Intro to Validation

DBT: Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

Many of us have used the word "valid" in daily life, but it has a specific meaning in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Validating others is an effective interpersonal skill to improve our interactions. This handout will introduce you to what validation is within DBT, how to validate someone, what counts as "valid," and why validation is effective.

What is validation?

Validation is:

- Verifying the facts of a situation
- Acknowledging someone's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors
- Noticing and understanding the causes of someone's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors
- Showing you can see another person's perspective

Validation is NOT necessarily:

- Agreeing with another person
- Liking the other person's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors
- Ignoring or denying that the other person has affected you or someone else
- Verifying an idea or fact that is not actually valid or true

Validating is showing that you understand how something makes sense - logically and/or emotionally. Here are a few examples of validation:

If someone is upset when they don't receive a job offer they were really hoping for:

✓ "That makes a lot of sense, I'd be really disappointed, too."
✗ "Oh don't feel bad; keep a stiff upper lip."

If someone has a hard day at work and verbally lashes out at you:

✓ "I understand that you had a hard day; I know work's been tough. But don't talk to me that way."
✗ "You're right, I know you didn't mean to, I was being too sensitive..."

If someone says they are a failure because of their poor grade on an exam:

✓ "I can see you're upset and wanted to do better. But one grade doesn't mean *you* are a failure."
✗ "You shouldn't feel like a failure - you passed. You're literally not a failure. Why be upset?"

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How do you validate someone?

You can validate someone with your expression, body language, words, and actions. DBT describes six levels of validation, which increase in strength from 1 to 6 (with 6 being the strongest).

1 Pay attention

- Don't multitask or look at your phone
- Keep the conversation (and your thoughts) focused on the other person
- Make eye contact, nod, lean in
- Listen and observe
- Use natural facial reactions (e.g., smile when hearing happy news)

2 Reflect back

- Make sure you're hearing them correctly by checking in: "It sounds like... Do I have that right?"
- Accept corrections gracefully
- Don't judge, criticize, or argue
- Have an open mind; take *their* perspective
- Use a friendly, understanding tone

3 "Read minds"

- Pay attention to nonverbal cues, like facial expressions and body language. Is there something they're *not* saying, but showing with their expression?
- Take a guess based on what you see and what you know about the situation. "Hey, it seems like you're feeling..."
- Be open to correction!

4 Understand

- How do the person's thoughts and feelings *make sense* given the circumstances? (Even if they believe something untrue or did something you don't approve of)
- Look for the logical connection between the cause (the situation) and effects (their thoughts, feelings, or behavior)
- "It makes sense that you did that, given that..." "I can see why you felt that way"

5 Acknowledge the valid

- Show that you see someone's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors are valid given the circumstances
- If appropriate, don't just validate with words, but also take action.
- "You're right, it is my turn to do the dishes," *then do the dishes*
- "I'd be stressed about that problem, too," *then help them solve the problem*

6 Show equality

- Be authentic and treat the other person as equal to you
- Don't put them on a pedestal or only try to appease them
- Don't put yourself above them by treating them as fragile, incompetent, or childish

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What should you validate? Everything?

Only validate the valid. The point of validation is *not* to verify falsehoods in the name of kindness. It *is* to show that you understand someone's experience given the situation.

What is actually "valid"?

Something verifiably true

- The facts of situation: things you can directly observe (like actions and spoken words) or things someone else can verify because they directly observed it

✓ She said, "I'm so frustrated" and left the room
✗ She must have thought she never wants to see me again
You can't directly observe thoughts, so if someone doesn't tell you what they're thinking, your best guesses are not "facts"
✗ He said you stole the office supplies (when you really did not)

Someone's description of an internal experience

- Feelings, beliefs, opinions, or thoughts
- Their suffering and difficulties

✓ She said she was in pain - *even if you think the same thing wouldn't hurt you*
✓ He said he believed he made a huge mistake - *even if you think it's not a big deal*
We can't directly observe someone's internal experience. Take people at their word.

Information or ideas that are:

- Relevant or meaningful to the situation
- Grounded: factual, logically correct, or generally accepted
- Effective for reaching a goal

✗ Information about someone else's job performance is not relevant to a discussion of your own job performance
✗ Ideas that are truly illogical aren't valid - e.g., it's raining because I made a mistake
✗ Drinking to cope with a relationship problem might feel better in the short term, but doesn't actually achieve the goal

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Let's look at an example of what you should and should not validate. Read the situation below, and before turning the page, to see the answers, use the criteria above to consider what you should validate and circle the checkmark for yes or the X for no below:

Your friend Anna is talking to you about a recent argument with your mutual friend Cam.

I'm so upset. *Validate?* ✓ ✗

Cam told me I was really inconsiderate for missing her birthday dinner last night. ✓ ✗

I was sick! ✓ ✗

I was likely to get other people sick and I wasn't up for going out anyways! ✓ ✗

I told her earlier in the week I was coming down with something, and when I told her yesterday I couldn't make it, I apologized. ✓ ✗

She's been acting different towards me for weeks - ✓ ✗

she was probably thrilled to have a reason to yell at me. ✓ ✗

I've gotta tell everyone to ice her out. She'll be nicer to me when she doesn't have any other friends. ✓ ✗

I just feel so angry. ✓ ✗

She's never appreciated me. ✓ ✗

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I'm so upset. ✓ *Anna's internal experience*

Cam told me I was really inconsiderate for missing her birthday dinner last night. ✓ *Verifiably true - what Cam says is observable*

I was sick! ✓ *Verifiably true*

I was likely to get other people sick ✓ *Grounded in logic*

and I wasn't up for going out anyways! ✓ *Anna's internal experience*

I told her earlier in the week I was coming down with something, and when I told her yesterday I couldn't make it, I apologized. ✓ *Verifiably true - what Anna says is observable*

She's been acting different towards me for weeks ✓ *Verifiably true - Cam's behaviors are observable*

she was probably thrilled to have a reason to yell at me. ✗ *This is an assumption Anna is making, not a direct observation of Cam telling us her thoughts, and we don't know what Cam's thoughts are yet*

I've gotta tell everyone to ice her out. She'll be nicer to me when she doesn't have any other friends. ✗ *This is unlikely to actually achieve Anna's goal of getting Cam to be (genuinely) nicer to her*

I just feel so angry. ✓ *Anna's internal experience*

She's never appreciated me. ✗ *This is an assumption Anna is making, not a direct observation of Cam telling us her thoughts, and we don't know what Cam's thoughts are yet*

What does validation look and sound like?

1. *Look at Anna and pay close attention to her words, expressions, emotions, etc.*
2. "It sounds like you're feeling pretty frustrated and angry."
3. "You look kind of down, and I know you've been worried about Cam being distant before. Am I right in guessing you're feeling sad and hurt, too?"
4. "It totally makes sense that you're feeling this way - especially because Cam said you were being inconsiderate when you were actually trying to be considerate to everyone involved."
5. "I doubt that icing her out will actually solve the problem. But if you want help figuring out other things to do next, I'm here for you."
6. "I'd be upset, too. I felt the same way when Julia and I were in that big fight last year."

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Why should we validate others?

Validation improves interpersonal interactions

- It shows you're listening, understanding, and not judging
- It shows you can agree on the facts with someone else
- It shows you're making an effort to find the truth of a situation

Validation reduces tension

- It moves you away from an argument about who's right and who's wrong
- It reduces anger on both sides: you focus on consideration, they feel understood

Validation makes it easier for others to listen to and understand you

- Which would you be more open to hearing suggestions or feedback from?
  - "You shouldn't feel that way, they didn't mean it."
  - "I can see why you felt like that; I'd probably feel that way too."

Invalidation hurts

- All of us have been invalidated before. It can leave us feeling alone, misunderstood, angry, unimportant, ineffective, or like we're screaming into a void
- Denying or trying to "correct" someone's feelings do not make the feelings go away

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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.

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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 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.

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