

Treating Risky and Compulsive Behavior in Trauma Survivors

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Distress reduction behaviors (DRBs) often seen in clinical populations

- Self-injury
- Bingeing and purging
- Compulsive sexual behavior
- “Impulsive” suicidality
- Compulsive gambling, shoplifting, and buying
- Hair pulling and skin picking
- Reactive aggression

Why risky behaviors

- Borderline personality disorder
- Impulse control disorders
- Behavioral addictions
- New empirically-based attachment/emotional regulation models
 - *Reactive Avoidance model (RAm)*

Reactive Avoidance model

- Early childhood maltreatment or disattunement →
- painful implicit memories and attachment disturbance →
- reduced emotional regulation skills

Emotional dysregulation + triggers →
(DRBs, dissociation, substance abuse)

Functions of DRBs

- Soothing
- Distraction
- Communication
- To reduce dissociation
 - Hebb's optimal arousal curve
- Relief from guilt and shame through self-punishment
- Distress-incompatible states

Safety, stabilization, and harm reduction

- Use therapeutic relationship to stabilize
- Increase emotional regulation skills
 - Grounding, relaxation, breath training, mindfulness training
 - Steps of ReGAIN
 - Emotional detective work
 - Metacognitive awareness of triggered states

Trigger management

- Harm reduction
 - Delay as long as possible
 - Do as little as possible
 - Replacing versus distracting
- Psychoeducation on triggers
- Identification: Direct and indirect
- Urge/emotion “surfing”
 - You can't stop a wave, but you can learn to surf (Kabat-Zinn)
 - Half-life of triggered distress

Titrated emotional processing

- Therapeutic window dynamics
- Multiple targets
 - Cross-activation, multiple traumas, self-titration
 - Client decides focus: “follow the targets”
- Shorter exposures
 - Habituation probably not issue
 - Less overwhelming
- Interspersal
 - Distress in compatible states
 - Grounding, relaxation, mindfulness, relatedness

Suggested readings

Briere, J. (2019). *Treating Risky and Compulsive Behavior in Trauma Survivors*. NY: Guilford.

Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2014). *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2nd edition, DSM-5 update*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.