

Opposite Action

DBT: Emotion Regulation Skills










Opposite action is a technique from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) that can help you change how you feel. By purposely doing the opposite of your emotion urge, you can reduce a feeling that is too intense or doesn't "fit the facts" of the current situation. When we practice opposite action, we strengthen our ability to tolerate difficult feelings and make choices aligned with our goals.

When might you want to use opposite action?

Opposite action is a tool you can choose to use when:

- ➔ Acting on your emotion urge would not help you in the long run
- ➔ Your emotion does not fit the facts of the situation at hand, or is too intense
- ➔ You would like to stop feeling the emotion

Below are examples of situations in which opposite action can help for nine common emotions people may want to reduce or change:

-  Fear: You need to take a public speaking class to graduate, but you get scared when you think about standing up and talking in front of others.
-  Anger: You and your partner had a fight and they genuinely apologized for misunderstanding you. You want to let the situation go, but your angry feelings are very tough to shake.
-  Disgust: You just started working with a coworker who reminds you of a person you greatly dislike. You don't want your old feelings of contempt to affect your new working relationship.
-  Sadness: In the midst of a hard month, someone turns you down for a date. Even though in your rational mind it's not a big deal, your feelings of sadness are really hard to overcome.
-  Shame: You're trying hard to break your old habit of never speaking up for yourself. When you give it a try, you feel proud at first, but then you feel ashamed that you seem "selfish."
-  Guilt: An urgent problem comes up and you have to reschedule with a friend who has been having a hard time lately. You know emergencies come first, but you keep feeling guilty.
-  Envy: You and your coworker applied for the same position at work, and your coworker got it. You don't like that your thoughts about why you deserved the job are affecting your work.
-  Jealousy: A close friend tells you all about his new romantic relationship and how much fun it is. You want to be happy for him, but inside you worry she'll take up all his time and attention.
-  Love: You end a friendship with someone who really hurt you. You know you made the right choice, but sometimes you can't help missing them and the good times you had together.

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*



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On these pages, we'll review the "facts" and urges for each emotion, and ideas for opposite actions.

Fear

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**... which creates an **urge** to...



To reduce feelings of fear, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Stay in the feared situation
- Get closer to the person, place, thing, or activity you are afraid of ("avoid avoidance")
- Do what scares you over and over again
- Pay attention to the feared situation with all your senses

Posture:

- Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, put your hands on your hips
- Make eye contact
- Breathe deeply and slowly

Anger

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**... which creates an **urge** to...



To reduce feelings of anger, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Avoid the person or situation you are angry with; take a time out
- Intentionally be kind to the person you are angry with
- Try to understand and empathize with the person you are angry with - see things from their point of view
- Use a gentle tone of voice

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly
- Exercise to blow off steam (in a nonviolent way)

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Disgust

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- Something could make you sick
- Someone's influence or thinking could harm you
- Someone you dislike is touching you

disgust

recoil or get away

To reduce feelings of disgust, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Get closer to the person, place, thing, or activity you find disgusting
- Intentionally be kind to the person you feel contempt for
- Welcome and take in the situation that seems repulsive with all your senses
- Try to understand and empathize with the person you feel disgusted by - see things from their point of view

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly

Sadness

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...

- You lose (or might lose) someone or something you care about forever
- Things do not turn out the way you hoped

sadness

slow down and grieve

To reduce feelings of sadness, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Stay in the sad situation
- Get closer to the person, place, thing, or activity making you sad ("avoid avoidance")
- Do joyful or challenging activities
- Pay attention to present moment with all your senses

Posture:

- Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, sit up tall
- Move or engage in gentle exercise (stretching, walking, jogging, etc.)



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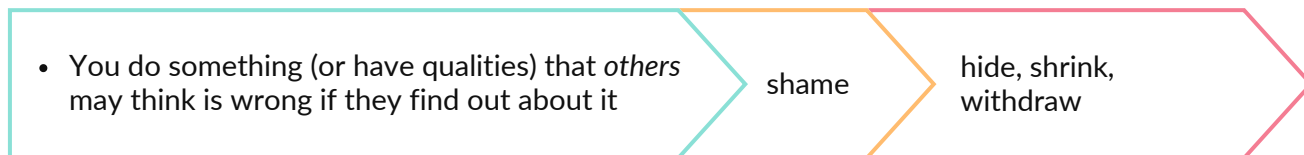
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Shame

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...



To reduce feelings of shame, do the **opposite** of the urge:

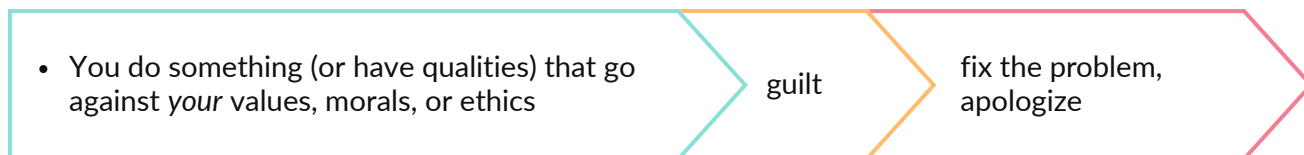
- * When your behavior does not actually go against your values or others':
 - Tell people (who won't reject you) what you did, or do the behavior over and over
 - Do not apologize or try to fix the situation
 - Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, sit up tall; make eye contact
- * When your behavior does not actually go against others' values, but does go against your own:
 - Tell people (who won't reject you) what you did
 - Apologize and try to fix the situation
 - Accept the consequences, forgive yourself, and let it go

Guilt

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...



To reduce feelings of guilt, do the **opposite** of the urge:

- * When your behavior does not actually go against your values or others':
 - Tell people (who won't reject you) what you did, or do the behavior over and over
 - Do not apologize or try to fix the situation
 - Raise your head, pull your shoulders back, sit up tall; make eye contact
- * When your behavior does not actually go against your values, but does go against others':
 - Think carefully: is it important to be accepted by this group of people or to stay in the group?
 - If yes: keep the behavior to yourself, use interpersonal skills to explain yourself, or try to change the group's values
 - If no: join a new group with values more like your own; repeat the behavior
 - Validate yourself

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Envy

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...



To reduce feelings of envy, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Resist urges to attack or criticize the person or damaging what they have
- Resist urges to exaggerate what you don't have or what someone else does have
- Make a list of things that you are grateful for

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly

Jealousy

The **facts** of the situation...

prompt an **emotion**...

which creates an **urge** to...



To reduce feelings of jealousy, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Resist the urge to control others' actions
- Resist the urge to question, accuse, or cling to the person you fear you will lose
- Welcome and take in the situation with all your senses
- Intentionally share with others

Posture:

- Relax your hands, torso, jaw, and facial expression
- Breathe deeply and slowly



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Love

The **facts** of the situation...

- Someone makes your life better and brighter
- Someone does something admirable or helps you reach your goals

prompt an **emotion**...

love

which creates an **urge** to...

get closer, express yourself, share time or experiences

To reduce feelings of love, do the **opposite** of the urge:

* Actions:

- Avoid the person, animal, or object you love, including reminders of them, communication with them, and places that remind you of them or that you know they will be
- Distract yourself when thoughts of the person come up
- Remind yourself why love does not fit the facts in this situation

Posture:

- Resist urges to lean towards, touch, or keep your eyes on the person

* Important Note *

When considering doing an opposite action:

Do not do an opposite action if it is likely to harm you. For example, spending more time around someone who has seriously hurt you in the past and is likely to hurt you again is likely not a safe choice.

Also remember that *discomfort* does not necessarily equal harm. Pushing through discomfort is part of how opposite action teaches our systems a new way of reacting to difficult situations and builds our confidence. Staying in an challenging conversation rather than making an excuse to leave is very likely to cause discomfort - and is a great example of opposite action - but very unlikely to cause harm. You are the expert on your circumstances and should use your best judgment.

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Try opposite action yourself

The next time you feel a strong emotion, you can give opposite action a try. This page shows an example, and the next is blank.

Which emotion are you feeling? Fear

How strong is the feeling, from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong)? 7

What do you feel the urge to do? Call in sick and skip the meeting I'm really worried about today

Why do you want to use opposite action?

- Acting on the emotion urge would not help you in the long run
- Your emotion does not fit the facts of the situation at hand, or is too intense
- You would like to stop feeling the emotion

Use the table below to brainstorm ideas and keep track of how well they work:

You can use the previous pages to help you brainstorm ideas specific to your emotion

After trying your opposite action, re-rate the feeling you are trying to reduce or change from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong)

Opposite actions I can try	Effort	Feeling
Write out questions I'm likely to get and good answers		
Practice talking out loud about the problem the meeting will address	70%	6.5
Practice starting the conversation I'm scared to have out loud	90%	4
Stand with confident posture for 5 min	100%	3

Note how much effort you put into the opposite action from 0% to 100%. Are you just going through the motions, trying hard but quickly giving up, or giving it your all?

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Try opposite action yourself

The next time you feel a strong emotion, you can give opposite action a try

Which emotion are you feeling?

How strong is the feeling, from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong)?

What do you feel the urge to do?

Why do you want to use opposite action?

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Opposite actions I can try	Effort	Feeling

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Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



325+
Companies Reviewed



3,625+
Hours of Firsthand Experience



1,545+
Data Points Analyzed



[Best Online Therapy](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

[Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



[Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

[Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.





Tools for Self-Assessment and Psychoeducation

Figuring out the next step in your mental health journey can be overwhelming. Developed by psychologists, the tools at [ChoosingTherapy.com](https://www.ChoosingTherapy.com) can help. Our mental health self-assessment quizzes can help you explore common symptoms of mental health concerns, as well as find the best therapy style for you. Our mental health worksheets can guide you through therapy concepts and how to use them in your life.

[Learn More with Mental Health Quizzes](#)

Our collection of psychologist-developed mental health quizzes can help you learn if you are experiencing mild, moderate, or concerning levels of anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and more. Each quiz also provides targeted resources based on your answers. These self-assessments are designed to offer insight, not diagnoses, and can be a helpful first step in recognizing symptoms and deciding whether to seek further support. If you have concerns about your mental health or your quiz results, we recommend you reach out to a licensed mental health professional.



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Search our collection of therapy worksheets by mental health topic, therapy modality, or demographic group. Our free, psychologist-developed worksheets make therapy exercises understandable and relevant to daily life. Find worksheets for help with ADHD, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, and other common mental health challenges.