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A TRAUMA-INFORMED WORKBOOK



TREATING TRAUMA WITH DBT

USING DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY
TO HEAL EMOTIONAL WOUNDS AND
RECLAIM YOUR LIFE

Companion Worksheets

My Personal Trauma Map

Instructions: In the boxes below, list experiences or situations that shaped your trauma responses. This is not a full trauma narrative—just an honest, gentle snapshot of what’s impacted you.

Area of Life	Trauma or Difficult Experience	Lasting Impact
Relationships		
Body or Health		
Emotions or Mood		
Self-worth/Identity		
Spirituality or Beliefs		

Reflection: *What stands out to you when you look at this chart?
Where do you want to start healing first?*

DBT and Me – My Growth Inventory

Instructions: Check the statements that feel true for you today, then choose 2–3 that you want to grow into.

- I am open to learning new ways of responding to my emotions.
- I can identify moments when I've been reactive or overwhelmed.
- I want to better understand my trauma responses.
- I am ready to make changes that support my mental and emotional safety.
- I am willing to be patient with myself.
- I can commit to practicing skills, even when it's hard.
- I want to build a life that reflects my values.

Trauma Self-Awareness Inventory

This worksheet is designed to help you identify signs of trauma-related symptoms. Check all that apply to your experience, and share with your therapist if you choose.

Cognitive & Emotional

- I have intrusive memories or flashbacks.
- I avoid thinking or talking about certain memories.
- I often feel emotionally numb or disconnected.
- I blame myself for things that were out of my control.
- I struggle to remember parts of my childhood or certain events.
- I feel worthless, “too much,” or unlovable.
- I frequently feel angry, ashamed, or helpless.

Somatic & Nervous System

- I feel “on edge” or constantly alert.
- I’m easily startled or overwhelmed.
- I struggle with sleep—falling asleep, staying asleep, or frequent nightmares.
- I have chronic muscle tension, stomach issues, or headaches.
- I often feel frozen, paralyzed, or dissociated from my body.
- My breathing changes when I’m triggered or overwhelmed.

Behavioral & Relational

- I withdraw or isolate, especially when I’m upset.
- I tend to people-please or take care of others while ignoring my own needs.
- I replay or reenact painful patterns in relationships.
- I distrust people—even those who’ve never hurt me.
- I struggle to ask for help or be vulnerable.
- I engage in impulsive or self-destructive behaviors when overwhelmed.

If you circled several items above, this does not mean something is “wrong” with you. It means your nervous system is doing what it was trained to do: survive. Healing involves teaching your system that it is now safe to thrive.

Understanding My Trauma Patterns

You can complete this alone, with a therapist, or return to it over time. Use it as a mirror—not to criticize yourself, but to understand what your nervous system has been trying to protect.

When I'm Triggered...

Check any that apply to you:

- I feel like I'm in danger, even when I'm not.
- I get overwhelmed by emotion and can't think straight.
- I suddenly feel numb or like I'm not in my body.
- I act out impulsively (yelling, self-harm, drinking, isolating).
- I over-function—taking care of others, getting “perfect,” trying to fix everything.
- I feel a sudden urge to run, hide, or shut down.
- I become confused, disoriented, or dissociative.
- I freeze—can't speak, move, or ask for help.

*What do these responses have in common? They are all signs of a **nervous system trying to survive**. Let's honor them—and then learn how to gently shift them.*

The Cost of Survival

Complete the following statements honestly:

One survival strategy that helped me in the past:

How that strategy protected me:

How that same strategy hurts me now:

A new way I'd like to respond when I feel triggered or unsafe:

Internal Beliefs Check-In

Circle or write the beliefs you've carried—then reframe them gently with truth and compassion:

Old Belief	Where It Came From	New, Compassionate Belief
"I am too much."	Emotionally distant caregiver	"My emotions are valid and deserve space."
"I can't trust anyone."	Betrayal in relationships	"I am learning how to trust slowly and wisely."
"It's always my fault."	Blamed in childhood	"I can be responsible for my actions—not everyone else's."

My Soothing Practices Menu

Grounding and nervous system regulation is essential to healing trauma. Fill out your personalized menu using your five senses:

Sense	Soothing Activity
Sight	
Sound	
Smell	
Taste	
Touch	

The Unstable Five Self-Check

Use this simple chart to assess how BPD symptoms show up for you today.

Area of Instability	How It Shows Up in My Life	What I Want to Change	Skill I Could Use
Emotions			
Behaviors			
Thought Patterns			
Relationships			
Sense of Self			

The Unstable Five Self-Assessment

The following five areas—**Emotions, Behaviors, Thought Patterns, Relationships, and Sense of Self**—are what we call *The Unstable Five* in Borderline Personality Disorder. These domains are deeply interconnected and commonly impacted by trauma. When one is dysregulated, it can pull the others into chaos as well.

This worksheet is your space to pause, reflect, and *understand* how each of these areas shows up in your life—and begin naming what you want to change. Take your time. There is no rush. No judgment. Just curiosity.

1. Emotions: The Storm Within

Emotional intensity is often the first sign something deeper is going on. It's not that you "feel too much"—it's that your nervous system is wired to respond fast and powerfully. That's not weakness. That's sensitivity. The goal here is not to get rid of your emotions, but to learn to regulate them without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down.

Reflect:

- What emotions do you experience most often?
- Do your emotions come on suddenly and feel hard to control?
- Do you suppress feelings until they explode, or express them impulsively and later regret it?
- Which emotions scare you the most?
- What helps you calm down, and what makes things worse?

Write:

How emotions show up in my life

What I want to change about how I respond to emotions

DBT skills I could use: (e.g., *Observe & Describe, Opposite Action, Check the Facts*)

The Unstable Five Self-Assessment (cont.)

2. Behaviors: Acting on the Pain

When we don't have tools to manage distress, we reach for whatever numbs, distracts, or gets us seen. These "target behaviors" serve a function—even when they cause harm. That's why DBT focuses on replacing destructive behaviors with skills that meet the same need in healthier ways.

Reflect:

- When I'm in pain, what do I tend to do?
- What behaviors bring me relief—but also shame or regret?
- What is the function of those behaviors? (e.g., avoid emotion, seek comfort, express pain)
- Have I scared myself or others with my actions?
- What am I hoping someone will *see* or *do* when I act this way?

Write:

Behaviors I struggle with

What these behaviors are trying to solve or communicate

Healthier alternatives I'd like to try

The Unstable Five Self-Assessment (cont.)

3. Thought Patterns: The Inner Critic and Cognitive Traps

People with BPD often experience racing thoughts, self-invalidation, and black-and-white thinking. When your emotions shift, your thoughts often shift with them. That means your reality can feel unstable—even to you. Learning to recognize and restructure these patterns is essential for emotional freedom.

Reflect:

- Do I see people (including myself) as all good or all bad?
- Do I often assume the worst—without checking the facts?
- What rigid “rules” or beliefs do I hold that limit me?
- What does my inner voice sound like—critical or compassionate?
- Have I ever felt disconnected from my thoughts or surroundings?

Write:

Thought traps I notice in myself (e.g., catastrophizing, mind-reading)

What these thoughts lead me to feel or do

DBT tools I could try: (e.g., “Both/And” thinking, Thought Defusion, Mindfulness of Thoughts)

The Unstable Five Self-Assessment (cont.)

4. Relationships: The Push-Pull Cycle

Relationships can feel like lifelines—and threats. You may crave closeness but fear abandonment. You might idealize people, then suddenly devalue them. Or struggle to hold onto a sense of connection when someone is emotionally or physically distant. Sound familiar? This section is about increasing awareness, not self-blame.

Reflect:

- How do I react when I feel rejected or disconnected?
- Do I test people, push them away, or chase them when they pull back?
- What are my fears about being vulnerable or asking for help?
- How do I respond to “no” in relationships?
- Do I feel like people will leave if I’m not perfect?

Write:

Patterns I notice in my relationships

My biggest fear in relationships is

Skills I want to build (e.g., Assertiveness, Validation, Radical Acceptance)

The Unstable Five Self-Assessment (cont.)

5. Sense of Self: Knowing Who You Are

Do you ever feel like a chameleon—constantly changing to fit in, to please others, or just to survive? If you have BPD or a trauma history, it's common to feel unsure of who you are, what you like, or where you're going. This instability can be disorienting, but it is not permanent.

Reflect:

- When do I feel most like myself?
- Do I shape-shift depending on who I'm around?
- Do I struggle to name my values, preferences, or goals?
- What gives me a sense of meaning or purpose?
- When did I first start to feel disconnected from who I am?

Write:

Right now, I describe myself as

What I want to feel more connected to in myself

Ways I can begin rebuilding my identity with intention

Self-Assessment Tools for BPD

Instructions: For each of the five domains below, you'll find a checklist of statements that describe common BPD-related experiences. Check each statement that feels true for you and rate the intensity of how much each one applies to you using this scale:

Scale	Description
0	Not at all
1	Minimal
2	Mild
3	Moderate
4	Strong
5	Intense or very frequent

At the end of each section, reflect on your totals and write in the journaling space provided. This insight will help you tailor the DBT tools in this workbook to your specific needs.

1. Emotional Dysregulation Assessment

How well do you manage your emotions?

Rate (0–5):

- I generally feel irritable. I frequently feel anxious. I often want to hide or isolate. I'm emotionally reactive to small things.
- I hate my emotions or feel ashamed of them. My emotions feel extreme or too intense. I frequently become enraged. I try to suppress or numb my emotions. I get emotionally overwhelmed quickly. I often feel ashamed of who I am. I feel I have little or no control over how I feel. I tend to worry constantly.
- My moods swing quickly or unpredictably. I rarely feel lighthearted, joyful, or calm.

Total checked: _____ **Total rated 3 or higher:** _____

Journal Prompt:

What emotions are the most difficult for you to experience or express? What would emotional balance look like for you?

Self-Assessment Tools for BPD

2. Behavioral Dysregulation Assessment

How do you cope with emotional pain?

Rate (0–5):

- I do impulsive things that I later regret.
- I binge eat or restrict food to manage emotion.
- I shop or spend money impulsively.
- I often feel out of control of my behavior.
- Others have commented that my behavior is “crazy” or concerning.
- I have self-harmed or injured myself.
- I’ve had episodes of binge drinking or drug use.
- I’ve threatened suicide in moments of distress.
- I’ve driven recklessly or while intoxicated.
- I’ve had unprotected or risky sex in the past year.
- I’ve overdosed or attempted to end my life.
- I’ve abused prescribed medication.
- I’ve gotten into physical fights.
- I use substances or behaviors to feel “normal.”

Total checked: _____ **Total rated 3 or higher:** _____

Journal Prompt:

What do your behaviors help you avoid or express? What behaviors do you most want to change, and why?

Self-Assessment Tools for BPD

3. Relationship Instability Assessment

What are your patterns in relationships?

Rate (0–5):

- I don't believe I am lovable.
- I feel no one understands me or my pain.
- My relationships start intense and fall apart quickly.
- I get emotionally attached very early in relationships.
- I try to be who others want me to be.
- If someone cancels or pulls away, I assume they hate me.
- I fall in love quickly and intensely.
- I often end relationships before I can be rejected.
- Making friends is difficult or feels unsafe.
- I can idealize someone and then suddenly hate them.
- I feel misunderstood or disappointing to others.
- I've been told I'm too clingy or intense.
- My relationships are chaotic or dramatic.
- People seem afraid of or avoid me.
- Others don't take me seriously or treat me with respect.

Total checked: _____ **Total rated 3 or higher:** _____

Journal Prompt:

What is one relationship you'd like to improve? What fears, beliefs, or behaviors keep getting in your way?

Self-Assessment Tools for BPD

4. Cognitive Dysregulation Assessment

What does your inner world sound like?

Rate (0–5):

- I think people are either good or bad—there’s no in-between.
- I don’t believe I can solve my problems.
- I dissociate or feel “out of body” often.
- I view myself in very negative, harsh ways.
- When I’m in conflict, I can’t see the other person’s perspective.
- I tend to think in black-and-white or all-or-nothing terms.
- When I’m overwhelmed, I isolate to think clearly.
- I’ve made threats to hurt myself when under stress.
- I suspect others are secretly against me.
- I have intrusive thoughts about hurting myself.
- I forget basic things but obsess over painful memories.
- I frequently think about death or dying.
- I’ve fired therapists or professionals after one mistake.
- I believe people should always treat me fairly.
- If people don’t meet my needs, I believe they’re bad people.
- I often feel hopeless about life or the future.

Total checked: _____ **Total rated 3 or higher:** _____

Journal Prompt:

Which of these thought patterns feel hardest to change? What do you want your inner voice to sound like instead?

Self-Assessment Tools for BPD

5. Sense of Self Instability Assessment

How well do you know and trust yourself?

Rate (0–5):

- I often sacrifice my own needs to please others.
- I frequently change jobs, interests, or values.
- I feel chronically empty or hollow inside.
- I mimic others' style, preferences, or personality.
- I rely on others to tell me how I'm doing.
- I try to be who others want me to be.
- I feel disconnected from the world around me.
- I rarely know what I want or feel.
- I often feel emotionally numb or blank.
- I am highly influenced by others' opinions of me.
- I often complete tasks without remembering them.
- I live in a "dreamlike fog" much of the time.
- I don't know what I want for my future.
- I've been in multiple physical altercations.
- My identity (style, work, passions) feels inconsistent or chaotic.

Total checked: _____ **Total rated 3 or higher:** _____

Journal Prompt:

When do you feel most like yourself? What helps you feel grounded, whole, and real?

Challenging Common EMDR Distortions

Trauma can twist our thinking. When memories go unprocessed, they often get wrapped up in distorted beliefs—stories we tell ourselves to make sense of what happened. These beliefs may have helped us survive at the time, but they can become barriers to healing if left unchallenged. In EMDR, these are called *negative cognitions*—deep-rooted beliefs about the self that formed during trauma. One of the powerful outcomes of EMDR is the shift from these distortions to more adaptive, healthy beliefs.

Distorted Belief	Healthy Adaptive Belief
“It was my fault.”	“I did the best I could with what I had.”
“I should have stopped it.”	“I was powerless then, but I have power now.”
“I’m broken.”	“I am wounded, but I am healing.”
“I can’t trust anyone.”	“Some people hurt me, but others are safe.”
“I don’t deserve love.”	“I am worthy of love and respect.”
“I’m weak.”	“I survived. I am strong.”
“It wasn’t that bad—I should just move on.”	“What happened mattered. My pain is valid.”
“I’m always in danger.”	“That was then. This is now. I am safe.”
“If I talk about it, it’ll get worse.”	“Talking helps me process and move forward.”
“No one understands.”	“I’m not alone. Healing is possible with support.”

Emotional Exposure Mapping

Use this chart to start building your own exposure plan:

Journal Prompt: My Avoided Emotion

- What emotion do I avoid the most?
- What situations or thoughts bring it up?
- What do I usually do to escape it?

Rank	Trigger or Situation	Intensity (1–10)	Avoidance Behavior	Coping Skill to Use
1				
2				
3				

Start where you are. Don't rush. But don't wait forever either. Growth happens on the edge of discomfort.

Tiny Acts of Bravery

You don't need a therapist's office to begin exposure work. You can start right now.

Exposure Goal	Tiny Step You Can Take
Feel anger	Say aloud: "I'm mad."
Face shame	Write one truth in your journal
Allow grief	Look at a photo and let the tears come
Feel guilt	Apologize or make a repair
Feel joy	Let yourself laugh without minimizing it

These are radical acts of healing.

Self-Help Exercises to Support the Nervous System

To heal, we must move from **fight/flight** into **rest/digest**. The exercises below help activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which regulates calm, digestion, and healing.

Before You Begin:

Rate your current level of distress on a 0–10 scale. _____

Exercise 1: Deep Breathing

- Inhale deeply through your nose, filling your lungs.
- Hold your breath for 2–3 seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth.
- Continue for 1–2 minutes.

Why it works: Deep belly breathing expands your bronchioles and signals the body that it's safe.

Exercise 2: Body Relaxation Visualization

- Close your eyes and visualize a safe, peaceful place.
- Notice colors, textures, sounds, and smells.
- Let your body relax into the imagery.

Why it works: Imagery activates calming areas of the brain, reducing physical tension.

Exercise 3: Coherent Breathing + Heart Focus

- Breathe in for 5 counts, out for 5 counts.
- Visualize breath flowing through your chest.
- Imagine love or gratitude radiating from your heart.

Why it works: Coherent breathing increases heart rate variability, which enhances emotional regulation and parasympathetic tone.

Exercise 4: Physical Sensation Awareness

- Focus your attention on a body part (e.g., feet, hands, jaw).
- Notice sensations without judgment.
- Breathe into any tension you find.

Why it works: Body awareness fosters connection and disrupts dissociation.

Exercise 5: Yawning

- Intentionally yawn several times in a row.

Why it works: Yawning helps activate parasympathetic functions and releases tension.

Exercise 6: Meditation

- Choose a simple meditation, such as focusing on your breath or repeating a grounding word.
- Start with 2–5 minutes.

Why it works: Meditation builds present-moment awareness and reduces cortisol.

Exercise 7: Positive Focus Practice

- Recall a memory or image that brings feelings of safety, joy, or connection.
- Breathe into that memory and notice sensations in your body.

Why it works: Positive emotions help calm the stress response and increase vagal tone.

Exercise 8: Gentle Lip Stroking

- Lightly stroke the skin just under your nose or upper lip.

Why it works: This stimulates facial nerves connected to the vagus nerve, promoting calm.

Create Your Radical Acceptance Statement

Use this template to begin accepting something you've been fighting.

**“I don't like that _____ happened.
I wish it had been different. But I can't change the past. I accept that _____
_____ is true. I am allowed to feel pain, and I am allowed to move forward anyway.”**

Fill in the blanks. Repeat it out loud. Write it on a notecard and keep it in your crisis kit.

Distress Tolerance Reflection Tracker

Keep a simple log to increase awareness and reinforce skill use.

Date	Trigger/Stress	Skill Used	Distress (Before/After)	Notes
Aug 1	Argument with sister	Self-Soothing (music, blanket)	8 → 4	Helped me stay home instead of driving off

Daily Situations to Practice Emotional Awareness

Use the following guide to notice and label your emotions throughout everyday life. Practice being a mindful observer.

0 = not effective at all.

5 = very effective

Situation	Emotion Felt	Effectiveness (0-5)
During a conversation		
After receiving a text or email		
While driving or commuting		
During a disagreement		
When alone or resting		
While watching TV or scrolling		

Priorities vs. Demands

Create two lists:

My Priorities	My Demands (What Others Expect)
Rest on Sundays	Return texts immediately
Time with family	Pick up every phone call
Finish my degree	Volunteer for extra shifts

Now reflect:

- Where is there alignment?
- Where is there conflict?
- Where do you need to reclaim your time, energy, or voice?

Ask yourself:

- What can I say “no” to this week?
- What can I say “yes” to that supports *me*?
- Who can I ask for help?

Sorting the Valid from the Invalid

On one side of a sheet of paper, list all the messages you've heard in invalidating environments (e.g., "You're too emotional," "It's your fault," "Stop being dramatic").

On the other side, challenge each one with a more compassionate truth.

Invalidating Message	Compassionate Truth
"You're just trying to get attention."	"I deserve support when I'm in pain."
"You're too emotional."	"My emotions are valid and tell me something important."
"You make everything worse."	"I'm doing my best in difficult circumstances."