

# Communication Skills with Difficult Clients

*Removing the struggle,  
Improving the connection*

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# Emotional Dysregulation

- Many of our clients have mood disorders that make their behaviors seem like extreme reactions
- Most are multiply diagnosed with a variety of conditions including:
  - personality disorders
  - ADHD/ODD/Conduct Disorder
  - psychosis
  - cognitive deficits

# Eliminating the Conflict

**Dialectics** Helping clients find true balance in emotion, thoughts, and behavior/choices.

Teaching them, as well as showing them how to live in balance. “Both..*And*”

**Validation** Acknowledging another person’s reality, noting that their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and responses are real, and are valid in their own right. “Yes..*And*”

**Practice, Practice, Practice**

# **“Dialectical” Open-mind thinking**

**Dialectical means that *2 ideas* can both  
be true at the *same time*.**

**All points of view have both TRUE and  
FALSE within them**

- You are right AND the other person is right.
- You are doing the best that you can AND you need to try harder, do better, and be more motivated to change.
- You can take care of yourself AND you need help and support from others.

# Dialectics in Clinical Practice

## I'm incapable

- of following treatment
- of coming to sessions
- of taking medications
- of going on in life

## You're capable

- I've seen you do it before
- if you try harder you can make it
- I can't allow you to kill yourself

# Synthesis="Both and..."

You don't have any resources sometimes, and you feel completely at a loss to help yourself. I mean, where would the energy and ideas come from? Other times you are really strong and you have been a model of coping.

Right now you don't have any resources or hope, so we'll use mine and together we can get you through this for another time, when you CAN manage.

# Being dialectical means:

- Letting go of self-righteous indignation.
- Letting go of “black and white”, “all or nothing” ways of seeing a situation.
- Looking for what is “left out” of your understanding of a situation.
- Finding a way to validate the other person’s point of view.
- Expanding your way of seeing things.
- Getting “unstuck” from standoffs and conflicts.
- Being more flexible and approachable.
- Avoiding assumptions and blaming.

# What is validation?

Finding what is genuinely “true” about another person’s point of view. It means telling someone that what they feel, think, believe, and experience is:

**real**

**logical**

**understandable**

*Ideally:*

**Self-validation** is when you are able to *quietly reassure yourself* that what you feel inside is real, is important, and makes sense.

# *Realistically:*

Emotions, thoughts, and sensations are all experiences that we sometimes doubt in ourselves. We ask ourselves:

DO I really feel this?

SHOULD I feel this way? (Is it the “right” thing to feel, even if it inconveniences someone else?).

# Making it “big” enough for others to recognize...

- Sometimes when we self-*invalidate*, we spend a lot of time and energy trying to prove to others and ourselves that our experience is real, and makes sense. This often results in conflict or crisis.
- In this situation, we may see an individual begin to raise their voice, make extreme statements, and refuse to let a point go, even when it's hurting them to hold on to an issue.

# Going to Extremes

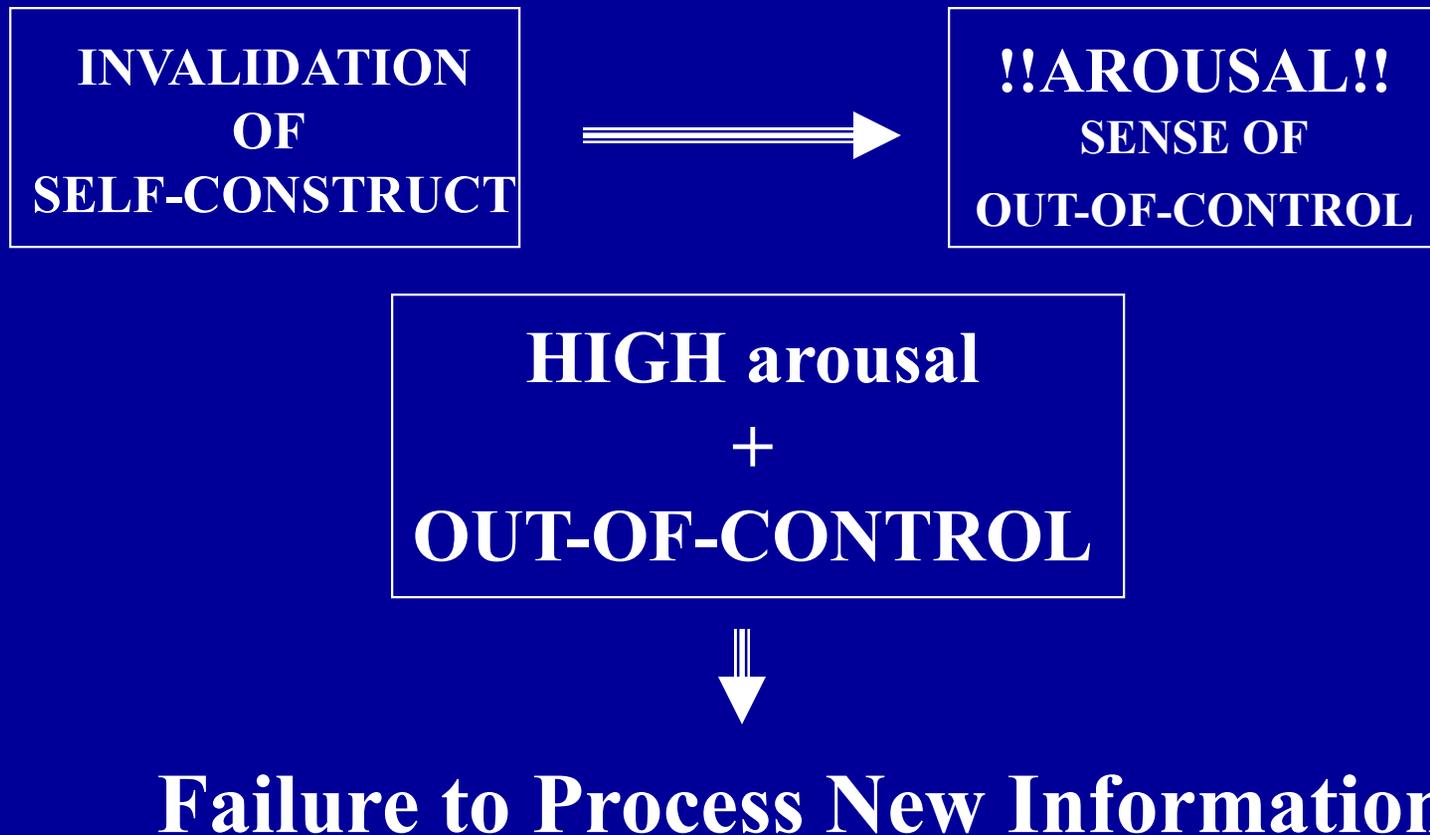
- Progressively raising voice
- Posturing in an aggressive manner
- Blaming and distancing others
- Verbally threatening to strike someone
- Verbally threatening to harm self
- Vague threats or refusal to contract
- Attacking others/harming self

# WHEN to Intervene...

As early in the “cycle” of behavior as possible—requires that you already **KNOW** the cues in both the client **AND** yourself (and possibly in your staff).

# Self-Verification Theory

**Validation = Self-Verification**



# Levels of Validation

1. Staying awake
2. Accurate reflection
2. Stating the unstated
3. Validation in terms of history or biological dysfunction
5. Validation in terms of present context or normative functioning
6. Radical genuineness

# Level 1: Mindful Participation with the Client

Verbal and non-verbal language communicates to the individual “You are the most important thing at this moment”.

Sometimes, this is the most significant respect an individual will have received. This is highly reinforcing, so try to find ways to do it when the individual is doing something “good”.

## Level Two: Accurately Reflecting Words

- A simple way to show “good intent” when you don’t understand yet, or don’t know what to validate.
- A way to show, “I’m still with you here”.
- Most times, this level of validation is not enough to finish the job, but it’s a good filler until you can get there.

## Level Three: Stating the Implicit Message

- Saying out loud what the individual is afraid or ashamed to state.
- Pulling the individual forward in their insight/awareness by stating a truth that is “just beyond” their awareness.
- It’s ok to ask the individual, “Is \_\_\_\_\_ what you’re feeling”? You don’t have to **KNOW** in order to test a hypothesis about what is just under the surface.

## Level Four: Learning and Diagnosis

“Of course you did/felt/believed that, how could it have been any other way?”

“You have been given very few reasons to trust anyone in your life, why would you suddenly trust me!”

“How could you have a diagnosis of depression and NOT feel hopeless about treatment?”

## Level Five: ANYONE would feel this way!

- When you can find a way, use this level of validation—and there's almost always a way.
- Find something to validate in the individual's experience as "normal"
- Don't be tempted to "validate" something that isn't valid!
- Look for something in the individual's experience that you can relate to.

## Level Six: Respecting Someone Enough to Be Yourself...

- Resist any urges to maintain professional distance or an attitude of superiority.
- Engage in a genuine interaction with the individual, as another human being.
- This is probably the most powerful form of validation, and can be part of every interaction that you have with an individual.

# What About When It's Impossible?

- Individual is a surly, venomous, snarling ball of hatred and is assaultive.
- Individual has seriously injured a staff member or a peer.
- Individual argues with every point you make.
- Individual appears to agree, then re-engages in the same behavior, over and over and over.

# Getting past easy explanations...

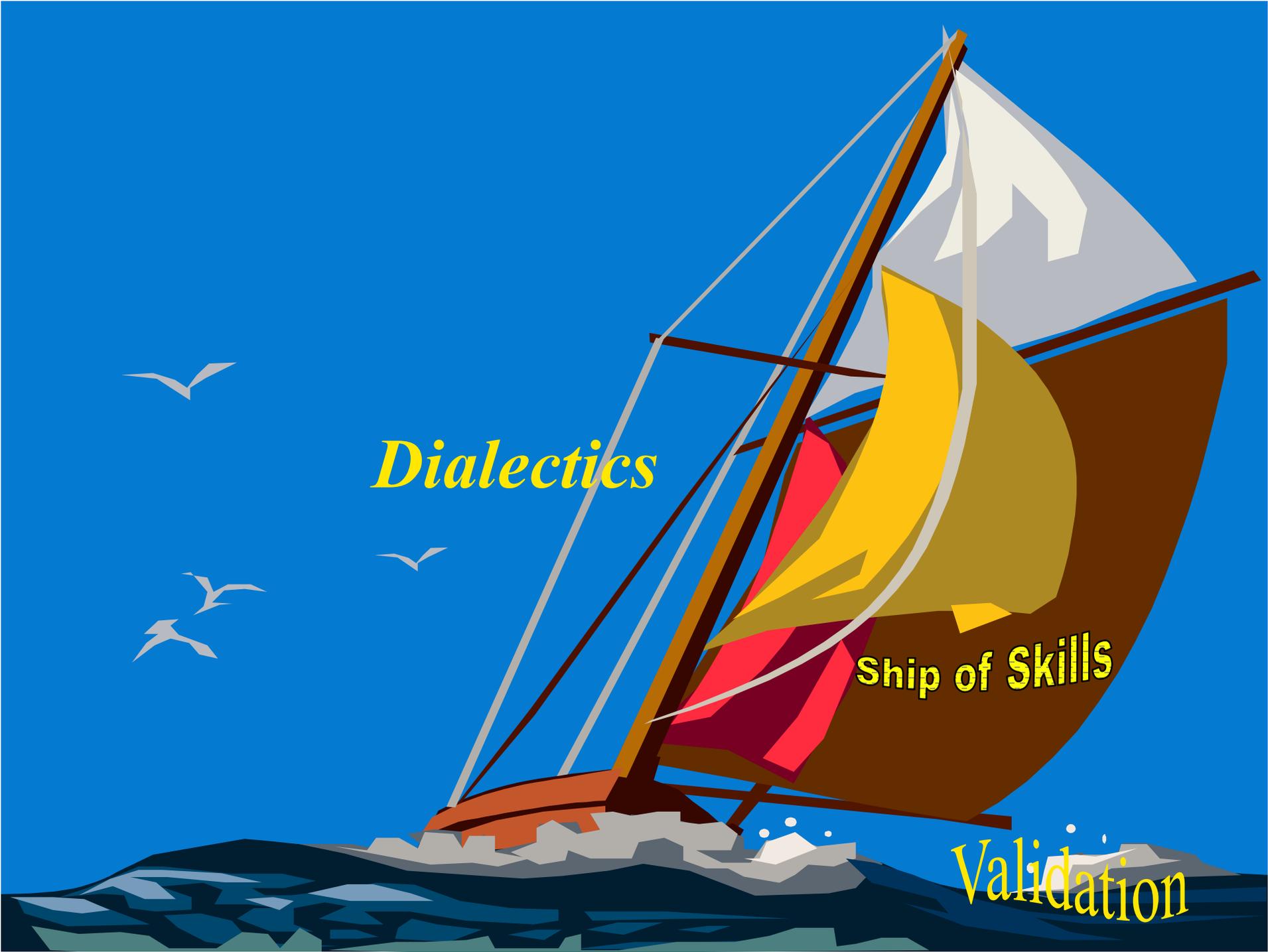
- “Attention seeking”
- “Really knows how to push people’s buttons”
- “Likes crisis-can’t live without it”
- “Doesn’t want to get better”
- “Too lazy to overcome old habits”
- “Afraid of success”

These explanations are born of **frustration**, and contribute to NO USEFUL intervention, no matter how sophisticated the clinical language in which they are cloaked.

It is natural to arrive at such expressions, but not effective. Clients sense these attitudes and become polarized.

# So what do we Validate?!

- The individual's emotional experience
- The individual's cognitive state at the time
- The individual's secret longings (Chief Hope)
  - To belong to someone without question
  - To connect with someone in a real way
  - To be seen as “worthy” by others
  - To be respected by peers
  - To be a person who doesn't feel ashamed of who they are
  - To be understood deeply



*Dialectics*

**Ship of Skills**

**Validation**