

You may have heard of **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)**, but what does “dialectical” actually mean? Dialectical thinking is seeing the truth of two opposite things simultaneously, and it’s the foundation of DBT. This handout will introduce you to principles, metaphors, and examples to help you understand dialectics and how they apply to our psychological lives.

### The basic principles of dialectics

Dialectical thinking is **seeing the truth in two seemingly opposed ideas at the same time**. Other ways to describe dialectics include a synthesis of opposites, thinking flexibly rather than rigidly, and understanding both sides simultaneously.

Dialectical thinking has deep roots:

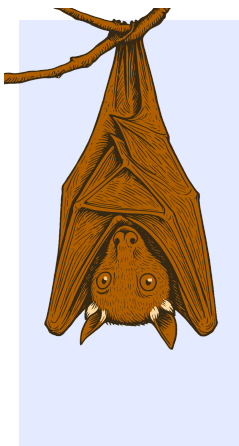
- Eastern Buddhist philosophers describe walking the Middle Way (or Middle Path) as avoiding extremes, and by doing so, and finding balance and wisdom between them.
- Western philosophers explored how an idea in a debate (“thesis”) has an opposite (“antithesis”); a “synthesis” occurs when a new idea arises to unify the thesis and antithesis.

The concept of dialectics is like:

- The unique emotional state of wanting to do better and being scared to change at the same time.
- How two flashlights shining on a 3D object from different angles make differently shaped shadows. Each shape (the two shadows plus the 3D object itself) is “right,” even though they differ.
- Wise mind (the insight of mindfulness shows us the truths of both emotional and rational mind).

That all seems pretty abstract. How else can we think about dialectics? Let’s try a metaphor.

### A metaphor to understand dialectics



Imagine that two people had never seen a **bat** - or even heard of one. One person discovers a bat hanging from a tree. “Come and look!” he says, “There’s this animal hanging upside down! It has pointed ears like a squirrel!”

Before the other person can get there, the bat flies away, high above the trees. “Right there!” he says, pointing. She notices. “Wait, what? That thing that looks like a bird?”

“Not a bird,” he says. “It definitely had fur.”

“Really?” she says, “But it has wings and can fly!”



If you had no idea that bats exist, these observations seem completely opposing and make no sense together. In your mind, either an animal has fur, or it has wings - it can’t have both!

Fur



Wings

Animal Attribute Selector

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

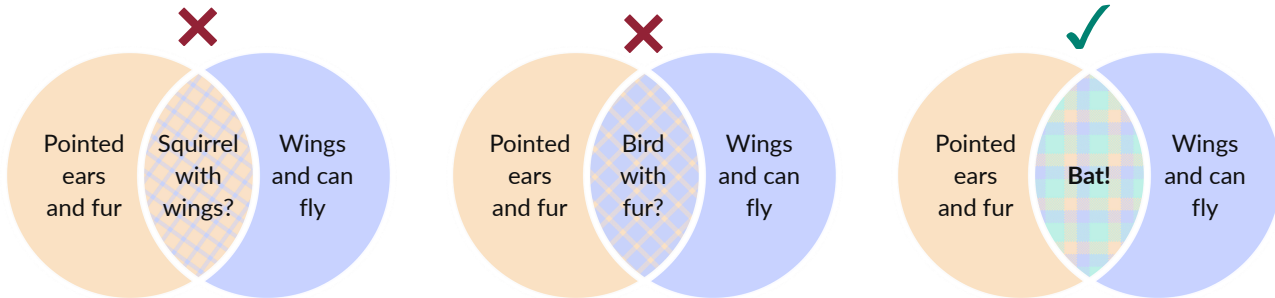


# Intro to Dialectics

## DBT: Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

But both people's observations were right. The man said the bat had pointed ears and fur, and the woman said it has wings and can fly.

Of course, we know both observations are true at the same time, not because the animal is somehow an impossible squirrel with wings\* or bird with fur, but because bats have some qualities in common with both squirrels and birds. Bats also have their own unique qualities, like echolocation and the ability to hang upside down, making them more than the sum of their ears, fur, wings, and flight.\*\*



\*We'll conveniently pretend that sugar gliders and flying squirrels don't exist for this metaphor.

\*\*That's why the last overlap is plaid, not just green. A synthesis is not just a mix, blend, or compromise - it keeps the essential truths of each side and adds new truths, too.

### A psychological example of dialectics

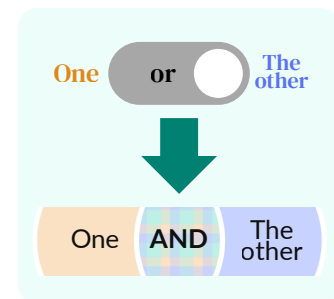
So what do bats and plaid have to do with a therapy technique?

Dialectical thinking is seeing two things that seem opposed to each other and changing your mindset from "either-or"/"this *but* that" to "both-and"/"this *and* that." Here's an example:

I'm in a room full of people

but

I feel so alone



At first glance, these two ideas seem to oppose each other. Feeling alone with people around? You're either alone or you're not, right? Because of this opposition, different people might have different automatic judgments of themselves:

I **shouldn't** feel alone; there are plenty of people here

→ What's wrong with me?

If I were less shy, I **wouldn't** feel like this

→ Why can't I be more outgoing?

Maybe they think I'm **not good enough** to talk to

→ I'll never fit in

Non-dialectical thinking (either-or, this-but-that) tries to resolve the tension between two statements by pushing one side away (e.g., "I *shouldn't* feel alone"). This often means we are judging ourselves for our thoughts or feelings, which makes us feel even worse.

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## DBT: Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

Non-dialectical thinking also makes it more likely that we get **stuck**. Pulled down by our negative feelings, we are less likely to act in ways to improve our situation.

Let's change the mindset to dialectical thinking:

I'm in a room full of people

and

I feel so alone

This change might not seem like much, but it can be enough to give us pause. The rational mind may think, "Huh, what explains that?" and start brainstorming. The emotional mind may feel some compassion rather than leaping to judgment. Different people may have different responses:

I guess I'm feeling **disconnected** from other people → Can I try to connect with just one person?

**Depression** is making it hard to be social again → Maybe I should pause and cope

I think I'm kind of **intimidated** by the people here → How can I be okay with this feeling and act confidently anyways?

Dialectical thinking resolves the tension by helping us come to a conclusion that balances *both* statements (e.g., "I'm feeling disconnected"). By doing so, it makes it easier to **avoid getting stuck**. We get a little relief when we accept and validate our own feelings. Acting to change our situation (if we choose to) is a little easier, too.

### More psychological dialectics

Let's look at a few more examples:

1

I strive to respect everyone

but

He made me really angry

He's going to get a piece of my mind (*then yells, rages*) → I said a lot that I regret

It's wrong to feel so angry with him → *Hide emotions, feel worse*

I strive to respect everyone

and

He made me really angry

My feelings matter and so do his → *Speak up honestly and respectfully*

UGH, this is really hard to tolerate → We need to talk but I need a break first

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# Intro to Dialectics

## DBT: Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

2

I'm a good family member

but

I can set my own boundaries

Wait, no one else seems to have boundaries in this family. Am I asking for special treatment?

→ Am I being selfish? Maybe I'm asking too much

I'm a good family member

and

I can set my own boundaries

Just because we're family doesn't mean my privacy, autonomy and feelings don't matter

→ Maintain boundaries and self-respect

3

I want to do better

but

I had a horrible day

I'm too upset to even try to \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g., resist addiction or self-harm urges, resolve conflicts calmly, use therapy skills, etc.)

→ I can't do it, I'm a failure

I want to do better

and

I had a horrible day

Uh oh, I've been here before and it usually doesn't go well...

→ Pause, cope, ask for help, take a break, etc.

### Balancing psychological opposites

Dialectics come up all the time in our psychological lives - especially if we are trying to address how we relate to ourselves and others. DBT encourages all of us to balance opposites like these:

Trying your best to change

and

Still needing to do better

Sharing some parts of yourself

and

Keeping some things private

Controlling your emotions

and

Tolerating your emotions

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# Intro to Dialectics

## DBT: Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

handout

Having a valid reason for your beliefs

and

Believing something incorrect

Being angry with someone

and

Loving and respecting them

Disagreeing with the rules

and

Following the rules

Accepting reality as it is

and

Working to change reality

Receiving help

and

Giving help

### The dialectical mindset

Dialectical thinking is not limited to the therapy room. It's also a way of seeing the world and searching for truth. Here are the pillars of the dialectical perspective:

1. **Everything in the universe has an opposite.** It is impossible to understand something without considering its opposite. Look beyond your point of view and consider its opposite.
2. **Everything is interconnected.** No one truly exists in a vacuum. Each of us has parts and each of us is a part of a whole.
3. We must radically accept that **change is the only constant** (even if it moves slowly). What may have been true before may no longer be true due to this constant change. As such, meaning and truth are not absolute but evolve over time and context.
4. **Change is transactional.** We influence our those around us and they influence us. Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have environmental causes and in turn cause changes in the environment.

In our other dialectics worksheets, you can learn more about:

- [Thinking and acting dialectically](#)
- [Practicing dialectic thinking in difficult situations](#)

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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.



## [Free Mental Health Worksheets](#)

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.