

Planning Ahead to Build Mastery

Developing the skill of planning ahead to Build Mastery is all about figuring out which situations are likely to cause us trouble in the near future, and then not only planning ahead for how we can cope with expected difficulties, but also visualizing being in the situation, and practicing how we will act effectively. The key component of this exercise is to understand that it is not the situation we are trying to build mastery for, it is the emotional experience. Situations can change, people can do random and unexpected things, so trying to master how to deal with what might happen behaviourally is a challenging, if not impossible thing to do. However, your emotional experiences are usually constant, particularly when it comes to difficult, and uncomfortable situations. We may be reacting to the presence of, or the possibility of a number of different emotions. In general, in my experience, it tends to be one of the big 4 (sadness, loneliness, guilt, and shame), along with fear and anger that seem to be the primary states that are important for us to prep for.

"The key component of this exercise is to understand that it is not the situation we are trying to build mastery for, it is the emotional experience."

~Steven Morris RP.

There is a large amount of research showing that we can learn new skills simply by imagining and practicing new skillful behavior in our minds. This is true for all sorts of skills. For example, in sports like tennis. A player who is trying to plan ahead for an important game can improve their tennis by practicing the mental process involved in their serve by rehearsing it in their minds. We can also apply this to interpersonal skills. For example, we can improve our ability to have conversations about making amends with others by rehearsing the way these conversations might go in our minds, effectively teaching our parts to cope with the different emotional experiences that are possible outcomes when actually having the conversation.

On the following page, there is a simple, single example of what coping ahead might look like that I have taken directly from the DBT Skills Training manual and adapted to fit the concepts of Schema Therapy and the multiplicitic personality perspective of doing this work. Take some time to read through it, see if it gives you clarity on the ways you can use this skill to your benefit. Imagine if you can the following story:

Joe is getting ready to sing solo for the first time at a recital given at his university. He has had a cold, and he notices that there is a part of him that is afraid his voice might give out for a minute or two in the middle of his performance. He recognizes that the dominant emotion he would struggle with in this situation is fear. Fear of the embarrassment or shame he will experience should he not have the skills to cope with this situation if it plays out the way he is projecting it too. To plan ahead, he imagines first singing with absolutely no troubles. He completes his performance and rehearses what it will be like to stand in front of the crowd as they give him a standing ovation. This is helpful, but there is still a part of him that is anxious. Next, he practices in his mind his worst-case scenario. In his visualization, he is walking out on stage with a glass of water in his hand, bending over, and putting it on the floor before he starts. Then he imagines singing, having his voice go out suddenly, bending over to gather his wits together, picking up his glass of water, taking a sip of water, and then continuing to sing when he is ready. Finally, Joe explores the third scenario, the one in which he is challenged with his voice but able to make it through with some minor mistakes, but nothing too catastrophic. Joe continues to rehearse all three possibilities in his mindful practice in the build up to the concert, so his parts have an idea of what to do in different situations connected to fear, shame, and embarrassment.

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~Steven Morris

In the work we do combining DBT and Schema Therapy, Planning Ahead to Build Mastery is an essential skill for changing the stories connected to the dominant Schema in our system. These are the stories that are directly responsible for activating the different parts of our personality that we are trying to understand, and ultimately re-educate. Planning Ahead to Build Mastery gives us the ability to work with these stories, not to remove them completely from our system, as this would be an extremely difficult thing to do. Instead, we use this skill to build Mastery for the emotional experience triggered by the childhood story so we can teach the activated parts that this story isn't happening now. On the following page there is a worksheet that goes over the way to develop this skill for your individual needs.

Plan Ahead to Build Mastery Worksheet

What is the situation you are planning ahead for? Describe in as much detail as possible. If this is occurring in a place you have previously been, describe the experience of being there through your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch while you're there?

I can see...

I can hear...

I can smell...

I can taste...

I can touch...

Describe your worst-case scenario.

Describe your best-case scenario.

Describe a realistic possibility of what may happen, something in between the first two examples.

Now that you have these in mind, use your mindful breathing skills to go to your safe place. Then, from this place of safety, step into the place where the situation plays out and visualize each of the situations one by one. Make a note of what you were thinking, what you were feeling, and what you did to cope with the experience in the space provided on the following page.

In the worst-case scenario, I was feeling...

In the worst-case scenario, I was thinking...

In the worst-case scenario, I acted out behaviours that were...

In the best-case scenario, I was feeling...

In the best-case scenario, I was thinking...

In the best-case scenario, I acted out behaviours that were...

In the realistic possibility scenario, I was feeling...

In the realistic possibility scenario, I was thinking...

In the realistic possibility scenario, I acted out behaviours that were...

Next, use this information to create a mindfulness script by completing the R.A.A.V.E.N exercise. Recognise and acknowledge that there is a part of your personality that is emotionally distressed by the situation you are planning for. Appreciate its reason for being active in your system, and validate its experience, because emotion regulation starts with self validation. Then check the facts to educate this part on what is so, reassure it that you have the skills to deal with the situation, and provide the evidence by naming these skills. Finally, make the request of this part to soften its emotional distress, to allow your healthy adult to demonstrate this ability. Remember to keep the information in this worksheet short and to the point, resisting the urge to tell the story about situations and sticking to important information that needs to be heard by the part you are working with. Once this is complete, take the time to record this scripted dialogue on your phone, tablet, or some other recording device so you can use it as an audio flash card to assist you with planning ahead to build mastery.

In schema therapy, flash cards are written or audio statements that you can use either in-between sessions to help remember an important skill, or as a stand-alone technique to help develop a particular ability to counteract an active story that is causing ineffective behaviour. In their audio form, they are statements that are designed to help develop the healthy adult in your system. To connect this with our work in DBT, each script is designed to link the parts of you that are existing in your reason mind, to the parts of you that are reacting in your emotion mind, through the development of your ability to tap into your wise mind. The healthy adult parts of your personality are there to guide the parts of you that are reacting to situations because of the story about what's happening. Over time, the messages and sentiments expressed in the cards are gradually internalized and, thus, are very helpful in developing the Healthy Adult mode. Flash cards are often developed for each type of challenging situation and phase of treatment.

Sometimes, we can find it difficult to complete an audio flashcard ourselves. This is often because there is no trust in self, so hearing the narrative in our own voice is rejected by our system. If this is the case for you, it is ok to have it recorded by someone that you do trust as a way to model the narrative we are trying to create. However, this is not the long-term solution, and it is the ultimate goal to complete the recording of the flash card in your own voice, so that your system starts to trust you, and not the voice of another person telling you what to do. Try to record it yourself, listen to the recording in the morning, at night, and whenever you have free time. Set aside space in your daily routine to listen to it, notice if there is a part of you that has an expectation that this is supposed to be a quick fix, as this is a process that takes a while. Teaching your emotional parts how to connect with your thinking, logical, and analytical parts is something that takes time, and lots and lots of practice. The end result is worth it, as it will lead you towards living the life you want to live, a life that is truly worth living.