



ACT with Challenging Clients
 Integrating Acceptance & Commitment Therapy to Enhance Your Interventions

Richard W. Sears, PsyD, PhD, MBA, ABPP
 Board Certified Clinical Psychologist
 www.psych-insights.com

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

Richard Sears holds several faculty appointments at the University of Cincinnati. He has written a number of books on mindfulness and psychotherapy, and offers mindfulness courses on his personal website.

Scope of Practice Statement

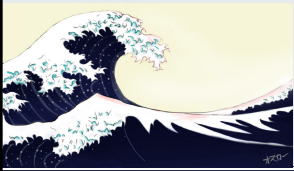
Materials that are included in this course may include interventions and modalities that are beyond the authorized practice of mental health professionals. As a licensed professional, you are responsible for reviewing the scope of practice, including activities that are defined in law as beyond the boundaries of practice in accordance with and in compliance with your profession's standards.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy



- ACT – pronounced as one word – “Act”
- Pioneered by Steven C. Hayes and colleagues
- Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS) www.contextualscience.org

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy



ACT is considered a “Third Wave” behavioral therapy, along with Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), etc.

A Long Definition of ACT

ACT is a functional contextual therapy approach based on Relational Frame Theory which views human psychological problems dominantly as problems of psychological inflexibility fostered by cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance. In the context of a therapeutic relationship, ACT brings direct contingencies and indirect verbal processes to bear on the experiential establishment of greater psychological flexibility primarily through acceptance, defusion, establishment of a transcendent sense of self, contact with the present moment, values, and building larger and larger patterns of committed action linked to those values.

Steven C. Hayes -- contextualscience.org

A Short Definition of ACT

ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.

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Functional Contextualism

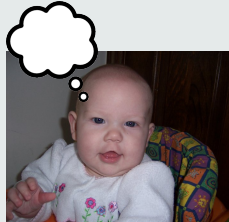
Context and function of behaviors are important

- Bucket with a holes



Relational Frame Theory

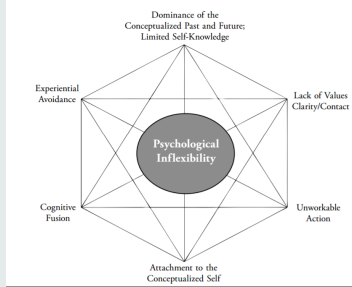
- Words/thoughts have conditioned meanings, associations, & emotions
- Not born with language
- Imitate, then internalize (thoughts)



“Existential Behaviorism”

- Historically, behavioral therapy and existential therapy have been diametrically opposed.
- ACT uses behavioral principles to help clients create a meaningful life.
- Four Existential Givens of Existential Psychotherapy:
Isolation, Freedom, Death/Change, Meaninglessness
(Yalom, 1980)

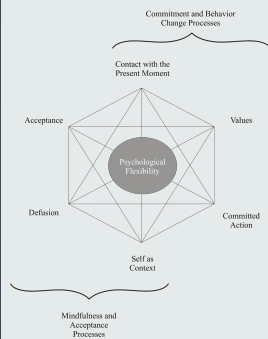
ACT Model of Psychopathology

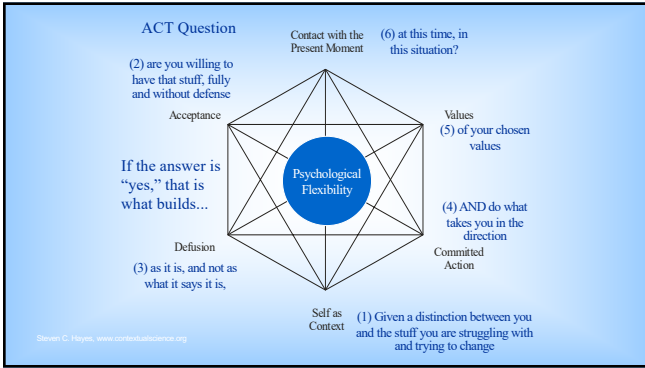


Hexaflex

The Six Core Processes of ACT:

- Self as Context
- Defusion
- Acceptance
- Contact with the Present Moment
- Values
- Committed Action





Psychological Flexibility

"contacting the present moment fully as a conscious, historical human being, and based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behavior in the service of chosen values"

Steven C. Hayes -- contextualscience.org

Suffering

- Suffering is a natural part of life.
- Attachment and suffering
 - Clients over-identify with problems
 - Clients often don't accept reality
- If you tell yourself that you will live your life as soon as all your problems are fixed, you may run out of lifetime before that actually happens.

Goal of ACT

ACT focuses on helping clients live a more fulfilling life, NOT on symptom reduction

Valued action predicts future drops in suffering, but drops in suffering do not predict future valued activity.

-Gloster et al., 2017

Problem of Control

Clients get stuck because they are trying to control their thoughts and feelings

ACT seeks to subtly undermine the control agenda



Creative Hopelessness/ Workability

Systematically reviewing everything the client has already tried, letting their own experience determine what has not been working

Helps clients let go of unhelpful thinking/ verbal problem-solving/control/avoidance

Problem of words – open your hand

Creative Hopelessness/ Workability

"If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got."

Fosters willingness to let go of control

Creative Hopelessness

"Person in the hole" analogy



Creative Hopelessness/ Workability

- What have you already tried to deal with this problem?
- How effective has this been?
- What has it cost you?
- Clients realize attempts to control/avoid unpleasant internal experiences often make them worse

Willingness

"Since what you've been doing hasn't been working for you, are you willing to do something different?"

Link to their values

And vs. but – "I want to go to the party, *and* I feel anxious"

Bus Metaphor



Passengers on the Bus – thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.
Who's driving?

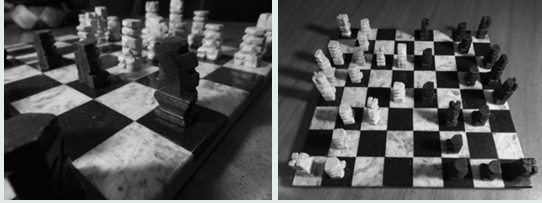
Self as Context

- "You are not who you think you are."
- Self as Content
 - "I am my thoughts, feelings, experiences"
- Self as Context
 - "I have thoughts, feelings, experiences, but who I am is much bigger. I can make room for them."

Self as Context

Conceptualized Self versus Observing Self

Chessboard Metaphor



Observing Self Exercise

▪ The self perspective over a lifetime



Cognitive Defusion

▪ Problem of Language & Fusion

- The word water is not wet
- Thoughts as mental events

▪ Lemon or Milk Exercise



Cognitive Defusion

- Defusion/Decentering/Distancing involves noticing thoughts vs. getting caught up in them
- Fighting thoughts can make them worse



Defusion Techniques

- Repeating thoughts (exposure)
- Talking about & writing down thoughts
- Clipboard metaphor



Defusion Techniques

- Labeling thinking:
 - "Radio Doom & Gloom"
 - "A Reason-Giving Machine"
 - "A Judgment Factory"
- Therapist models defusion
- Content vs. Process



Defusion Techniques

- Mindfulness exercise – noticing thoughts
 - Movie Theatre
 - Waterfall
 - Thought Trains
 - Clouds
 - Leaves on a Stream

NOT PUSHING AWAY-not distress “tolerance”

Acceptance

- Acceptance of reality as it is in this moment
- Acceptance of our own emotions/self-compassion
- Don't have to like it
- Clients often try to “fix” emotions
- Therapist models acceptance



Acceptance

- Exercise: Moving into Emotions
 - Best to choose something minor for practice
 - Discomfort here in the moment, or “freeze-frame” a minor recent issue
 - Stay with one thing to allow exposure effect
 - Hold the difficulty lightly, and keep attention coming back
 - Suspend tendency to fix or analyze
 - Even without change, teaches don't have to struggle to avoid
 - Could finish with 3-minute breathing space

Acceptance

- Acceptance undermines control agenda
- Watch out for accepting to avoid
- Exercises: Loving-kindness/compassion
 - Self
 - Neutral
 - "Enemies"



Contact w/ Present Moment (Mindfulness)



"the awareness that emerges through paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment"

(Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 345)

Contact with Present Moment

- Living in the past and living for the future
- Mindfulness of present moment sensory experiences
- Busyness versus productivity
- 3-minute breathing space



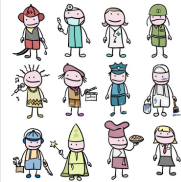
Values

- Values are compass headings – never arrive there
- What makes life meaningful and fulfilling
- Values pull us, versus feeling pushed to do them
- Set concrete goals toward values



Values Exercises

- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- Funeral exercise
- Magic wand exercise
- Valued Living Questionnaire



Value Domains

1. Family relations.
2. Marriage/couples/intimate relations.
3. Parenting.
4. Friendships/social life.



Value Domains

- 5. Career/employment.
- 6. Education/personal growth and development.
- 7. Recreation/fun/leisure.
- 8. Spirituality.
- 9. Citizenship/ environment/ community life.
- 10. Health/physical well-being.

(Harris & Wilson, 2008)

Exercise – Moving Toward Values

- Identify value
- Identify first goal along the way
- Identify thoughts that may come up
- Take action

Committed Action

- Are you willing to commit to moving toward your values?
- A step can be big or small, but must be taken
- Assigning homework/"Life Experiments"
- The problem of "trying"
 - Client who was "80% sure"



Role of Exposure

- Counters experiential avoidance
- Increases psychological flexibility
- Requires willingness to be uncomfortable in order to move toward what is important
- Swimming pool analogy



Role of Exposure

- Translate client values into behavioral goals
- Watch out for “dead person’s goals”
 - E.g., not using, not feeling anxiety, etc.
- E.g., if family is a value, set goals to do specific things with family, like go to a movie, take a vacation, etc.

Role of Exposure

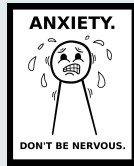
- Explore potential barriers to goals
 - External experiential avoidance
 - People, situations
 - Internal experiential avoidance
 - Thoughts, emotions, memories, body sensations

Role of Exposure

- In vivo or imaginal exposure for external avoidance
- Mindfulness and acceptance exercises for internal avoidance
 - Rate discomfort, then explore directly
 - Investigate like a "curious scientist"

Anxiety

- The Cycle of Avoidance
- Ruminations and Worries as Avoidance



Anxiety

Quicksand Metaphor



Holding a Crying Baby



Anxiety

Clean vs. Dirty Anxiety

Clean – natural and spontaneous emotions, memories, and other private events that show up in the context of living life

Dirty – shows up when trying to control or avoid what comes up from what naturally occurs in life, ie, “anxiety about anxiety”

Anxiety

Internal Exposure

Move into body sensations

Notice “extinction burst”

Observe thoughts and redirect back to body

Case examples

Trauma

- Conscious mind/cortex does not want to recall trauma
- Emotions/limbic system does not want to forget
- Battle to control/avoid thoughts, feelings, & triggers
- Mindfulness-Exposure vs Avoidance



File Cabinet Exercise



- Memory reconsolidation
- Client gets in touch with a feeling
- Recalls same feeling when young
- Gives younger self what was needed
- Younger self sees current self

Trauma

Tin Can Monster Exercise to foster acceptance/flexibility

(Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012)



Depression

- Always refer for medical issues
- Assess substance issues
- Challenges of medications
- Use what works
 - Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy
 - Behavioral Activation



Depression

- Beck's cognitive triad
 - Fusion with negative views of self, world, and future



Depression

- Suicidal thoughts
 - Brain's attempt to describe, evaluate, and problem-solve
 - 70% of population have had serious suicidal ideation



Depression

- Identifying values – “nothing matters”
 - What used to be important to you?
- Making small, incremental action steps
 - What can you do today?
 - Cleaning one thing vs. whole house

Depression

- Noticing versus debating thoughts
 - “Notice your mind telling you it won’t work”
- Taking action before feeling better
 - Bicycle
 - Hanging a picture



Personality Disorders

- Rigid interpersonal patterns
- Genetic, neurological conditions
- Excessive traits, missing traits
- Lack observing ego – tx can install
- Inflexible thinking & behavior patterns
- Everyone else is the problem

(Gregory Lester, 2019)

Personality Disorders

- Identify values and take committed action
- Increase contact with present moment to install observing ego and make connections
- Defuse from rigid thinking
- Increase acceptance of emotions
- Broaden sense of self
- Increase psychological flexibility

Clinician Self Care

- Reflect on your own values
- Take committed steps each day
- Remember you are more than a clinician
- Notice your thoughts without getting lost
- Give yourself permission to have feelings
- Make contact with the present moment

Contact Info

Richard Sears
richard@psych-insights.com
www.psych-insights.com
513-899-6463



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