Linehan Institute

Marsha M. Linehan, Psychologist Who Transformed the Treatment of Suicidal People, Dies (1943-2026)

Her development of Dialectical Behavior Therapy brought hope and lives worth living to millions who had nearly given up on life. Drawing on behavioral science, Western philosophy, Zen and her own experience of profound suffering, she changed how the world understands and treats people with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and those with other severe, complex, and difficult to treat mental health struggles.

Dr. Marsha M. Linehan died November 10, 2026, in the arms of her beloved daughter Geraldine Rodriguez. She was 83.

Affectionately known simply as “Marsha” to patients, students and colleagues around the world, she launched a revolution in psychiatry with the publication of her first randomized controlled trial of DBT in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* in 1991. Her findings challenged longstanding beliefs that BPD was untreatable and would ultimately lead to a life of despair. Grounded in behavioral science and integrating cognitive behavioral therapy with Zen practice, DBT offered an evidence-based, behavioral road out of hell for those suffering from BPD and other complex and severe conditions rooted in emotion dysregulation.

In 1993, Marsha published two seminal books, Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder and Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder. Both ultimately became foundational texts in modern psychotherapy. Her DBT Skills Training Manual has remained Guilford Press's number one bestseller since its original publication. Its reach expanded to other populations with multiple, severe and complex problems. Within a decade, DBT was being adapted for adolescents and families, people with eating disorders and substance use disorders, and patients in inpatient, forensic and juvenile justice settings, and schools.

Marsha was loved deeply by her family. She is survived by her loving daughter, Geraldine Rodriguez, son in law Nate Merseth, granddaughter Catalina Merseth, her dearest supportive sister Aline Haynes, loving brothers Earl Linehan, Dr. Marston Linehan and Michael Linehan and in heaven, brother John Linehan; and many cherished nieces and nephews.

A Stunningly Brilliant and Seemingly Improbable Career Shaped by Suffering
It would be decades before the world learned that DBT was forged, in part, through Marsha's own early struggles.

Born May 5, 1943, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to John Marston Linehan and Ella Marie Bourg Linehan (Tita), she was admitted at age 17 to the Institute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut, for what was to be a two-week evaluation. Ultimately, she spent 26 months receiving psychiatric care. Misdiagnosed, she endured heavy medication regimens, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and extended periods of solitary confinement. She would later describe those years as living in hell. She made a vow “I was in hell and when I get out, I am going to come back and get others out too.” Thus, her academic and clinical career was dedicated to this vow which led to the development of DBT.

Marsha earned bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology from Loyola University in Chicago in 1968 and 1970, and a doctorate in social psychology in 1971. Though not originally trained as a clinical psychologist, she had the good fortune of admission to post-doctoral fellowship in behavioral modification at SUNY Stony Brook under the guidance of Marvin Goldfriend, PhD, and Gerald Davison, PhD. Both would be lifelong mentors, colleagues, and devoted friends. While at Stony Brook, Marsha focused her passion on applying behavioral principles and techniques to people who were frequently suicidal.

She joined the Department of Psychology faculty at the University of Washington in 1977 and remained there for her entire career. She established the Behavioral Research and Therapy Clinics, a consortium of research projects developing and evaluating treatments for severely disordered, multi-diagnostic and suicidal populations as well as a training clinic for dozens of doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows who were her pride and joy. She received decades of funding from the National Institutes of Health to support her research.

As a Professor of Psychology, Marsha was courageous, brilliant, tireless and uncompromising in her pursuit to improve the lives of people suffering from BPD through rigorous research and clinical innovation. She was fearless in treating the most challenging and suicidal of clients, recognizing that if not her and her therapists, then whom? With natural wit and outsized charisma, Marsha routinely filled the training halls with students eager to learn (and laugh) from this master scientist and clinician. She served as president of both the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy (formerly known as Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy) and the Society of Clinical Psychology, Division 12, American Psychological Association. She was a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychopathological Association and was a diplomat of the American Board of Behavioral Psychology.

Over her career, she was lauded with many awards and recognition for her clinical and research contributions to the study and treatment of suicidal behaviors, including: the Louis I. Dublin Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Field of Suicide (American Association of Suicidology), the Distinguished Research in Suicide Award (American Foundation of Suicide Prevention), and the creation of the Marsha M. Linehan Award for Outstanding Research in the Treatment of Suicidal Behavior established by the American Association of Suicidology. Marsha was recognized for her clinical research including the Distinguished Scientist Award from the Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology, the award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions to Clinical Psychology (Society of Clinical Psychology,) and awards for Distinguished Contributions to the Practice of Psychology (American Association of Applied and Preventive Psychology) and for Distinguished Contributions for Clinical Activities, (Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy), Grawemeyer Award in Psychology for outstanding ideas in the field of Psychology. She received the Career/Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) in 2016. In 2018, she was selected for inclusion in *TIME Great Scientists: The Geniuses and Visionaries Who Transformed Our World*. In 2023, she received the Washington State Leadership Board's Legacy of Service Award in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to mental health and the development of Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

Early Pioneer in Dissemination and Implementation
In addition to her many academic accomplishments, Marsha built pathways for disseminating DBT worldwide. She developed an efficacious comprehensive multi-day intensive training method; an adoption method, focusing on the functions of treatment (verses treatment modes) so real-world treatment settings could adapt DBT to their unique needs while maintaining program fidelity; and a training company (The Linehan Training Group, now Behavioral Tech Institute) that has delivered thousands of DBT trainings and implementations worldwide. She formed a digital technology startup (Behavioral Tech Research; now Linehan-DBT Research) to develop and research digital technology training tools to augment traditional methods of instruction in disseminating DBT and other evidence-based practices. Together with her daughter Geraldine, they established the non-profit The Linehan Institute to offer skills training freely to underserved communities.

Deeply Spiritual and Contemplative
Raised in a devout Catholic family, Marsha never moved from a deeply spiritual and contemplative life. Her spiritual path evolved through Christian contemplative prayer, Zen practice and the study of acceptance. She trained in spiritual direction with Gerald May and Tilden Edwards, studied Zen with Willigis Jäger Roshi in Germany and Pat Hawk in the United States, and received Dharma Transmission as a Zen Master from Hawk in April 2012. Jäger confirmed her as a Zen Master in the Empty Cloud Sangha in June 2012. Her spiritual practice profoundly shaped her scientific work. In developing DBT, she translated the teachings and practices of mindfulness and Zen into concrete, teachable behavioral

strategies, integrating them with behavioral science. DBT became a defining example of what came to be known as the “third wave” of cognitive behavioral therapies, bringing mindfulness and acceptance into evidence-based psychotherapy.

Her commitment to contemplative practice also extended to DBT clinicians. She established the Marie Institute to provide low-cost mindfulness retreats for clinicians, recognizing their need for sustained opportunities to renew and deepen their own practice. Her later founding of the Empty Cloud Sangha gave institutional expression to her Zen teaching and commitment to contemplative life. The Sangha continues that work today.

The Courage to Tell Her Story: A Full-Circle Return
For decades, Marsha kept her personal struggles with mental health problems private, fearful that any disclosure would compromise the scientific legitimacy of her work and ultimately DBT’s acceptance by the scientific and clinical communities. Recognizing the power of her story and the hope it may inspire in others, she disclosed her own history only after the scientific evidence supporting DBT was beyond refute. In June 2011, she returned to the Institute of Living to tell her story. Always putting clients first, she disclosed her history to her own clients first, then to the Institute of Living’s clients receiving DBT, and then to the world. Her story was featured on the front page of the New York Times, “Expert on Mental Illness Reveals Her Own Fight,” published June 23, 2011.

That return brought her story full circle. The inpatient unit where she had once been hospitalized now provides DBT outpatient services. The room where she had been secluded had become a DBT therapy office. The transformation reflected her life's work: the place she had once experienced as a living hell was now helping lift others out of their own suffering and rebuild their lives using DBT—the very work to which she had devoted her career.

When asked, “How do you want people to remember you?” Marsha responded, “I want them to remember me as a person who helped others and developed strategies for helping others that were effective…there are so many people who don’t have anybody to help them. I want to help the people that don’t have anybody helping them.”

With genius, conviction, and courage, Marsha fulfilled that promise.

Marsha certainly lived a life worth living. She welcomed all to her home - a place of joy, warmth, beauty, dancing, and profound intellectual conversations. She will be mourned and missed by so many.