

# GIVING BACK WHAT HE WAS GIVEN:

HELPING OTHERS PARTICIPATE FULLY AND BUILD BETTER LIVES



Ed Chen M.Ed., RCC, CCC, is the director of training at the DBT Centre of the Fraser Valley and co-founder of Lifted Counselling and Consulting Inc.

Asking Ed Chen what drew him to Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) reveals something foundational about his values. One of the assumptions of DBT is that therapists and clients are equals.

“DBT assumes that we are people first. It is that understanding of the human condition that drew me to the modality,” he says.

Backing up a step, the reason Chen chose counselling as a career reflects who he is as a person and what he has experienced.

“As a first-generation immigrant and the son of immigrants, stress and struggles were everyday occurrences in my family and life,” he says. “I have witnessed what difficult life transitions can do to people’s well-being socially, psychologically, and physically.”

However, he says he is one of the fortunate ones.

“I was able to build a life worth living with the guidance, lessons, and support from my family, friends, and community.”

Chen entered the helping profession with the hope to give back what he was given — and he is doing exactly that. He is the director of training at the DBT Centre of the Fraser Valley

and co-founder of Lifted Counselling and Consulting Inc. He has extensive experience in delivering DBT to high-risk youths and families experiencing concerns such as suicidality, self-harm, impulsivity, depression, anxiety, trauma, and addictions. He also has considerable background in DBT program development in government agencies, community services, and schools. His DBT Program for Young Parents in Schools was recently nominated for a Premier’s Award for innovation.

Chen is also a skilled speaker and an active member of the global community and has presented both locally at the Undergraduate Psychology Conference at the University of British Columbia and internationally at the Transformation of At-Risk Youths Conference in Singapore, providing skill-based trainings for parents, teachers, and health care professionals.

**Tell us about the DBT Centre of the Fraser Valley. Who are your clients? What are the most common reasons people come to you there?**

The DBT Centre of the Fraser Valley is a group of highly trained DBT professionals who are committed to providing effective DBT programs to adults, youths, couples, and families. We also strive to provide the most updated,



relevant, and research-informed trainings and consultations to various agencies and professionals. I am both a clinician and the director of training at the centre. People and families who access our services often experience difficulty regulating their emotions, which may lead to concerns such as self-harm, suicidality, interpersonal conflicts, and impulsivity. We work with our clients collaboratively not only to resolve their concerns, but also to assist them in achieving the goals in their lives.

#### **How do you help people build more effective relationships?**

One of the first steps in helping people build more effective relationships is to help them identify their goal in interpersonal relationships. It is important to note there can be only one goal at a time, as mindfulness teaches

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us that being one-mindful is one of the ways to accessing our inner wisdom, or wise mind. The goal can range from standing up for your self-respect to maintaining a relationship. This goal then serves as the foundation to implement the appropriate skills, and it is through this goal setting and skill implementation we begin to build more effective relationships.

#### **What is the foundational rule of relationship building in DBT?**

The foundational rule of relationship building in DBT is a dialectic in itself — all human beings are lovable and finding friends may take effort on your part. This rule assumes that all of us, you and I included, are lovable by others from the start. However, friendships do not fall from the sky and making friends may not be easy. Even though we are lovable, and we may be doing the best we can, we need to do better, try harder, and be more motivated to change in order to build more effective relationships.

#### **What are some of the skills people need to find and keep better relationships?**

If your goal is to find people and get them to like you, here are some of the skills we teach our clients:

► Familiarity often leads to liking, and sometimes love: In other words, look for people who are close by you. Life is not a romantic comedy. We tend to like people who are familiar to us, rather than the stranger in an unfamiliar coffee shop. To build liking, it is important that we are frequently around and visible to a group of people, and this may be classmates, members of a particular interest group, co-workers, or other people who attend the same places.

► People often make friends with people who share our interests and attitudes: In other words, look for people who are similar to you. We are not suggesting you must agree with others on all issues all the time. What we are saying is that people tend to like those who share the same important values, morals, and interests.

► Work on conversation skills: If you'd like to connect with others, especially those you'd like to build a relationship with, you'll need to communicate with others. This may include learning things to talk about, learning to self-disclose skillfully, learning to actively listen, and learning to ask and respond to questions effectively.

► Express liking selectively: We often like those who we think like us. A person who opens the door for you is going to appear more likeable than someone who slams the door in your face. Expressing genuine liking for another person can be a powerful skill in getting someone to like you. However, be careful not to suck up, grovel, or beg. Do not compliment or praise too much, and never, ever use compliments to get favours (there is nothing genuine in using validation as a bargaining tool). Be selective, subtle, and skillful in your expressions of liking.

### **Which skills are most commonly lacking and why?**

Do not underestimate the power of small talk. Even though some people may not like chit chat, small talk is the welcome sign that helps open the door for deeper and more meaningful relationships. Revealing your darkest and deepest secrets with a brand-new person in an elevator rarely leads to friendships or lasting relationships.



Learn how to join an ongoing group conversation. Many people find joining groups a daunting task. However, waiting for people to approach us may result in never having any friends. Even though we are lovable (based on the foundational rule for relationships), we must make the first move in finding friends and learning how to approach and join a group.

### **You are involved in many other projects and endeavours with the hope to spread an important message. What would you like to say to the people reading?**

I immigrated to Canada from Taiwan at the age of 10 on November 10, 1994. That very first night, my brother and I slept on a mattress on the ground in a cold empty house. All our belongings, I was told, were still in a shipping crate somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. On the first day of school, I was

bullied by the other children because of the colour of my skin. That winter, I wrote to my friends back in Taiwan, and no one wrote me back. When I returned to Taiwan for my great-grandmother's funeral, everyone treated me as if I was a foreigner who had forgotten about my roots. I was lost. I was nobody to everybody. Seeing this, my father said to me: "If you are going to do something, do it till the very end."

**My father understood one thing — that is, if you are going to do something, you participate. You participate fully. You participate with every inch of your soul. You allow yourself to feel every smile, endure every struggle, and treasure every moment.**

My father understood one thing — that is, if you are going to do something, you participate. You participate fully. You participate with every inch of your soul. You allow yourself to feel every smile, endure every struggle, and treasure every moment. My parents embodied those words. They left everything they had ever known in pursuit of hope. They changed their names. They gave up their roots. They feared for their children. They did this because they believed in us.

Therapist or client, I do not believe we are a fragile people. My family and I are embodiments of that strength. I am not saying this is easy, and there was nothing easy about it for us. What I am saying is that the human spirit is resilient, and despite how difficult things may seem yesterday, we always have a choice to participate and to build a better tomorrow, today. ■