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RESEARCH

Piloting a Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) Infused Skills Group in a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP)

Richard J. Ricard
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This study explored the impact of a 4-week skills group intervention based on the principles of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) with a sample of adolescents attending a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program. This article provides a session-by-session overview of activities adapted from DBT-specified training modules of mindfulness, emotional regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and distress tolerance. The results of a pre/posttest comparison revealed reductions in student- and parent-reported indicators of behavioral distress when compared to a control sample of students not receiving the intervention. Implications and continuing challenges of conducting efficacy studies of clinical interventions in schools are discussed.

Keywords: alternative education programs; Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT); efficacy; structured psychoeducation groups

Systematic exploration of the efficacy of school-based interventions is essential given that our school counselors are seeing an increasing number of troubled students on their campuses (Galassi & Akos, 2004;
Group work has been described as especially suitable for school-based interventions because groups are a natural way for adolescents to relate to each other (Kulic, Horne, & Dagley, 2004). Despite recent meta-analytic studies reporting the efficacy of over 60% of group interventions, (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997), the efficacy of group treatments for specific populations and treatment settings is still in question (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2006). The authors cite a number of limitations in the work such as low sample sizes and the presence of confounding variables (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2006). Controlled studies that demonstrate the efficacy of theoretically grounded group work are needed (Furr, 2000). This article evaluates the efficacy of a psychoeducational intervention in a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) setting with adolescents who are at high risk for academic failure and often subject to legal adjudication (Foley & Pang, 2006).

INTERVENTIONS IN DISCIPLINARY ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM (DAEP) SETTINGS

Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs provide educational opportunities for students who have violated the code of conduct at their home schools. These students are characteristically impulsive, emotional, aggressive, and considered especially “at risk” often because of antisocial tendencies that make it difficult for them to function in traditional educational settings (Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Raywid, 1994, 1999; Tobin & Sprague, 2002). DAEP programs are tasked with managing the disruptive behavior of students (Aron, 2006) and documenting a response to intervention (RTI) during a brief (15–90 days) stay, before students are allowed to return to their home campuses (Mitchell et al., 2011). A lack of research on DAEP campuses has resulted in the availability of very little data on the prospects and process of student attendees and more generally the efficacy of intervention strategies employed (Mitchell et al., 2011). In many cases, the DAEP is ill equipped to fully address the behavioral counseling needs of referred students; often as ill equipped as the referring home schools. Despite the potential to be therapeutically supportive of students with significant behavioral difficulties, DAEP intervention often involves little more than individualized monitoring of student academic school work (Foley & Pang, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Given these challenges, it is not surprising that the recidivism rates for DAEP intervention are highly variable and under-reported (Mitchell et al., 2011). Structured group approaches to address persistent behavioral disruptions of student educational attainment have been
successful in a variety of educational settings (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Webb & Brigman, 2007). The availability of empirically validated approaches specifically designed for use on DAEP campuses may be useful in circumventing resistance to campus-based interventions (Foley & Pang, 2006). DAEP based counseling staff equipped with these intervention may be able to address the resistance of hesitant and distrusting students who are not willing to participate fully in the intervention (Hemphill & Howell, 2000). An adaptation of standardized DBT skills curriculum for adaptive functioning (e.g., coping with distress, managing interpersonal conflict seems especially appropriate for evaluation in a DAEP campus setting (Harley et al., 2007).

**DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY (DBT) SKILLS TRAINING**

DBT is a structured, time-limited, cognitive behavioral treatment approached which emphasizes the ability to effectively manage intense and conflicting emotions and truths (Feigenbaum, 2007, 2010; Greco & Hayes, 2008; Swales, 2009). Evidence-based DBT skills training involves four modules: Skills for mindfulness, emotion regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and distress tolerance (Choate, 2012; Linehan, 1993). As summarized by Choate (2012), *Mindfulness skills* involve attending to emotions, thoughts, and physical experiences without judging or trying to change them. *Emotional regulation* involves skills for reducing vulnerability to negative emotions and recognizing the changeability of one’s emotional responses. *Interpersonal effectiveness* involves maintaining personal beliefs and values while learning how to improve relating skills that require assertion and negotiation. Finally *distress tolerance* teaches skills for managing impulsive reactions (that usually make things work) to difficult circumstances and acceptance of painful emotions and life circumstances (Choate, 2012; Linehan, 1993). A focus on learning skills in each module “helps change behavioral, emotional and thinking patterns associated with problems that are causing distress in one’s life” (Linehan, 1993). Although DBT was created to treat adult symptomology (Wheelis, 2010), utilizing DBT across the developmental spectrum has become of interest, specifically in the treatment of adolescent diagnoses (Fleischhake et al., 2011), of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED), personality disorders (PD), and more (APA, 2000; Apscie, Bass, & Houston, 2006; Nelson-Gray et al., 2006; Rakfeldt, 2005; Trupin, Stewart, Beach, & Boesky, 2002). Further, Quinn (2009) reported that adolescence is a developmental
period characterized by changes in cognitive functioning. Some adolescents may undergo an oppositional transition as they are cognitively maturing and developing empathy with emotional vulnerability, while battling impulsivity and reactive behaviors. These symptoms disrupt functioning especially in the context of other psychosocial stressors and are often characteristic of students assigned to alternative educational program campuses.

**THE CURRENT STUDY**

This study evaluated the efficacy of a Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) Infused skills group intervention on the behavioral distress of students attending a DAEP. We adapted activities from the standard DBT skills curriculum to design a skills group to enhance student coping skills and facilitate an awareness and acceptance that change is constant. Our groups were designed to help students replace maladapted emotional and behavioral reactions with behaviors that would reinforce non-emotionally and behaviorally charged responses (Linehan, 1993). Our adaptation of DBT modules is aimed at teaching emotional and behavioral self-preservation skills, while facilitating an awareness of the impact of behavior on others (Linehan, 1993). The standard DBT Skills intervention requires at least a 6-month commitment to weekly 2.5-hour sessions (Greco & Hayes, 2008; Linehan, 1993). This treatment commitment is beyond the practical possibility for DAEP based intervention. Our intervention provides a briefer DBT infused group experience specially tailored for use at a DAEP campus. By providing opportunities for learning and practicing adaptive skills we expected our structured intervention to reduce reported symptoms of behavioral distress a in a DAEP setting (Quinn, 2009). Using a non-probabilistic sampling method (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2010) students were recruited to participate in eight to ten 45–50 minute group counseling sessions two times each week for 4 weeks. Consistent with principles of best practice for development of integrated structured group experiences, group goals and plans of activities were developed and adapted from standard DBT skills training protocol (Furr, 2000; Linehan, 1993). Students and their parents reported the frequency of behavioral distress symptomology on questionnaires (pre- and post- intervention). A treatment group received the 4-week group intervention as the primary DAEP intervention, while the control group received treatment as usual at the DAEP. The research question concerned the impact of a DBT infused skills group on symptoms of behavioral distress. We hypothesized that student self- and parent-reported symptoms of distress in six behavioral
domains would decrease for those students participating in the skills group process when compared to a control group of students not receiving the intervention. The results were intended to provide an illustration of how empirically validated treatments might be generalized across treatment settings (Harley et al., 2007).

METHOD

The Setting

The “Teen Talk” program was implemented at a DAEP located along the Southern Gulf Coast of the United States. The DAEP serves a school district consisting of over 48,000 students. The DAEP receives students from grades 1 to 12 (ages 6–18) from area elementary, middle, and high schools. The population of the campus fluctuates across the academic year and averages a daily attendance of approximately 200–250 students. Students are referred to the DAEP for violating their school’s disciplinary code of conduct to include offenses such as noncompliance, fighting, substance use, and misdemeanor and felony acts. The term of enrollment at the DAEP ranges 15 to 90 days depending on the severity of offense. During their term at the DAEP, students participate in a tiered response to intervention (RTI) program in which they conform to regulations for dress code, behavioral deportment, and completion of academic assignments. Student progress is evaluated based on a daily monitoring of student attendance and behavioral compliance. Students are contracted to complete a specified number of days, which they earn by completing academic requirements and maintaining satisfactory deportment. Students who successfully complete their days are typically allowed to return to their home campuses. The Teen Talk program was approved (and received IRB approval for research purposes) as a collaboration between the DAEP and a local university to provide a counseling service to students at the DAEP as a component of the DAEP’s Response to Intervention Plan (RTI). The partnership detailed the participation of university practicum and internship students from a Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) counselor training program.

Recruitment and Screening of Participants

Beginning in the fall of 2011, every student enrolling in the DAEP was introduced to the “Teen Talk” counseling program as part of their orientation session. Students were informed of the group process as
well as the research intent of the program, in accordance with IRB requirements, student participation in the treatment group was determined based on receiving parental consent, student assent, as well as availability of group space (room allotment allowed only for concurrent conduct of 4 groups). Students and parents not involved in the treatment nonetheless completed pre- and post- surveys as part of their participation in the RTI plan at the DAEP campus (control group). One of the school’s four certified counselors served as the site supervisor and campus liaison for university counseling student interns. As part of the service commitment of our program, individualized counseling services were also made available to students depending upon their needs (usually referred by the supervising school counselor).

**Group Size, Composition, and Format of “Teen Talk”**

Teen Talk groups were designed to accommodate groups of 4–6 students in accordance with guidelines for DBT psychoeducational skills group principles (Linehan, 1993). Students who consented to participate met twice a week (T, TH or M, W) for 4 weeks in same gender group sessions to learn skills and discuss topics relevant to kids and teenagers of today. Teen Talk groups were facilitated by two interns responsible for co-leading the group. Groups ranged considerably in size and student patterns of attendance varied because of the transitory nature of the typical DAEP student population. Six students were seen individually throughout this study. In these cases post-session supervision emphasized the DBT skills training focus be maintained whenever possible.

**Teen Talk Group Facilitators**

The counseling sessions were facilitated by an ethnically diverse team of seven (three European Americans, two Hispanic Americans; two African-Americans) counseling interns from a CACREP accredited counselor training program in the area. The counseling interns worked under the direct site-based supervision of a female, Hispanic American Ph.D.-level licensed professional counselor (LPC) who also was a full-time certified school counselor at the DAEP for the past 4 years. The counseling team consisted of 6 females and 1 male at various counseling experience levels. There were 4 doctoral students receiving credit for a doctoral-level internship in Counselor Education; 2 masters level practicum students, and 1 Ph.D.-level licensed Professional Counselor Intern who is the first author and a faculty member at the university. Regular staffing meetings and site-based supervision occurred after daily counseling sessions in which activities
were reviewed and client issues discussed. In addition, each counseling intern received at least 1 hour of individual supervision at the university each week from a licensed professional counselor supervisor (LPC-S) on the counselor education faculty at the university. Additional training sessions were provided on a monthly basis for continued professional growth of all interns. Teen Talk groups were facilitated by two interns responsible for co-leading the group. Doctoral-level interns were paired with less experienced masters level students. Consistency in leadership of an individual group was maintained for the duration of that group's tenure; however, counselors may have been paired with a different co-leader for the onset of a new group process.

**Assessment of Student Response to Group Intervention**

Beginning in the fall of 2011, all students and their families completed the Youth Outcome Questionnaire (YOQ–30.2; Wells, Burlingame, Lambert, Hoag, & Hope, 1996) as part of the campus enrollment process. The YOQ–30.2 is a standardized 30-item instrument comprised of six subscales and a total score. The instrument was specifically designed to measure the treatment progress for children and adolescents receiving any form of mental health treatment. The instrument has been validated for assessing changes in observed behavior or symptoms across six domains of behavioral distress (somatic complaints, social isolation, aggression, conflict, hyperactivity, depression). A total score reflects the degree of distress being experienced at the time of assessment. The internal consistency reliability for total score is reported as .92 for both parent and self across the six subscales and total score (Burlingame et al., 2002).

**Demographics of Participants**

One hundred-twenty five (125) students (70 males and 55 females) participated in groups and individual interventions during the 2011–2012 academic school year. A total of 669 sessions were conducted with students receiving an average of 6 sessions (mode 8; range 1–12; 6 students met individually for extra or make up sessions as directed by supervising school counselor). A total of 178 students (120 boys and 58 girls) concurrently enrolled at the DAEP were placed in the control group. The ethnic composition of the school is predominantly Hispanic (average of about 86% across the 2011–2012 academic school year). Our sample was comparable (79.8% and 83% Hispanic for treatment and control group respectively). While all students at the DAEP had committed violations at their home schools, referrals to
the DAEP are based on severity of infractions. Discretionary referrals occur when violations are relatively minor, while mandatory referrals are made in the case of more serious violations. Students in our treatment and control groups were almost identical with respect to criterion for mandatory referral (37.1% and 37.6% for treatment and control groups respectively).

OVERVIEW OF GROUP SESSIONS

Sessions were aligned with principles of DBT skill development modules for mindfulness, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. In accordance with principles of developing psychoeducational groups, each session involved a didactic focus, which was prefaced by a description of the goals of the session, and an experiential activity for practice and consolidation (Furr, 2000).

Session One: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Validation of Others

Session one involved welcoming and introducing students to the group process. The group members introduced themselves to each other. Students were encouraged to talk about why they were referred to the DAEP, their current perceptions of the school, and how they felt about their home school. Group norms for attendance, participation, respect, and confidentiality were discussed. Ice breaking exercises that emphasize active listening and validation (Linehan, 1993) were introduced with the following activities.

*I get what you are saying to me* is a communication exercise designed to help students practice interpersonal validation skills for listening and responding to conversational partners. Validation is the non-judgmental acceptance of ourselves and others and is considered a core DBT component that is difficult for many clients (Linehan, 1993). In dyadic practice students were coached to provide reflective statements (i.e., repeating and/or rephrasing a conversational partners’ expression) in order to “check their understanding” in the context of role-play. The technique for eliciting reflective statements is based on active listening microskills (Ivey & Ivey, 2003). Students were taught “active listening” skills (e.g., attending, reflecting, and paraphrasing) while engaging in a series of role play activities involving peer-peer, teacher-student, and parent-child interactions. Students were challenged to try out as homework active listening with their family and friends and report back to the group in the next meeting.
Session Two: Thoughts, Feelings, and Choosing Behavioral Responses

Session two involved the introduction of mindfulness and contact with the inner world of thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and choices (Linehan, 1993). These concepts were introduced with basic activities. 

*I am responsible for my actions* is an activity that uses the analogy of a programmable robot to initiate discussion about the differences between choices, reactions, and responses. The discussion focuses on how humans are different from robots. Humans are free to respond and make choices; they are “Response Able.” Robots do not have freedom to choose, they are programmed. Students were encouraged to draw robot figures during the discussion. The discussion was extended to highlight the difference between reacting to something (e.g., touching a hot pot) and choosing a response which involves some level of internal processing before making a response. Students were encouraged to think about how they typically react and/or respond in different situations.

*Understanding the flow of my experiences* is an activity designed to help students understand the different components of an experience. Distinguishing thoughts, feelings, events, and actions often represents a challenge to students and yet it is a major part of understanding how one might learn to regulate behavior in the context of an emotional experience (Linehan, 1993). A discussion and an accompanying worksheet presenting multi elemental events (e.g., I got a bad grade [event], I got mad [emotion], and threw my book at the teacher [behavior]) were used to identify different “moments” of experience. In a follow up discussion, each student was encouraged to identify an event in his/her life and analyze the various components of the outcome, according to their new understanding of elements of their experience. The students were encouraged to address issues related to recent conflict or distress (when something bad happened or things didn’t go their way) and more specifically perhaps the precipitating event that led to their referral to the DAEP. Students were asked to describe their experience at multiple levels (event, thought, feeling, how they chose to act, behavior). Discussion was focused on accepting the consequences of their choices and generation of possible alternative decisions that might have met with more favorable outcomes than referral to the DAEP.

This activity is facilitated by having students create a thought record by segmenting their experiences on a piece of paper with columns indicating event, thought, emotion, and behavior. A wavy column (signifying a river) is placed in between the emotion and behavior column. This is designed and described as the “choice river.” Students are
encourage to understand that they make choices (cross the choice river) when responding or reacting to the emotions or thoughts associated with an event.

**Session Three: Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation**

Session three involved activities related to understanding, describing, and expressing feelings and emotional experiences. This concept was introduced in exercises that helped the students to contact and explore their feelings and bodily sensations. The activities are coupled with periods of silence and breathing practice.

*Minding my own business* is an activity designed to increase student awareness of their public and private selves. This activity is derived from the idiomatically expressed desire to keep private some aspect of one’s personal life from purview of the interpersonal world. Students reflected on the concept of “minding your own business” and were lead in reflection of “business” as in internal state (thinking, feeling, and emotional experience). An initial discussion focused on recognition of private thoughts and feelings as personal. Moments of silent reflection and breathing were taught as an approach to “mind” or connect with our internal selves. The activity was designed to help the student make contact with his or her own emotional experience. Students played *mood charades* in which they acted out several emotions for the group to discover and discussed a *glossary of feeling words* used to increase their understanding of vocabulary surrounding the affective domain. Students were encouraged to recall and describe emotional experiences from the past and note how they were feeling during the recall process. A solution focused leader intervention such as the use of “the exception question” (e.g., Can you remember a time when you felt happy in the past?) was used to facilitate recall of a time when they experienced a particular emotion which was processed in the present moment. As an extension of this awareness, students were reminded of the potential emotional weight of negative emotions and were encouraged to consider the physical metaphor of how holding a heavy object (like a brick) would make them tired. Students were encouraged to describe a current situation that seemed “weighty” like prolonged feelings of anger, fear, or worry. This was followed by a discussion of how one might turn the mood around toward positivity (Linehan, 1993).

**Session Four: Distress Tolerance**

Session four was focused on understanding adaptive coping strategies and responses to difficult emotional situations. Distress tolerance
skills involve learning how to cope adaptively and survive powerful feelings. As a follow-up to the previous session, discussion focused on functioning in the context of potentially overwhelming feelings (Linehan, 1993). The students were encouraged to discuss times when “things didn’t go their way” and how they handled the associated pain, hurt, or disappointment. Skills for distress tolerance help individuals cope with painful events by building resilience and learning new ways to manage the uncomfortable feelings (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). Exercising distress tolerance skills involves understanding that emotional highs and lows pass, and surviving them with some degree of stability and calm, is more adaptive than reacting to them in the difficult moments. A series of short breathing and focusing exercises was presented to help students manage their emotional response in moments of stress. Students were taught to “tune in” to their body and notice the signals that indicated upset (e.g., heart rate, respiration, etc.).

Three culturally relevant metaphors were utilized to help students conceptualize the management of personal upset. The metaphors were introduced as part of a drawing activity. Collectively these metaphors emphasized the periodicity of emotional experiences that need not control how we think and behave.

The “I of the Hurricane” metaphor involved having students depict a hurricane (i.e., draw swirling and spiraling wind) around a center (“I”) characterized by stillness, peace, and calm. The DAEP is located 2 miles from the Gulf Coast and has an active hurricane season. Students were encouraged to represent the distress in their lives as objects flying in the wind around them (e.g., conflict, worries, etc.). Figure 1 shows the depiction drawn by one student. As seen in the figure, this student’s life indicated many concerns typical of the student population at the DAEP (e.g., legal, familial, and scholastic).

The Riding the Waves metaphor described emotions as ocean currents and rip tides that propel swimmers within their catchment out to sea. Panicky and novice swimmers struggle with futility against powerful currents like humans struggling with unwanted emotions, and are rendered helpless, never making progress toward the shore; as in life, never making progress toward emotional peace. The goal is for students to become like surfers and more experienced swimmers who use the power of the waves and prevailing winds to navigate rough surf by waiting and timing their energy to match the momentum of the currents; this as opposed to fighting against a feeling instead of swimming around or riding with a wave until its energy dissipates.

The At the Movie Theater metaphor describes surviving intense emotional experiences as watching a move in a theatre and not being
involved in the dramatic action. This metaphor was applied to address the common distress related to reactions of those around them. Students were asked to describe situations in their lives that involved “drama.” That is, when the importance of some circumstance or someone is overemphasized (i.e., dramatized). The discussion was focused on how one might, like a movie goer, remain in a seat and watch without getting involved.

*Try to Bother Me* is an experiential practice in which one person in a group sat in the middle of a circle of group members and rehearsed breathing techniques while the group members try to bother them (i.e., make them laugh, move, or react). Students were encouraged to remember that they can make the choice to remain still and peaceful even in the midst of the chaos that may surround them.

**Session Five: Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills**

Session five involved teaching effective communication and relating skills. Many students are referred to a DAEP for conflictual or combative relationships with their families, peers, and school officials (Mitchell et al., 2011). Students were asked to describe the quality of social interactions with others (family, friends, teachers, counselors) in the past week using the Social Interaction Questionnaire (SIQ;
Ricard, 2009). The SIQ asks students to describe how they felt after interaction with particular persons (e.g., positive, felt encouraged; or negative, felt discouraged or had little or no contact). The SIQ was used primarily to initiate conversation about student perception of social support, particularly in the context of any significant events that had occurred that week. Students take turns describing their week in conversation and discussion is focused on how conversations can influence the overall quality of a relationship. Discussion focused on processing significant interactions in the group and reviewing active listening and validating skills discussed in previous sessions. Leader interventions focused on reinforcing listening skills during group processing. Students were encouraged to continue to invest in specific application of these skills for homework. Finally, discussion was focused on student beliefs about the quality of their relationships and what each would be willing to do to improve that quality.

Session Six: Interpersonal Effectiveness (DEAR MAN)

Session six involved a continuation of teaching communication and relating skills initiated in session five. The session introduces the DBT activity of DEAR MAN to structure the discussion. DEAR MAN is a standardized activity of DBT skills training which involves teaching the elements of effective communication (see Choate, 2012; Linehan, 1993). The activity teaches skills for describing (D), expressing (E), asserting (A), and reinforcing (R) as well as utilization of mindful (M), attentive (A), and negotiation (N), all needed for positive relating with conversational partners. The activity was used to continue discussion of effective communication skills from session five. The activity was introduced using a humorous pun by asking the student to draw a “Deer Man” (i.e., a man with dear features like antlers). After students shared their depictions (most drew a man with antlers), the traditional DEAR MAN acronym activity was introduced and facilitated through rounds of role-play. Through role-play scenarios students practiced DEAR MAN communication “to get what you want.” Students modeled conversations between teachers and students, parents and children, and peers. In each case students practiced negotiation and assertiveness in the context of validating their conversational partners (as they learned in session one). Two rounds of dyadic conversational role-plays were conducted while group members and the leader coached. The second round of role-play required the adolescent to assume the opposite character in a role reversal scenario. Scenarios involving the use of persuasion and refusal skills were practiced within a peer-peer, student teacher, and parent child contexts.
Session Seven: Radical Acceptance and Emotional Regulation Strategies

Session seven teaches the concept of radical acceptance as an important skill in coping with difficult emotions and knowing how you feel (Linehan, 1993). Radical acceptance is an important attitude for emotional regulation and distress tolerance. Radical acceptance involves willingness to accept current realities while being able to respond in adaptive ways. As such, the capacity to accept simultaneously “what is” and pursue “what can be” is the core dialectic of DBT (Linehan, 1993). The concept was introduced in this session using concrete examples of acceptance of reality. For example, “as much as you may want your shirt to be a different color, it is just gray” (the mandated uniform color at the DAEP) or “as much as you wish it was 3 p.m., it’s only 2:20 p.m.” These teaching examples were paired with the introduction of “self-soothing” strategy (McKay et al., 2007) approaches to “improving the moment,” both of which involve deliberate efforts to “be with the feelings associated with distress” and yet make productive responses. Students were reminded of the hurricane and wave metaphors and taught strategies for managing emotions such as “acting the opposite” and “half smiling” (Linehan, 1993). Students were also reminded to take a time out and breathe (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2012) before responding in a way they might later regret. These strategies were described as opportunities to interrupt an automatic, impulsive reaction to a distressing situation. In all cases, the discussion of these activities was coupled with material support in the form of written descriptions and/or leader illustrations.

Session Eight: Goal Setting/Committed Action and Smart Goals

The closing session involved a discussion of goal setting and reflecting upon the group experience. I am SMART is an activity that utilizes the acronym to describe specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time limited (SMART) goals. Students were coached to describe at least one short-term goal (in next 2–3 weeks) and one long-term goal. Students took turns discussing each other’s goals and querying each other on the dimensions of SMART. Finally students were encouraged to commit to specific actions for pursuing goals now. In all cases, students were encouraged to reflect upon their time at the DAEP and returning to their home campuses. Encouragement came in the specific form of asking “How can things go differently at your home school? And What are you willing to do to make things go differently?”
Away you go involved a leader-prepared individualized narrative letter to each student addressing the process they participated in and the progress they made as a group member. The leader endeavored to provide honest strength-based feedback in the context of encouragement and praise for efforts realized during the group process. The general form of the letter is provided below:

Dear Student (name),

Throughout these few weeks I have seen your willingness to achieve your goals. You have learned many skills that will help you with many difficult situations. It is up to you to use these skills when needed. I am so proud of your work in our group. Good luck in the coming years.

Counselor Signature

IMPACT OF SKILLS TRAINING ON STUDENT BEHAVIORAL DISTRESS

The impact of skills training on student behavioral distress was assessed using a repeated measures research design (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2010). Student self- and parent-reported YOQ–30.2 scores were used to evaluate the impact of this intervention on student distress in six behavioral domains (see Table 1 and Table 2). The scores were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using group (treatment vs. control) as a between subjects' factor and pre–post- intervention as repeated measure. The dependent variables were six subscale scores and the total score on the YOQ–30.2. The internal consistency reliability of YOQ–30.2 total scores was excellent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somatic</td>
<td>3.1 (2.6)</td>
<td>2.3 (2.4)</td>
<td>2.2 (2)</td>
<td>1.8 (1.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Isolation</td>
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<td>.67 (1.3)</td>
<td>.97 (1.7)</td>
<td>.84 (2.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>3.0 (3)</td>
<td>2.4 (2.8)</td>
<td>1.9 (2)</td>
<td>1.8 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct Problems</td>
<td>7.1 (5.1)</td>
<td>5.6 (5)</td>
<td>4.3 (3.7)</td>
<td>3.9 (3.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperactivity/Distractibility</td>
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<td>3.8 (3.1)</td>
<td>3.1 (2.5)</td>
<td>2.5 (2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression/Anxiety</td>
<td>6.9 (4.9)</td>
<td>5.5 (4.3)</td>
<td>4.5 (3.1)</td>
<td>3.9 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Global Score</td>
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<td>20.6 (15.3)</td>
<td>16.5 (10.)</td>
<td>14.5 (11.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of subscales of the YOQ–30.2 for Student Self-Reports in treatment and control groups. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.
(\(r = .90\) for student-reported and \(r = .94\) for parent-reported). A series of preplanned focus comparisons on pre–post x group (treatment vs. control) interaction was conducted to assess the impact on treatment group when compared to the control group. The impact of the intervention was expected to be evidenced by a significant interaction between pre–post and group, showing relative improvement of the treatment group on (YOQ–30.2 measures) compared to the control group not receiving the intervention.

As seen in Table 1 and Table 2 the mean self-reports and parent reports on YOQ–30.2 revealed that statistically and clinically significant reductions in frequency of total behavioral symptoms were reported in both treatment and control groups, \(F(2,299) = 14.9, p < .001\) \(\eta^2 = .091\). The significant reductions were reported by both parents (\(\eta^2 = .08\)) and students (\(\eta^2 = .02\)). Preplanned focused comparisons pre–post x group interaction across six subscales and on the total YOQ–30.2 for treatment and control groups showed that students in treatment groups reported significant improvements above those in the control group on aggression, \(F(1,301) = 3.9, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .013\), and conduct, \(F(1,301) = 4.4, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .014\); and margin improvement on hyperactivity, \(F(1,301) = 3.7, p = .054, \eta^2 = .012\). Similarly, parents of students in the treatment group reported significant changes in distress on all subscales of the YOQ–30.2, when compared to parents of students in the control group. Parents reported significant reductions in somatic, \(F(1,300) = 6.7, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .022\); social isolation, \(F(1,300) = 4.2, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .014\); aggression, \(F(1,300) = 9.3, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .03\); conduct, \(F(1,300) = 19.9, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .062\); hyperactivity, \(F(1,300) = 15.9, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .05\); and depression, \(F(1,300) = 23.5, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .073\).

### Table 2  Mean of Parent-Reported YOQ–30.2 Scores of Student Behavioral Distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic</td>
<td>2.2 (2.3)</td>
<td>1.3 (2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Isolation</td>
<td>1.2 (1.6)</td>
<td>.63 (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>2.3 (2.3)</td>
<td>.52 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct Problems</td>
<td>7.0 (5.5)</td>
<td>3.6 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperactivity/Distractibility</td>
<td>4.6 (3.4)</td>
<td>3.0 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression/Anger</td>
<td>5.5 (4.3)</td>
<td>2.8 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Global Score</td>
<td>22.7 (15.7)</td>
<td>11.2 (13.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of sub-scales of the YOQ–30.2 for Parent Reports in treatment and control groups. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.
DISCUSSION

These results provide empirical support for the efficacy of a structured skills group counseling intervention on the reported behavioral distress of students attending a DAEP. Parents and students in our treatment group reported significant reductions in overall distress when compared to a matched sample of students not receiving the intervention. Our DBT infused approach helped students experience an increased self-awareness in ways that seemed to improve their (and their parents’) reports of school functioning. The results of this relatively brief (4-week) intervention (Mitchell et al., 2011) are significant to efforts to increase the therapeutic components of DAEP interventions (Foley & Pang, 2006). More generally our approach to empirical validation of interventions may add to lack of efficacy research in the counseling literature (Ray et al., 2011) and more specifically in DAEP environments. Our demonstration of the impactful use of DBT foundational principles supports consideration of the use of contemporary therapeutic approaches (such as DBT, ACT, and other acceptance based approaches) for utilization with non-institutionalized populations (Chapman, 2006; Greco & Hayes, 2008; Hayes, Masuda, Bissett, Luoma, & Guerrero, 2004). While our intervention rests largely on the principles of DBT, the intervention was designed to be integrative of diverse counseling delivery methods. This integrative stance provided for the flexibility needed to work with adolescent populations (Harley et al., 2007; Woodberry, Rosemary, & Indik, 2008). Our use of a variety of culturally relevant activities that often incorporated humor and physical activity seemed to enhance student interest (Chesley, Gillett, & Wagner, 2008; Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001). Role plays and use of artistic and metaphorical expression all helped to “draw” the students in and enhance the counseling experience (Gladding, 2008). Students who were typically cautious and non-trusting seemed to appreciate our efforts to build rapport with the use of humor and familiar language. For example, we humorously talked about use of the “F” word in groups for feelings (knowing the prevalent use profanity in our population). In sum, efforts to connect with meaningful contexts in our students’ lives seemed to increase participation (Hemphill & Howell, 2000).

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations related to the generalization of these results primarily due to the non-probabilistic sampling procedure used to assign students to the treatment group. The work
was done with a convenience sample, which limits our ability to make claims about causality of our interventions. However, our groups (treatment and control) seemed to be fairly homogenous with respect to the types of offenses they committed in order to be sent to a DAEP. Also, students and their parents may have self-selected for participation in the counseling sessions. Thus our treatment group participants may have been more motivated than expected from random assignment. Finally, our intervention focused on only one school campus. Generalization to other campuses should be made with caution. A number of limitations seem also related to implementation of our program. As an “extracurricular” component of the school’s curriculum, student participation was at times in competition with the school testing calendar, alteration in lunch schedules, and/or student required participation in other activities. Also, as suggested by the work of Hemphill and Howell, (2000), student absenteeism resulted in variability in the dose of the intervention received by individuals in the treatment group. Finally, our outcome measures were self-report. The use of teacher observations or other measures of outcome might have strengthened the generalizability of our results.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING PRACTICE**

Despite the noted limitations, we believe this project illustrates a viable model for incorporating mental health counseling services in a scholastic setting, particularly with high-risk students. School-based mental health professionals must work to build and maintain a relationship with students, teachers, and administration (Zirkelback & Reese, 2010). Our efforts to be congruent with the scholastic mission were invaluable in gaining the cooperation of the staff (Rogers, Murrell, Adams, & Wilson, 2008). The implications for counselors in DAEP environments are evident in that this pilot approach may be adopted and manualized as a required element in the campus plan for student intervention. We feel the lessons learned from our efforts to organize and conduct psychoeducational groups on a DAEP campus are readily generalizable and, therefore, relevant to many school settings particularly those experiencing an increasing number of students with behavioral difficulties on their campus. Further, this approach might be manualized to enable intervention in a larger classroom environment.

This program addresses the issue of “compartmentalization” in counselor training (Galassi, & Akos, 2004; Graczyk, Domitrovich, & Zins, 2003). Traditional school counseling internship students are
rarely expected to address the scope of mental health issues typically encountered at a DAEP. Similarly, mental health counselors in training rarely have the opportunity to “do counseling” in school settings; let alone experience the culture of the school environment. The cross fertilization of counseling specialization may well prove beneficial and necessary for addressing the increasing mental health needs of students in schools (Weist, Evans, & Lever, 2003).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Further specification and manualization are the primary goals of the immediate future research of this program. As a noted limitation of this work, our efforts to date involve only collection of anecdotal evidence from our DAEP teaching faculty, and as such, we cannot report systematic indications of improvement in actual school functioning as a result of participation in counseling. As such our results reflect a similar limitation described by other researchers utilizing DBT approaches (see Shelton, Sampl, Kesten, Zhang, & Trestman, 2009; Trupin et al., 2002) for similar interpretation of treatment impact. The inclusion of direct measures would represent an important addition and target for future research as we work on manualizing this intervention.

As a final practical implication for further research, expansion of the program to a school-based “therapeutic living environment” with less pull out of therapy is of particular interest. In this respect, teachers as “natural change agents” might endeavor to deliberately incorporate our operationalized approaches to mindfulness, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness as a way of relating to their students throughout their daily work. While considerably utopian in nature, such an effort would perhaps transform the educational experience of children and perhaps the work lives of teachers.

**CONCLUSION**

This DBT infused group intervention was effective for reducing the symptomology of mental difficulties in a sample of adolescents in a DAEP setting. The students benefited from a structured intervention that targeted behavioral issues that negatively impact school success. Given the lack of efficacy studies in school settings and in particular in DAEP settings, these results add to the literature in ways that will stimulate future research in these settings.
REFERENCES


