

Dialectics 3: Exercises

CORE CONCEPT: Practice these exercises to be more dialectical in your life.

The following exercises can bring about dialectical balance and assist you in seeing options in your life. Remember that in dialectics we can see both sides: Experiencing a difficult problem or crisis does not mean that we are hopelessly stuck, and seeing another side of the problem or crisis does not invalidate how serious or painful it is to you. Remember to validate yourself and look across the dialectic.

Dialectical exercise 1: What is going right?

Often we focus on what is wrong and neglect the other side of the dialectic. Asking what is going right, well, or in your direction, however small, helps to bring another perspective and balance.

EXAMPLES:

- Someone does poorly on a test but also has an opportunity to use a tutor or complete an assignment to gain extra credit, or may be doing well in another subject or area.
- A significant problem occurs at work but you have the knowledge and/or support to address it effectively.
- Your child has a disability but shows resiliency and a positive attitude.

If you feel down, what is going right, well, or in your direction?

Dialectical exercise 2: What are your resources?

We often think of our limitations and overlook the resources that will help us reach our goals.

EXAMPLES:

- You are out of shape but have running shoes, exercise equipment, a gym membership, or a safe place to walk.
- You experience depression but have a therapist, self-help books, and DBT skills to practice.
- A person cannot currently get ahead in his or her current job but has access to classes to advance his or her career or has in-demand job skills and can look for new employment.

With any particular problem, what are your resources?

Dialectical exercise 3: Is there a silver lining?

Few things in the world are all good or all bad. When a painful situation occurs, consider whether there is a silver lining. Sometimes problems and even tragedies reveal opportunities.

EXAMPLES:

- A person is served divorce papers and now has the opportunity to reinvest in hobbies and other interests given up during the marriage or has the opportunity to find a more suitable mate in time.
- You lose your house in foreclosure and find relief in not struggling to make a high mortgage payment every month.
- You change schools but have the chance to have a fresh start and make new friends.

Pick a current problem you are experiencing. What is the silver lining?

Dialectical exercise 4: The dialectics of control

Some people have more of an external locus of control. They think that things happen to them, they frequently blame others, and they miss opportunities to make effective changes that are actually under their control. Other people have more of an internal locus of control and believe that they have influence over their environment and can take charge of their choices and lives.

EXAMPLES:

- One person believes he will fail a test no matter how hard he studies whereas another person believes that her preparation will make a significant difference in the outcome.
- One person thinks she cannot ever be happy and does little to try to improve her life whereas another person invests himself in creating a happy life.
- You blame others for the problems in your life instead of taking responsibility for your choices and behavior.

Think about a problem you have. Where is your locus of control and would you be more effective if you shifted it?

Dialectical exercise 5: All or something!

Often we get in all-or-nothing places in regard to change. All or something means that, if you cannot totally throw yourself into the change process, at least do something that moves you closer to a goal. Some movement is preferable to no movement!

EXAMPLES:

- A person who wants a healthier lifestyle overhauls his diet and starts exercising every day.
- You are overwhelmed by a dirty and disorganized home so you clean one part of one room.

- One person fills out and practices a skills plan to solve a problem while another person starts reading and thinking about skills to practice someday.

Think about a problem you have. How can you throw yourself totally into change or at least do something toward the change?

Dialectical exercise 6: Compassion for others

We can often be harsh in our assessments of others, holding them to high standards and being judgmental. Sometimes compassion is a better route for both others and ourselves. Note that being compassionate does not mean that people automatically get a “pass” for ineffective behavior. We can be both compassionate and accountable, which is dialectic.

EXAMPLES:

- You get cut off in traffic. Rather than getting angry, you think that the offending driver may be having a bad or stressful day.
- Your child is having a tantrum and you remember that being a toddler is no walk in the park.
- A person’s boss is critical of her employees. That person recognizes that the boss is overwhelmed by too much responsibility and wants the business to do well.

Think about a person with whom you are struggling. How can you be compassionate toward this person?

Dialectical exercise 7: Movement through scaling techniques

Sometimes it is difficult to imagine big changes happening in your life. When you struggle with thinking about large changes, you can conceptualize smaller changes using scaling techniques. Start by listing the severity of your problem from 10 (extreme problem) to 0 (no problem). After you have rated your problem, consider what you would be doing differently in terms of behavior if the problem improved by one or more points. Then commit yourself to your new behavior(s) to create the incremental change.

EXAMPLES:

- An overweight person rates his problem as an 8. He concludes that when his problem is at a 6 he will be going to his local health club at least three times a week. He commits to going to the club.
- You are depressed and rate your depression’s severity at a 10. You think that at a 9 you will be actively sharing and talking in your program group. You start to talk more in program.
- A parent has a child with behavior problems rated at a 7. The parent says that when the problems are below a 5 she will be having more fun with her child. The parent starts engaging in more playtime with her child.

Think about a problem you have and rate it from 10 to 0. What behavior(s) will you be doing when the problem improves by two points? Remember to do what you identify!