

## The Four Basic Assumptions from DBT Family Skills Training

### The Four Basic Assumptions

1. **There is no one truth or any absolute truth, but usually two or more truths.**
2. **Everyone is doing the best they can.**
3. **Everyone needs to try harder.**
4. **Interpret situations in the most benign way possible.**

(DBT-Family Skills Training, Perry Hoffman, 1999, 2003)

“Well, you never...”

“If you really cared, then...”

“You are so wrong...”

How many times have we said things that assumed we were right, that we knew what the other person was really feeling, thinking or doing, or when we were utterly convinced that the “worst case scenario” would occur? And what was the result of holding and expressing these negative assumptions?

In my work with families coping with life's difficulties and challenges that can surely test all of us at times, I have found that embracing this set of assumptions can be quite beneficial. These particular “working assumptions for relationships that matter” have provided a useful framework to move loved ones toward more effective relating. Perhaps, these can be useful to you in more effectively engaging friends and family during periods of stressful change. These are guidelines or touchstones for you to experiment with, rather than a list of moral pronouncements or rigid commands. This is offered with the hope that you might benefit as others have. The purpose of intentionally holding these basic assumptions is quite practical; *the purpose is to communicate more effectively and to genuinely connect with those we care about.*

The first of these four “working assumptions” is **“there is no one truth.”** In any group of people, there are many perspectives. Each of us has a unique experience--a unique perspective or vantage based on our life history, our state of mind, our level of understanding, our hopes and wishes, and our habitual patterns and life lessons. No ordinary human being has a corner on the market for the truth. So, there is not only one right way of seeing and understanding and acting in a particular moment. This notion encourages us to engage in nonjudgmental mindfulness of each other, to cultivate some curiosity about how others perceive a situation, and to willingly take an open stance with a more expansive, inclusive view.

The second basic assumption is **“all of us are doing the best we can.”** Of the four assumptions, this one tends to evoke the most skeptical reaction. Please remember that this not intended to be a philosophical argument on who is right and who is wrong. Of course, one could argue exceptions to this assumption that one is doing the best she can when its clear that mistakes are being made. The purpose again is to remember that the people we care about are not malicious--that they are doing what they think is best at that moment and in that situation for themselves or even



others. They may be genuinely heeding some important value or priority. Perhaps they are coping the best they can with escalating and painful emotions. You yourself are doing the best you can at this moment, with what you know, with your current abilities, with the resources that you have. This assumption encourages us to engage each other with patience and compassion, rather than reactive judgment.

The third basic assumption provides a welcome dialectic or some balance to the second assumption. While each of us is doing the best we can, **“we can each try harder”** in the sense that we can learn to become more skillful, and we can gain more knowledge. We can redouble our efforts to practice patience, empathy and validation. This assumption balances the fundamental attitude of acceptance with the essential willingness to change such that our relationships can improve and deepen.

And the last of our basic or working assumptions is founded on the fact that we care about each other and that the well-being of each of us truly matters. So, we do our best to **“interpret each situation in the most benign way possible.”** Basically, we give each other (and ourselves) the benefit of the doubt. We refrain from the urge to assume the worst. We witness our minds producing plentiful negative thoughts and conclusions, and we refrain from immediately acting on these. This is not to deny negative aspects of reality, however we are intentionally investigating a more benign interpretation and genuinely considering this perspective. Then, we can mindfully consider the pros and cons of taking those actions or expressing those thoughts. This assumption can be a very powerful way of transforming a not uncommon predicament--when we are holding a fixed, limited, and negative view of someone we currently feel estranged from *and yet* really do care about. From this benign stance, we can take actions that fit with our values and gradually become more of the kind of friend or family member we want to be.

May these four working assumptions support you in building the relationships that make life worth living.

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