

# The Dialectics of Emotion Regulation in Complex Trauma

Teaching people how to  
regulate their emotions the  
DBT Way

Dr Christine Dunkley

Consultant DBT Trainer



# Traumatic Events versus Traumatic Living Conditions

People who have repeated or enduring criticism or neglect can experience similar sequelae to those with physical and sexual trauma histories.



# Intentional versus Unintended Traumatisation

Neurodivergent people in a neuro-typical world can experience chronic traumatization without anyone intending it that way

*Ritschel, L. (2025). Using DBT PE with Autistic Individuals. Webinar recording, DBT PE.*

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The addition of a PTSD diagnosis does not impede progress in DBT

But the type of traumatic experience **did** affect the speed of recovery.

Higher severity of sexual and emotional abuse in childhood was associated with quicker reductions in symptom severity and higher levels of physical abuse with slower reductions.

Christensen, K.E., McMain, S., Chapman, A. & Kuo, J.R., 2025. *An examination of the role of PTSD and childhood trauma on treatment outcomes for individuals with borderline personality disorder in dialectical behavior therapy*. *Borderline Personality Disorder and Emotion Dysregulation*, 12, 47. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40479-025-00322-2>





## Pursuing Emotion versus Pushing Emotions Away

Dopamine addiction versus behaviours that numb or change emotions like self-harm, disordered eating, substance misuse, suicidal behaviour

Zhu, W., Zhang, Y., Lan, Y. & Song, X., 2025. Smartphone dependence and its influence on physical and mental health. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16, 1281841. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1281841>

# To regain control Start with the present moment...

Emotion Regulation is the ability to **increase or decrease** an emotion under your conscious control, until the amount is just enough to be effective in the *current* context



# Problem solving is the primary regulation strategy for any emotion



This means solving the problem that set the emotion off



If you lose the 'glue' between an emotion and the problem that caused it, you are modelling to the client that emotions only exist to make us miserable

We all have this skill to a degree. Imagine I grow prize roses...



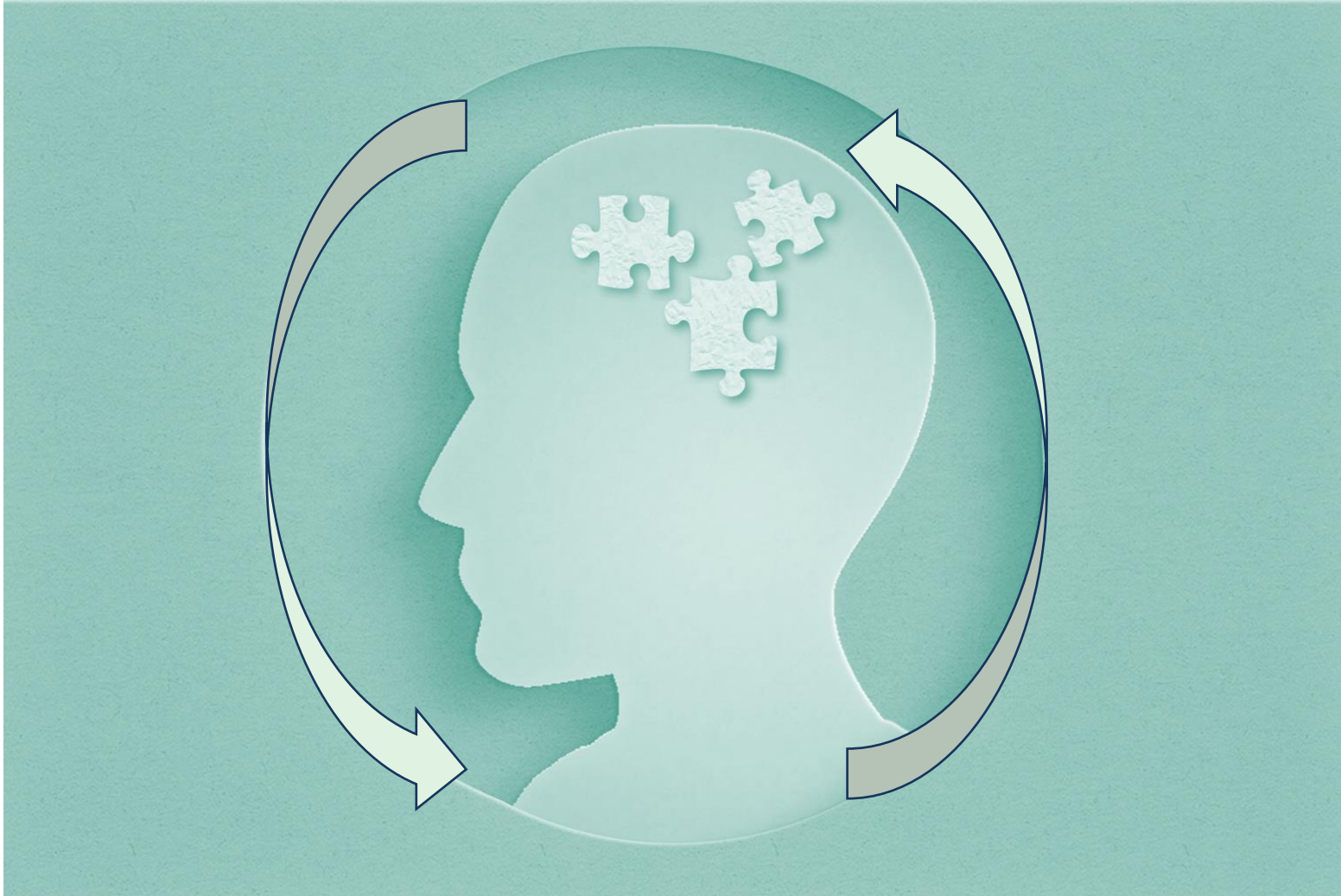
# Signature Features of Emotions



- Temperature
- Breathing
- Muscle tone
- Facial expression
- Posture
- Gesture
- Voice tone
- Actions in the environment.

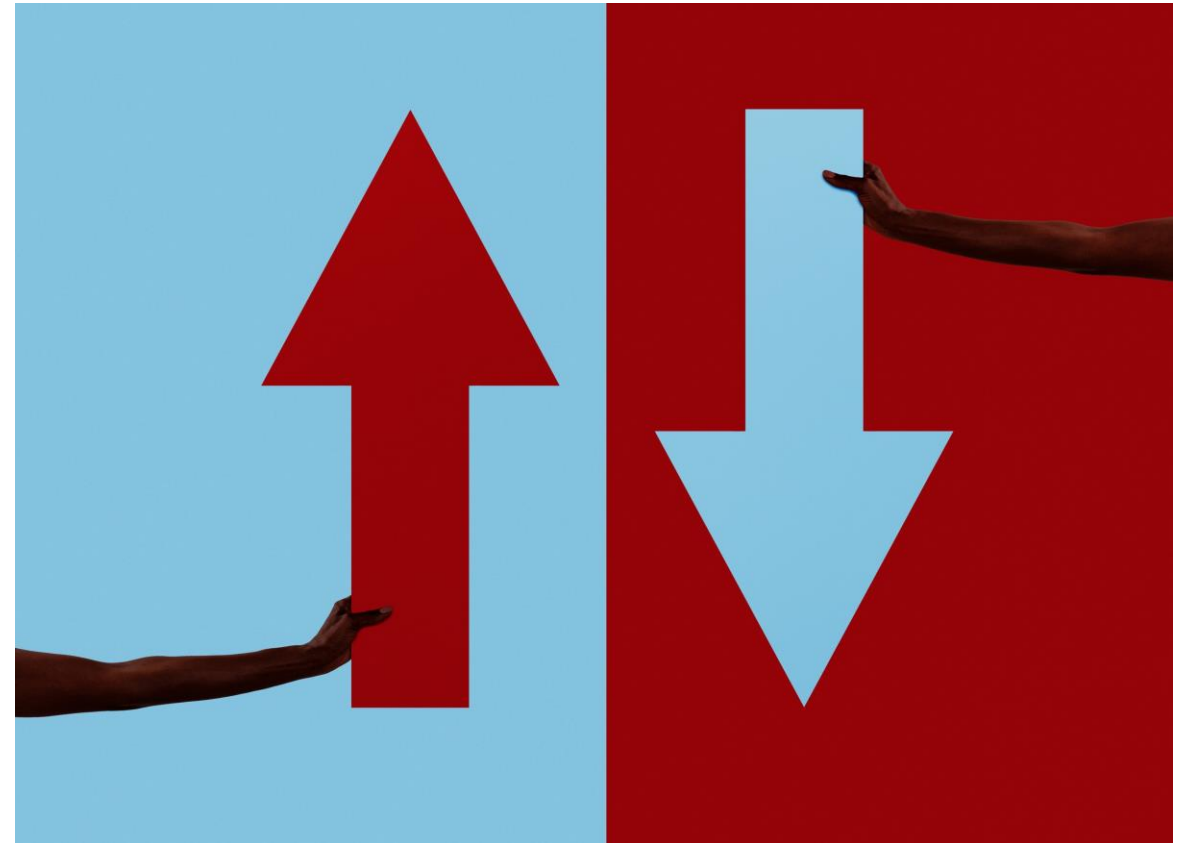
Every emotion is unique within its particular context. It is constructed afresh on every occasion.

We are working with the bi-directional processes between brain and body



THE INTENSITY OF AN EMOTION  
CAN BE UNDERSTANDABLE  
AND YET TOO BIG TO BE  
EFFECTIVE

WE LEARN TO DOWN REGULATE  
THE EXCESS THROUGH  
THE SKILL OF OPPOSITE ACTION



## Opposite Action for Anger

Emotion signature



Opposite action

Temp: Hot>

Cool down

Posture: squared up, chin>

Sit back or lie down, lower head

jutting, fists clenched>

Unclench fists

Gesture: finger jabbing>

Hands down

Jaws clenched>

Loosen jaw, allow tongue to float

Breath: jagged>

Breathe out (like balloon-blowing)

Muscles: tense>

Relax muscles

Eyes: narrowed>

Widen gently

Mouth: lips pursed>

Relax, open mouth

Voice: shouting, snarling >

Soften tone

Action: attack >

Gently avoid or be kind

# Opposite Action for Sadness

Emotion signature



Opposite action

Temp cold >

Warm up the body

Breath long uneven sighs >

Shorter even breaths

Muscle tone floppy >

Firm up muscle tone

Eyes hooded >

Widen eyes

Mouth downturned >

Flatten mouth

Posture loose >

Sit or stand upright

Voice tone outer range H/L>

Bring vocals into mid range

Action a) withdraw >

Mix with others

Action b) seek, pine for >

Block clinging actions

# THANK YOU

- Dr Christine Dunkley
- Regulating Emotion the DBT Way; Routledge 2020
- [Christine\\_Dunkley@hotmail.com](mailto:Christine_Dunkley@hotmail.com)
- Dr Christine Dunkley on LinkedIn for top tips
- British Isles DBT Training [www.dbt-training.co.uk](http://www.dbt-training.co.uk)