

The Four Basic Assumptions

1. There is no absolute truth or any one truth. Usually there are two or more truths.
2. All of us are doing the best we can.
And
3. All of us can do better, try harder.
4. Interpret situations in the most benign way possible.

Let's break this down:

An Assumption is a belief that cannot be proven. Therefore, think of the above Four Assumptions as guidelines, a way to approach interactions, situations, and life. These “assumptions” are not “rules” to be rigidly followed. They are **Not** “absolute truths” (especially since one of the assumptions is that there is no absolute truth). They are meant to give you a different way to think and perhaps improve your relationships with friends, family, and others you care about.

Let's look at the assumptions:

1. There is No Absolute Truth

Can you think of ways this Assumption may be beneficial to you when you are interacting with someone or when you are viewing a situation?

Let's look at an example:

- 1) You and a friend are walking and another one of your friends walks by without saying “Hello.” You immediately think, “They did not say Hello because they were preoccupied.” And your friend thinks, “They did not say Hello because they are mad at me.”

Who is “RIGHT?” How far will you go to prove your point? **Or** if you thought to yourself, “Hey, there is no absolute truth. There can be two or more truths,” how would your interaction play out differently with your friend?

Remember, there are many different perspectives. Each of us has a unique perspective, influenced by our history, emotional state, knowledge, and experiences. There is **no** “one right way” to see, understand, act.

We can use this Assumption to help us become more **open, interested, and inquisitive about how others interpret and perceive** situations. Perhaps allowing us to develop a **willing approach** and an **open stance** when viewing situations.

2. All of Us Are Doing the Best We Can

Are you struggling with this one? Are you thinking of situations where you or someone made mistakes (failed a test, was late for a meeting, forgot to meet a friend) or maybe behaved in a manner that was “out of control” or “aggressive?” Are you thinking, “Were they really doing the best they could?”

Let us just step back and see if we can take a different perspective: “In that very moment, they were doing the best they could, given their history, life experiences, state of mind, and emotional state.” Can we hold this assumption in our minds for just a while?

Remember that these “assumptions” are guidelines and not absolute truths!

Let’s look at an example:

- 1) It is Thursday and Jasmine has an exam on Friday. She comes home, watches a movie, talks to friends, and goes to bed at 10PM. Jasmine does not study for the test. The next day, Jasmine takes the test and is unable to answer most of the test questions.

Did Jasmine do the best she could? She did not even study! Do we have all the “facts?” Is it ever possible to have “all” the “facts?” Since we do not know why Jasmine did what she did, then why not assume that she did the best she could on Thursday night?

What if I told you that Jasmine had a cold, and that she had just come home from a two-hour basketball practice? Or what if I said that her mother was ill and at the hospital? Would this information make any difference? What if there are no external factors “excusing” her behavior? What if in her state of mind, Jasmine did the best she could at that particular point in time?

Embracing the Assumption that “We all do the best we can” may free us to be more **compassionate and patient with others and with ourselves**; steering away from judgment and reactivity.

Wait! If we are all doing the best we can, does that mean there is no room for improvement? Should we just tell everyone “good job” even when they made mistakes? This is an interesting point **And** this leads us straight to the next Assumption.

3. All of Us Can Do Better, Try Harder

This is where the Dialectic part of DBT comes in. Two opposing Assumptions can be true at the same time. I can say, “You did the best you could” **And** I can say, “You can do better and try harder, and work harder on making changes.”

Let's look at some examples:

Scenario 1: Parent to Child: "I see you cleaned your room," (toys under the bed, clean clothes in a basket, piles of books all over the floor) **But** "it is still a mess. It is clear you did not even try. Go clean your room."

Scenario 2: Parent to Child: "I see you cleaned your room," (toys under the bed, clean clothes in a basket, piles of books all over the floor) **And** "next time, when you clean your room, you could work on putting the books on the bookshelf, or maybe the clothes in the drawers, or the toys in the toy bin."

Which scenario embraces both the Second and Third Assumptions: "We are doing the best we can" and "We can do Better and Try Harder?" If you were the child, which parent response would increase your motivation to do Better and Try Harder?

"We are doing the best we can" and "We can do Better and Try Harder" go hand-in-hand. They also exemplify another DBT idea: **to create change we also need to validate**. We need to find a balance (dialectic) between **Accepting/Validating** (We are all doing the best we can) **AND** creating a **Willingness to Change** (We can all do Better and Try Harder).

Are you still with me? I am sure you are doing the best you can to keep up with all this information about "the Four Basic Assumptions" and perhaps you are finding ways to motivate yourself to keep reading and learning.

Here is the fourth Assumption (and one of my favorites):

4. Interpret Situations In the Most Benign Way Possible

and filter information. If I am experiencing feelings of anger, I may look for things in the environment that confirms (validates) my anger. If I tend to worry, I may note all the scary things that are happening around me and in the world. Imagine then what happens when we are interacting with a loved one. Maybe we are having an emotionally intensive conversation and in our "emotion mind" state we may tend to be more impulsive and emotion-driven. We may be more likely to judge, blame, and interpret our loved one's behavior in the worst possible way.

Let's look at some examples:

1) **A parent** is talking to their teenager about all the work they have missed at school and needing to decrease their screen time so that they can focus on their work.

The teenager looks away from the parent who is talking, grimaces, and says nothing.

The parent interprets their teen’s behavior: “They are being disrespectful,” “They are not listening to me,” and “They are not taking this seriously and don’t care.”

Now does this parent really have “all the facts?” Do they really know what their teen is thinking and feeling? Or maybe they are just making an educated guess (an assumption) that is not the most benign interpretation of the situation. What if the teenager was anxious? What if they were trying to keep calm and not be reactive? What if they made a face because they were getting emotional?

- 2) Now, let’s go back to the example of the two friends walking and coming across a friend who does not say “Hello” to them. Since we don’t know why the person did not say “Hello,” why not make the most benign interpretation? Such as, “He was preoccupied,” “He may be having a difficult day,” or “He may not have seen us.”

If we don’t have “all the facts,” making the most benign interpretation may allow us to stay calm and not be as reactive. Then maybe we can work on gathering more information and perhaps more effectively problem solve. Or maybe we will never have “the facts” and we will never know what “actually” happened. In this case, why not interpret the situation in the most benign way possible? Let us just **give each other and ourselves the benefit of the doubt.**

Will you give these Four Assumptions a chance? Are you willing to experiment with them? Try them out, gather information, and assess how embracing these assumptions makes changes in your life and in your interaction with others.