



LENS

# Marsha Linehan, Creating Dialectical Behavior Therapy From Her Own Experiences

Courtesy of University of Washington



As she grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the 1960s, Marsha Linehan was an excellent student and played the piano well. However, she felt deeply inadequate compared with others. She also found herself at odds with her parents and spent much of her senior year of high school in bed with headaches. That year, she was taken to local mental health professionals who recommended she be institutionalized. Thus, at age 17, Marsha Linehan found herself in a locked ward at the Institute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut. Previously, she displayed the characteristics often seen in those with BPD. She burned herself and slashed her arms, legs, and other parts of her body. In the hospital without sharp objects, she hit her head on the wall or floor.

This is how she currently describes that time: “My whole experience of these episodes was that someone else was doing it; it was like ‘I know this is coming, I’m out of control, somebody help me; where are you, God?’” She further stated, “I felt totally empty, like the Tin Man; I had no way to communicate what was going on, no way to understand it.” After more than 2 years,

she was released from the ward and returned home. While at home, she attempted suicide.

She later moved to Chicago in an attempt to start over. She lived at the YMCA and took a job as a clerk in an insurance company. She reports that her Catholic faith was vital to her and that she prayed often. A religious experience took her to a place where she accepted herself as she was. In Chicago, Marsha Linehan also took classes and was able to complete a PhD in psychology. As she continued her career, she became a therapist who worked with suicidal people who often had a personality disorder. She helped them to focus on life as it is rather than how the person thought it should be. She also emphasized acceptance. She built on these principles to develop DBT and to test its empirical efficacy.

Marsha Linehan, along with Elyn Saks (whom you met in Chapter 13) and Kay Jamison (whom you met in Chapter 6), has become a productive scholar and advocate of reforming our current mental health system with its frequently inadequate care. This also means sharing an understanding of the experiences of those with mental disorders, including the way in which society stigmatizes these individuals. A growing number of voices, some of whom are profiled in the *New York Times* series “Lives Restored,” have demonstrated the reality of those with mental illness moving from distress to productivity ([www.nytimes.com/interactive/science/lives-restored-series.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/science/lives-restored-series.html)).

**Thought Question:** What kinds of unique contributions can an individual who has experienced mental illness make to our understanding of the experience and treatment of mental illness that would otherwise be missing?

This *LENS* is based on a talk given by Dr. Linehan at the Institute of Living as reported in the *New York Times* ([www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/health/23lives.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/health/23lives.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)) (see B. Carey, 2011).