Behavior Chain Analysis

DBT Emotion Regulation: Understanding What Led to a Behavior

A behavior chain analysis helps you look closely at a behavior you want to change and everything that led up to it. Psychologist Marsha Linehan made chain analysis a core part of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). You walk through the moment one link at a time, from what left you vulnerable, to what set things off, to the behavior itself. Then you look for the links where you could do something different next time.

1 The behavior and what set it off

Pick one specific time, a recent one if you can. Describe exactly what you did, as if a camera had filmed it.

The problem behavior:

Example: I sent my sister a long, angry text and turned off my phone

Prompting event: what happened right before the chain started?

Example: She canceled our dinner plans by text an hour before

Vulnerability factors: what made me more likely to react this way?

Example: I had slept four hours and skipped lunch

Common vulnerability factors include poor sleep, hunger, illness, pain, alcohol or drugs, and stress from earlier in the day.

2 The links in the chain

List each link between the prompting event and the behavior, in order. A link can be a thought, a feeling, a body sensation, an action, or something that happened around you.

Type of link	What happened
Thought	*She always cancels on me. She does not care.*
Feeling and body	*Hurt, then anger. My face got hot and my hands shook.*

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Consequences

What happened after the behavior, for you and for other people? Many behaviors bring quick relief and cost more later.

Right after	Later on

4 Break the chain next time

Look back over your links and pick the ones where you could have done something different. Write the skill or action you could try instead.

Link I could change	Skill or action I could try instead
When my face got hot	*Put the phone down and walk around the block before answering.*

Why does this work? *A problem behavior can feel like it came out of nowhere. Breaking the moment into small links shows the thoughts, feelings, and events that led there. Each link is a place where a skill could change what happens next.*

How can I lower my vulnerability next time?

Example: Eat lunch, and wait to answer hard messages until I have rested

Repair: what can I do to make things right with others or with myself?

If the behavior you are looking at is self-harm or a suicidal thought or action, work through this sheet with your therapist. If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the US, or call your local emergency number.

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