120 minutes of weekly staff time is usually required. Afterward, this time should decrease to 15 to 30 minutes.

If the student is effectively using the skills, an ongoing weekly total of 90 to 120 minutes of student use will be observed. A sudden decrease in skill use will usually be associated with boredom from using the same skill area or using the same tools within a particular skill area. This suggests the need to help the student work in all the skill areas or to add new tools within a skill area.

The teacher should expect to see a decrease in the cumulative weekly minutes of the target behavior. The number of minutes will vary with the particular target behavior and its severity. If there is no reduction in the behavior after several weeks, the teacher is encouraged to obtain consultation and learn about other possible interventions for behavior problems.

**Step 4: Evaluate**

To evaluate the effectiveness of classroom interventions, outcome data are needed (Scott, Payne, & Jolivette, 2003). Data collection should be kept brief and simple. This will help ensure that the teacher uses the results from the data that are collected. Figure 1 shows a simple data collection tool that measures staff and student time required to carry out the ACCEPTS skills and the duration of the target behavior to be reduced.

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**Conclusion**

Distress tolerance skills represent an approach to use with students when a direct emphasis on change might not be possible. There can be situations in which a student seems to resist standard CBI interventions. The problem that is causing the outburst, such as the illness of a parent, is not in the control of the teacher or student. Furthermore, some students might not be ready to address a particular cognition or feeling.

It is important to consider the role of resistance in the teacher–student relationship. Maag (1999) described resistance as a reciprocal relationship between the student and teacher. The problem is not just that the student is being oppositional; it is also possible that the student views some typical CBIs as a mismatch between the function of his or her problem behavior (e.g., avoidance) and the teacher’s...
Name of student __________________________
Date of week beginning on: ______________
Target behavior in measurable and observable terms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A. Cumulative minutes coaching and prompting student to use ACCEPTS</th>
<th>B. Cumulative minutes student spends in use of ACCEPTS</th>
<th>C. Cumulative minutes student engages in target behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
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<td>Tuesday</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly total</td>
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Definitions:
A. Cumulative minutes coaching and prompting the student to use ACCEPTS. This includes the time the teacher and classroom staff members spend developing the skill materials, teaching the student to use the skills, negotiating which skill to use, and encouraging the use of the skills.
B. Cumulative minutes student spends in the use of ACCEPTS. Count the minutes in which the student engages in the skill that has been chosen. If the student chooses a skill that requires a staff member’s time to work alongside the student, such as taking a short walk, count that time here.
C. Cumulative minutes student engages in target behavior. The target behavior is what the student does when having a meltdown such as tearing up instructional materials, putting one’s head on the desk and refusing to work, or swearing. If the student continues to engage in the target behavior even while using ACCEPTS, count that time here.

Figure 1. Duration of behaviors tracking chart

instruction to confront the irrational belief that underlies the behavior (Ellis & Harper, 1997). The result can be more avoidance or even aggressive behavior that protests the inappropriate directive. A more effective alternative can be a behavior that serves the same function as avoidance (e.g., temporary distraction) and simultaneously teaches a new skill. The ACCEPTS Toolkit can help achieve this goal by teaching coping skills.

The needed skill might be distress tolerance, which teaches a face-saving and productive way to calm down. Rather than choosing between confronting the issue or avoidance/aggression, distress tolerance can be an effective third alternative. This alternative gives the student and teacher a menu of behaviors that can help the student manage painful feelings constructively. This approach teaches new behaviors and can serve as a stopgap measure until the student can address the issue or return to the class activity.

Dialectical behavior therapy is a therapeutic intervention that has shown promise in clinical and residential settings with adolescents (Miller, Rathus, DuBose, Dexter-Mazza, & Goldklang, 2007). It adds an acceptance or distress tolerance component to standard CBI tools that may decrease anger and classroom avoidance behaviors (Linehan, 1993a).

The ACCEPTS Toolkit represents a powerful addition to the teacher’s resources. The teacher can introduce these tools without purchasing a curriculum or extra materials. Often, the classroom contains all the supplies needed to set up the training program. The interventions can provide coping skills to help students handle life’s difficulties
without meltdowns and get the student and teacher back on the same track.

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**References**


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