

CHAPTER 12

Relationship Skills

Emotions connect to you to other people and to the world around you, and primary adaptive emotions can facilitate relationships with other people. "Emotion is thus a relational experience connecting the individual and the environment; people experience emotion in relation to people or objects in the world that they are angry at, sad about, or afraid of" (Greenberg and Johnson, 1988).

But sometimes when you need to communicate to others, your emotion may be too strong or too weak. Or there's a mismatch between your facial expressions and what you're saying to get your message across. In this chapter and the next, we're going to focus on developing effective ways of communicating emotion to the people around us. In this chapter, we'll deal with relationship skills in general. In chapter 13, we'll focus on our intimate relationships. In both, we'll be talking about what DBT therapists formally call *InterPersonal Effectiveness* (IPE) skills.

Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

In DBT, interpersonal effectiveness skills include how to ask for what you need, how to tell others "no," and how to cope with conflicts you may face with all kinds of people (family, friends, coworkers, teachers, etc.). The skills may sound quite commonsensical, but they can be hard to implement.

If you need to let someone know that you're angry with them, pouting or speaking softly won't express the degree of your anger very effectively. The other person might think you are slightly annoyed and not "get" that you're really quite mad. IPE is all about getting that emotion across in a way that is clear and effective.

In which of these settings and situations might you benefit from having IPE skills?

- Home
- Work
- School
- Shopping
- Dining out
- Being pulled over for a speeding ticket
- Asking your employer for a raise
- Family reunion
- Legal proceedings
- Asking someone out on a date
- Negotiating with friends what movie you want to see
- Getting someone to acknowledge a wrong
- Having someone tell you you're wrong
- Public speaking
- Driving
- Holiday get-together
- Play groups and dates
- Taking child to school for first time
- Parent-teacher conferences

Rating Your Current IPE

Before looking at your current IPE skill set, let's look at your foundations for interpersonal effectiveness.

How did your parents model reciprocity for you? _____

How did your family of origin respond to your needs when you made requests or communicated a need? _____

Were you encouraged to express your needs when you were growing up? If so, how? If not, why do you think this is the case? _____

During your childhood how did you get others to take your problems, needs, or feelings seriously? _____

How do you get others to take your problems, needs, and feelings seriously these days?

How do your emotions sometimes get in the way of expressing your needs?

Do you think you are skilled at accepting it when you're told no, or tolerating negative answers to requests? Explain your answer: _____

If you are better with interpersonal effectiveness than you used to be, to what do you attribute that improvement? _____

Does your spouse or partner seem to take you seriously when you express your needs or feelings? How do you know? _____

How do you show your friends or family that you take their needs and feelings seriously? _____

Your Personal IPE Inventory

Let's start by seeing how aware you are of your interpersonal resources and skills. Look at the following statements to get a sense of what you believe about your current level of skillfulness. Then take a moment to reflect on why you think you have or lack the resource or skill.

- I'm very skilled at asking for what I want
- I have people in my life whom I can ask for help
- I'm a "yes-man" or "yes-woman"
- I don't know how to ask for help
- When people say no it means they dislike me
- I have trouble saying no to requests
- I say yes to so much that I can't do anything
- Other people really aren't interested in helping me
- I rarely do favors for friends and family
- When someone tells me no once, it means they won't ever say yes
- When I want to say no I make up excuses to avoid having to say no
- I can tolerate and accept it when people say no to my requests
- I am deeply hurt when others say no to me
- I get upset thinking about asking for help from others

Now, for each statement on the list that you agree with, try to think of at least three specific examples or situations that support the way you feel. If you find that hard to do, even for statements that you strongly feel are true, ask yourself: What does that tell you about your belief?

Applying Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

One of the most common situations in a relationship between people happens when one wants or needs something from the other. It's also one of the thorniest. There are a number of factors you need to consider when you ask others for help or favors, and when you refuse others' requests (which is often harder). How hard do you push to get what you want? How hard do you resist when you must say no? What are the unspoken elements in any negotiation, and what weight should you give them?

Applying IPE involves carefully weighing a number of critical interpersonal elements that are involved when you make a request or when someone makes a request of you. These elements are priorities, capability, timing, homework, authority, rights, reciprocity, long-term versus short-term problems, and respect.

In this tabulation, I have listed the questions you should ask yourself under each element. With time, those will become second nature, and your analysis of a situation will become faster and smoother.

Priorities

- Are my objectives very important?
- Is the relationship fragile, injured, or tenuous?
- Is my self-respect on the line?
- Will my self-respect be damaged if I say no to a request?

Capability

- Is the other person able to give me what I want?
- Do I have what the other person wants?

Timing

- Is the other person in the mood to listen?
- Is this a time when the other person is likely to say yes to my request?
- Is this a bad time for me to say no?

Homework

- Do I know enough about this situation or person of whom I'm making the request?
- Do I have all the information I need about this request?
- Am I clear about what I want?
- Is the other person's request clear?
- Do I know what I'm saying yes to, or committing to?

Authority

- Does the person making the request have authority over me?
- Do I have authority over the person I'm asking to do something?

Rights

- Would saying yes to the request violate my rights in any way?
- Would saying no to the request violate that person's rights?

Reciprocity

- Have I done as much for this person as I am asking them to do for me?
- Has the other person done as much for me as they are asking of me?

Long-Term versus Short-Term

- Will giving up on my request now result in long-term problems later?
- Will saying no to the other person's request lead to long-term problems?

Respect

- Do I usually do things for myself?
- Do I avoid appearing helpless?
- Will saying no make me feel bad about myself?

If the approach seems obvious to you, congratulations. You already have a well-honed grasp of the subtleties of dealing with requests and other people. But for most of us, exchanges within even familiar relationships can sometimes be mysterious. And for many people, almost every aspect of a negotiation—having to ask for help, being pressured to say yes, forcing yourself to say no—is stressful. Coolly analyzing the elements of an exchange can help us make that all-important choice between yes and no.

Mindfulness to Personal Interactions

If you apply the analytical IPE skills described above, you will make smarter choices. And if you add the mindfulness skills you've learned, you'll make wiser ones.

Observe and describe what is going on in the situation. Describe to yourself what the other person is actually saying and actually doing. Just put words on what is happening without editorializing or letting your mind wander to assumptions or what you think you know about the situation or the other person's motives. For example, "I notice that Barb is asking me to put the toilet seat lid down . . . I notice I'm feeling anxious . . . I notice the thought, 'I wish this wasn't an issue.'" That's vastly different than, "That nag Barb, all she does is complain about that dang toilet lid!"

Take a nonjudgmental stance. Be attentive to your judgments and assumptions about the other person or their motives and then let go of them. Be intentionally compassionate toward the other person(s) and toward yourself as you work for an effective outcome. Remember that judgments are often conditioned reactions that don't always accurately reflect the situation and sometimes cause you emotional suffering. Don't evaluate this situation as you work it out, see it, and accept it.

Stay present. Don't leave the discussion abruptly or without warning. Don't let your mind wander to worry thoughts about how this will turn out awfully for you. Become so engaged with this situation and the other person(s) that you are no longer self-conscious. Don't make excuses to get out of the discussion or situation, dissociate, or tune out. Be where you are, with your full attention and intention.

Stay willing. Be willing and open to stay in the discussion, even if it's difficult. With respect to others allow yourself to feel your connection to them.

Checking Out Assumptions: Jenny

In our couples therapy sessions, Jenny often went on the attack in session, while John would sit in silence, taking it in, with a mildly pained expression on his face. Jenny would rattle off a litany of complaints about John in session and then finish for a moment by saying, "Do you see what I have to live with? See how passive he is? He just doesn't care. He never has."

Eventually, we established that there was a pattern in their relationship of Jenny being quite forceful in her opinion which came across too strongly for John, so rather than risk further escalation he would retreat into himself. He expressed that it didn't matter what he said or did, she was never happy with it because she treated his efforts to be involved at home as substandard.

Jenny was willing to practice checking out her assumptions about John's behavior. For instance, when he wouldn't offer his opinion she assumed that he didn't want to talk. As it turned out, she wasn't waiting for his reply. She started talking again before he could respond. John simply didn't know how to get a word in with Jenny talking over him, and he didn't want to escalate her emotions, nor his. This was news to Jenny. Every time Jenny told John why he was doing something (e.g., "You don't talk because you don't care"), she had to ask John to confirm or deny whether her assumption about his motives were correct. Almost always she was wrong. And she began to see how her assumptions affected her emotional responses to John.

We all worked together to balance having Jenny wait for responses from John, and letting go of old and incorrect assumptions. And we worked with John to be more responsive in a way that Jenny could appreciate. They worked at moving toward the middle, closer to one another, and with a new skill of checking out their mutual assumptions about one another, thus having fewer obstacles to overcome.

People You Are Especially Sensitive To

In everybody's life, there is at least one person that we have a relationship with that is thorny, tender, easily ruffled, or in some other way sensitive. Some of us have several or many such people in our lives. Try making a list of the elements of such a relationship. Make a copy of the worksheet for each person on your list.

Especially Difficult People

Person's name: _____

Describe your relationship to this person: _____

Describe the quality of this relationship: _____

Why do you think you are especially sensitive to this relationship? _____

Describe how you would like to improve this relationship: _____

List potential obstacles to improving how you relate with this person: _____

Dealing with Difficult People

Now refine your list to focus on people you're not only sensitive to, but people who you find especially difficult to be around, or *aversive*. Maybe they act caustic, rude, or shaming toward you and others. Around them you find yourself becoming very nervous, resentful, or fearful. Sometimes these people may be family members that you have to see at family functions. Or they may be coworkers that you can't completely avoid at a job. In either case, the effect of being around them is to sometimes leave you feeling absolutely miserable.

If you find yourself in such a setting, consider the following practices to help you change your emotional responses so your experiences become more bearable.

When I use the word *aversive* in reference to the other person, I mean that the other person has become someone that you would greatly like to avoid. You may even find

yourself judging them as repulsive, repugnant, or disgusting. You may find that you hate them, and feel they are worthy of your contempt. As you begin the work of changing your emotions toward this other person, however, try to avoid those thoughts. The idea here is to move away from unnecessary emotional suffering and toward effectiveness so that you don't carry the burden of your intense negative emotions. The goal is to reduce your emotional suffering. Also keep in mind that the goal isn't to change that other person. Instead, you're working at changing yourself.

For the following exercise, list up to five people you find extremely difficult and aversive. Choose people you have regular contact with: daily, weekly, or at least monthly. Don't pick people you only see once a year (although I hope you'll extend your practice to your interactions with them, too). You need regular practice, so that's why I urge you to target situations in which you are engaged with these difficult people. Start with a difficult-person inventory to build awareness to who it is you consider difficult and why they are difficult to you.

Five Difficult People: An Inventory

1. Name: _____

Level of difficulty (0-5): ____

Context of interaction: _____

Describe how you feel around this person: _____

Describe your judgments about this person: _____

Describe how you currently handle being around this person: _____

2. Name: _____

Level of difficulty (0-5): ____

Context of interaction: _____

Describe how you feel around this person: _____

Describe your judgments about this person: _____

Describe how you currently handle being around this person: _____

3. Name: _____

Level of difficulty (0-5): _____

Context of interaction: _____

Describe how you feel around this person: _____

Describe your judgments about this person: _____

Describe how you currently handle being around this person: _____

4. Name: _____

Level of difficulty (0-5): _____

Context of interaction: _____

Describe how you feel around this person: _____

Describe your judgments about this person: _____

Describe how you currently handle being around this person: _____

5. Name: _____

Level of difficulty (0-5): _____

Context of interaction: _____

Describe how you feel around this person: _____

Describe your judgments about this person: _____

Describe how you currently handle being around this person: _____

Now that you have assessed your "top five," as it were, it's time for you to commit yourself to engaging in facing these difficult persons in a new and skillful manner.

Be prepared for potential obstacles, including intense painful emotions, worry thoughts, or thoughts about your inability to change or handle these situations. You'll need to prepare yourself before facing the difficult person, and once you face them you must resolve to follow through with your new skills practice, and do it in the heat of the moment. This is where real change takes place. Also, don't expect that you'll change the way you react to these people overnight. You'll have to engage them over and over again. Change may come slowly, but if you stick with it, you'll experience change—and I believe you'll be quite excited about it.

One more caveat. The change won't be from fearing or loathing a person to enjoying their presence. If that comes, so much the better. But for starters keep your sights on the primary goal, which is reducing the degree of negative emotion you'll feel.

Using Exposure Therapy Methods

What you are about to embark on is similar to techniques used in *exposure therapy*, where you face objects or situations that you typically fear or avoid—heights, snakes, cats, flying—until your anxiety about facing them is reduced or gone. In your case, this happens by virtue of being exposed to the difficult person and engaging in breathing and opposite action. As you face your fears again and again, you'll become less impaired by them. (By the way, if you find any of this hard, that's natural. If it were easy, we would have done it long ago.)

Here are some exposure strategies and how to use them:

Observe and describe. Observe and describe the other person's behaviors, simply stating what you actually see. Let go of your assumptions or what you think you know about this person and their motives; just stick to the facts. For example, "I observe that this person is speaking loudly" and "I notice this person uses a curt tone of voice." You can also use your observe and describe skills to become aware of your own thoughts. Simply notice them, without holding on to them or trying to push them away. "I notice that I have the thought 'I wish I didn't have to work with this person'" or "I observe the judgment that I wish this person would die." Know what your thoughts are as you have them, and don't judge yourself for having judgments. Just observe them as they arise.

Mindfulness to emotion. Be aware to what you are feeling—fear, anger, shame, whatever. Don't judge your emotions, but label them descriptively. Be aware of each emotion, just noticing experiencing it, and letting go of thoughts such as, "I can't stand this" or "I'm a basket case."

Opposite action. Actively engage the person. Instead of avoiding them, go out of your way to speak to them and do so with confidence and opposite to the emotion that you're feeling at that time. If you're angry, approach the person with gentleness and a half smile; ask them about their family or just how they are. If you absolutely have to get away because you have pushed past your current limits, avoid the person gently and deliberately, knowing that you are avoiding them because you choose to, and not out of mindless impulsivity.

Breathing. Remember to take centering breaths as you notice your emotions getting stronger. Breathing helps to center you and triggers a physiological relaxation response

that will help you to more effectively endure the situation you are in, and even if it becomes hard, it won't remain impossible. Over time your body and brain will begin to make new associations with being in proximity to the difficult person. Breathing is how you get hold of your mind and cooperate with your emotions.

Nonjudgmental stance. Let go of your judgments about the difficult person. They ultimately only hurt you and don't change you or the person. Try looking at the person with new eyes, and see how you feel. Practice observing and describing their appearance. Do this factually, noting their size and eye and hair color. Stick to the facts and see if you can have a new view of that person.

Make a copy of the following worksheet for each difficult person in your life, and record your interactions. Make a note to reread the sheets in a few days or weeks. See any change?

Dealing with Difficult People

1. Name of difficult person: _____

Level of difficulty (0-5): ____

Predicted level of difficulty (0-100): ____

Skills you plan to use:

- Observe and describe
- Mindfulness to emotion
- Opposite action (actively engage person)
- Breathing
- Nonjudgmental stance toward difficult person
- Assertiveness
- Act out of self-respect
- Distress tolerance

Context of interaction: _____

Describe the situation: _____

Describe emotions that you felt around this person: _____

Describe skills used (opposite action, breathing, mindfulness): _____

Rate actual difficulty of situation (0–100): _____

Rate your effectiveness: (0–100): _____

What you plan to do at your next interaction, and how you might improve your practice:

As you interact with others, try to be aware of assumptions that you carry with you from your past, and your habits of thought that come with you into the present. Your assumptions may or may not reflect reality or truth, so simply practice being aware of what you are thinking.

The DEAR MAN GIVE FAST Mnemonic

Interpersonal effectiveness training has three major goals:

1. Objectives effectiveness: getting what you want
2. Relationship effectiveness: getting and keeping relationships
3. Self-respect effectiveness: how to feel good about yourself

In her skills training manual (1993b), Marsha Linehan offers a mnemonic device to remind people of the skills that address these three areas: DEAR MAN GIVE FAST. The first part, D-E-A-R M-A-N, lists factors involved in getting what you want. The second, G-I-V-E, focuses on the relationship. The third, F-A-S-T, deals with your self-respect.

DEAR MAN: Getting What I Want

We all need to communicate with others about what we want out of situations. Being emotionally connected to the environment means asking for things we need from friends, family, teachers, and employers. Sometimes you may not get what you want because very strong emotions get in the way; sometimes the environment doesn't respond to your best efforts. Even the most skillful people don't get what they want all the time, and there is a skill in accepting no in situations where you don't get what you want.

To work at getting what you want, use D-E-A-R M-A-N, which stands for the following:

Describe. Say words to the other person, describing what you want, and saying it as clearly as possible so that they know what you want. Be precise and descriptive, leaving no question in the other person's mind what it is that you want.

Express. Don't be afraid to be expressive. You're working at controlling your emotions, not being unemotional. Use facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice that are appropriate to the content and importance of your request. Can you recall dull teachers or professors who spoke in a monotone and were unexpressive? Now compare them to those who waved their hands around a bit, and you'll think of reasons to be expressive. You want to make an impression on your own behalf.

Assert. Be assertive and matter-of-fact. Don't be aggressive or passive aggressive about your request, and don't threaten the other person or blow your stack.

Reinforce. Make sure that the other person knows why they should give you what you are asking for. If appropriate, tell them the positive outcomes for you, for them, and for your relationship. Use statements like, "It would mean the world to me if you . . ." or "I would be deeply grateful if you give me what I want," or (in extreme cases) "I'll wash your car for a month if you do this." Try to make the other person feel good about granting your request. But don't offer the other person something that you can't deliver. Be realistic and genuine.

Stay Mindful. Stay on track with your request. Keep your eye on the prize, and don't let distractions, worry thoughts, or the other person throw you off. If they attack you for making your request, ignore the attacks and keep pressing for what you want. If you let yourself get caught up in personal attacks or insults you'll be more vulnerable to overreacting. And if you engage in highly ineffective behaviors, that may sabotage the whole discussion or give the other person the excuse of not wanting to deal with an out-of-control "crazy person." Don't retaliate. Instead, practice opposite action, breathing, and radical acceptance.

Appear confident. Stand up straight and make good eye contact when making your request. Don't stammer or back off. Think of yourself as a confident and competent businessperson closing a sale, or as a successful negotiator. People will take you more seriously if you at least appear to take yourself seriously. Tie this in with your practice of self-validation, because your needs and wants are valid.

Negotiate. Without compromising your values, consider accepting a middle-ground solution that may be "good enough." Try to respect the other person's limits. Skillful negotiating may help you to get more of what you want in the future because you are able to demonstrate a respect for the limits of others, and you come across as reasonable, which can be an engaging quality that affords you future influence.

GIVE: Focusing on the Relationship

The G-I-V-E part of the mnemonic helps to strengthen the connection between you and the other person.

(Be) Gentle. Be gentle with the other person. Sometimes when emotions run high and feelings get hurt, people can turn nasty. This will only drive a wedge deeper between the two of you. Being gentle can change the whole tone of the interaction.

(Act) Interested. Truly listen to the other person, so they sense that you care about their perspective. Not only will you really get their position, but you'll get a more engaged and willing participant for the discussion.

Validate. Acknowledge what the other person expresses or demonstrates about their perspective, including their emotional experiences. You can do this by using statements such as, "I see that you are angry. I hear you saying that you're disappointed in my behavior."

(Use an) Easy manner. Be mellow and relaxed. Let go of tension, anger, rage, and your judgments. As Linehan writes, this is the difference between the "soft sell" and the "hard sell" (1993b, 82). She suggests wheedling and schmoozing with others, including the use of humor, smiling, and soothing. This is much nicer and much more effective than being pushy or verbally aggressive.

FAST: Focusing on Your Self-Respect

Finally, bring your F-A-S-T skills to bear.

(Be) Fair. You have to give some to get some. Scratch others' backs as much as they scratch yours. You may damage your self-respect if you don't reciprocate. Others will notice how fair you are with them, so pay attention to this. When you're trying to solve problems, try to be fair to yourself and the other person.

(No) Apologies. Apologize when you are wrong, of course, but don't be overly apologetic. Don't apologize for taking up the other person's air, and try not to come across as pathetic and whiny. Nobody wants to hang out with whiny people. It could also damage your self-respect, because being overly apologetic can reinforce self-invalidation and old judgments about yourself, your effectiveness, and your worth as a person.

Stick to values. When appropriate, express your opinions on political, religious, and psychological issues. Don't keep quiet just to avoid being judged or sounding dumb. Let others know where you're coming from and don't change your mind on moral or value issues without a very good reason. Be careful not to confuse flexibility with a lack of integrity. You can hold opinions different from others and still respect and be respected in a spirit of true tolerance.

(Be) Truthful. Act according to your true level of skillfulness. Tell others what you need or want. If you distort the truth—by telling a white lie to spare someone's feelings, for example—make sure you know that you're doing it and do it mindfully and not reactively.

IPE Worksheet

Commit to one week of practice with these skills. But don't wait for major negotiations to use them. Try them out in small interpersonal transactions. Get friends or acquaintances to role-play with you. A little rehearsal will help you be better prepared to use the IPE skills when you need them in truly tough situations. Use the following worksheet to guide you in your practice.

On the days that you practice any of your IPE skills circle the skills in the corresponding column(s). In the last column rate the effectiveness of your skills practice (0 = no effectiveness, 1 = minimal effectiveness, 2 = mildly effective, 3 = moderately effective, 4 = very effective, 5 = extremely effective).

IPE Practice Diary (Example)				
DAY	OBJECTIVES	RELATIONSHIP	SELF-RESPECT	EFFECTIVENESS (0-5)
Mon	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	2
Tue	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	4
Wed	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	0
Thu	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	2
Fri	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	5
Sat	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	4
Sun	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	2
NOTES: Need more practice on self-respect effectiveness				
Effectiveness rating: (0 = no effectiveness, 1 = minimal effectiveness, 2 = mildly effective, 3 = moderately effective, 4 = very effective, 5 = extremely effective)				

IPE Practice Diary				
DAY	OBJECTIVES	RELATIONSHIP	SELF-RESPECT	EFFECTIVENESS (0-5)
Mon	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
Tue	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
Wed	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
Thu	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
Fri	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
Sat	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
Sun	DEAR MAN	GIVE	FAST	
NOTES:				
<p>Effectiveness rating: (0 = no effectiveness, 1 = minimal effectiveness, 2 = mildly effective, 3 = moderately effective, 4 = very effective, 5 = extremely effective)</p>				

Evaluating Your IPE Practice

Now that you have practiced these IPE skills for a week, practice them over and over until they're second nature. Use the following questions to review your experience, noting what works, and what you might need to tweak to enhance your practice.

Which set of IPE skills do you find the most natural to you? _____

Which set of IPE skills do you find the most difficult to practice? _____

Describe situations in which you practiced your skills: _____

Describe any rehearsals you practiced with friends: _____

Describe emotions that you experienced as you practiced these skills: _____

Describe any obstacles to your practice of IPE skills and what you can do to remove them:

Describe your plans to continue to practice your IPE skills, including situations in which you can use them (work, school, home, coffee shop): _____
