Beginning DBT – First Sessions Checklist

Start first session
• “What brought you to this program?”
• “Describe for me the life that in your heart of hearts you long for?”
• “What is the main thing that gets in the way these days of getting that life?”
• “Good news – you’re in the right place because that’s exactly what we do. EXCEPT…. It’s much harder than you think (commitment strengthening)”

By the end of first session
• Get basic info on self-harm/suicide behavior, including eliciting circumstances
• Commitment to no self-harm
• Refraining from self-harm, consequences to self-harm (24 hour rule)
• Commitment to attend appointments
• Attending all sessions (4 miss rule)
  o Make next 4 appointments so it’s clear if there are 4 misses
• Being videotaped or audiotaped

Tasks in early sessions: Review guidelines and obtain commitments for:
• Targeting self-harm and therapy-interfering behavior as primary targets each session (treatment hierarchy)
• Decreasing therapy-interfering behavior
• Review client agreements
• Review therapist agreements
• Solving problems productively and rationally- building a life worth living
• Getting and accepting skills coaching (phone numbers and use)
• Targeting normative/productive behavior
• Create a diary card to be completed each week
• Using specific skills when dysregulated and self-harm risk increases
  o Create crisis plan and review distress tolerance skills

Other tasks early in session
• Review BPD diagnosis (if applicable) and orient to bio-social theory of BPD
  o Increased sensitivity, increased reactivity, slow return to baseline
  o Invalidating environment
    ▪ Invalidate private experience
    ▪ Displays of emotion ignored or punished, but sometimes help is provided (intermittent reinforcement)
    ▪ Oversimplification
  o Biological predisposition to emotions, life complicated by emotional arousal, environment increases negative arousal, environment doesn’t help deal with emotional arousal = pervasive emotion dysregulation
• Orient to nature of DBT and link biosocial theory of BPD to DBT
• Behavioral chain analysis of major targets in each priority area
  o Vulnerability factors
  o Prompting event
  o Links: emotions, thoughts, physical sensations, urges, actions, events
  o Problem behavior
  o Short- and long-term consequences (what maintains it/what’s reinforcing the behavior, what is the harm/motivation to change)

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