ACCEPTANCE, COMMITMENT AND VALUE-BASED LIVING:

An overview of acceptance & commitment therapy (ACT) to empower meaningful living

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1. Psychological Inflexibility: potential psychological suffering
2. Psychological Flexibility: one path for psychological health
3. Informs intervention strategies to promote psychological health
   • A mindfulness-based therapy from within the cognitive behavioral therapy tradition

(note: health ≠ happiness)
ACT MODEL OF HUMAN SUFFERING: PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLEXIBILITY

**F**usion
- thoughts as reality

**E**valuation
- judgments of self, experiences, world

**A**voidance
- unwillingness to experience

**R**eason-Giving
- the “whys” for behavior, who we are, our problems
IS THERE ANOTHER WAY?

• In the place of literal meaning, there are multiple meanings (your thinking, what is present, context, history, feelings)

• In the place of evaluations – own your evaluations and do what works

• In the place of reason-giving – honest ignorance and commitment to a course

• In the place of emotional control – emotional openness and acceptance
ACT PROMOTES

- Present Moment Awareness
- Contact with Values
- Commited Action
- Self as Context
- Defusion
- Acceptance

Psychological Flexibility
ACT PROMOTES

Open Up

Acceptance

Present Moment Awareness

Be Here Now

Contact with Values

Know What Matters

Committed Action

Do What it Takes

Defusion

Self as Context

The Observer

Watch your thinking

Psychological Flexibility
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

• SAMHSA placed ACT on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) in 2011

• Substance abuse
  • Opioid dependence (Stotts et al., 2012; Hayes et al., 2004), Methamphetamine dependence (Smout et al., 2010), self-stigma in SUD (Luoma et al., 2012)

• Anxiety, PTSD, and Depression
  • OCD (Twohig et al., 2010), anxiety disorders (Arch et al., 2012; Craske et al., in press)
  • Experiential Avoidance as a predictor (Kashdan et al., 2012; Plumb et al., 2004)
  • Depression & anxiety (Forman et al., 2007)
  • General distress (Lang et al., 2012), VA roll-out for depression (Walser et al., 2013)

• Behavioral Medicine
  • Chronic Pain (Vowles et al., 2011; Wetherell et al., 2011)
  • Diabetes (Gregg et al., 2007)
  • Weight management (Forman et al., 2013)
  • Smoking Cessation (Bricker et al., 2010; Vilardaga et al., 2018)
  • Cancer and end of life (Rost et al., 2012; Plumb Vilardaga et al., 2019)
MODEL OF INTERVENTION:

OPEN (ACCEPTANCE, DEFUSION)
AWARE (PRESENT MOMENT, SELF)
ACTIVE (VALUES, COMMITMENT)
This sounds great!

But how do I start?

- Early assessment from an ACT perspective
- 1) Ask what the client wants to be about
  - A start... may not be fully clarified (open, defused values) just yet...
- 2) Ask what gets in the way of that
  - The client’s presenting problem as they see it. We then reframe that from an ACT perspective using the model.
Values are Guiding Principles
They help us choose actions that matter most.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Principles ARE:</th>
<th>Guiding Principles are NOT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The direction (ongoing actions)</td>
<td>The destination (goals or achievements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What matters to us in our hearts</td>
<td>Just morals or “shoulds”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of meaning</td>
<td>People, places, activities, or feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How we want to act</td>
<td>How we want others to act toward us</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example: We don’t achieve “being caring,” but we can be caring in many situations.
CONSIDERATIONS FOR VALUES

Places to start – an easy heuristic:

• **Connection**
  • With another person? Something in nature? Some activity (eating, drinking, music)?

• **Caring**
  • About something, someone, or some activity? Expressing concern or affection for self or others?

• **Contribution**
  • To your environment/work, health, happiness, others’ well-being? Looking after nature, your body, mind or spirit?

• Across life domains (family, work, health, spirituality)
| Example Guiding Principles                        |  |  |
|-------------------------------------------------|  |  |
| Being Caring or Nurturing                        | Understanding Myself | Living with Integrity |
| Expressing My Talents                            | Mentoring or Teaching Others | Being Creative |
| Challenging Myself                              | Being Responsible or Reliable | Being Free/Independent |
| Being Kind                                      | Intimacy/sharing Inner experience | Being Honest /Genuine |
| Caring for My Body                              | Preserving the environment | Being Physically Active |
| Being Practical                                 | Learning |        |
| Contributing to the World                       | Exploring or being adventurous | Connecting with Nature |
| Appreciating                                    | Being passionate | Growing as a Person |
| Promoting Justice                               | Leaving a Legacy | Helping or Supporting Others |
| Improving my Skills                             | Expressing Humor | Being Useful or Industrious |
| Being Self-Disciplined                          | Being Adaptable | Being Hopeful |
| Questioning Norms                                | Living Simply | Being Tolerant/Open to New Ideas |
| Taking Risks                                    | Following Tradition | Being Guided by Reason |
My Guiding Principle:

_______________________________

ONE Small Thing
I can do in service of this principle between now and next week:

_______________________________
WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF VALUES? CASE FORMULATION: ABC OF ACT

A: Situation
What did you notice?
External Event; or Private Experience (memory, thought, feeling)

B: Response
What did you do?
- Approach
- Avoid/ Attempt to control
Private Public

C: Consequence
How did it work?
AWAY from internal experience? Or TOWARD meaningful living?

Asking many questions that help clients examine their own behavior
WHY THE FOCUS ON AVOIDANCE / ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL?
LIGHT AND DARK SIDES OF LANGUAGE

Reasoning
Communicating
Problem-Solving

Past & Future: here now
• Plan
• Learn

Values
• Self directed rules
• Experienced as choice
• Remote & verbal consequences
• Guide action long term

Over-extension of:
• Problem-solving
• Evaluation, judgment

Past & Future: here now
• Rumination
• Worry
• Relive trauma (PTSD)

Context of literality (fusion)
• Thoughts = reality
• Thoughts → actions
With the amazing abilities of our minds, suffering can occur even when we are physically safe.
IN OTHER WORDS

- When people feel bad, they carry around verbal descriptions of the hurt
- These descriptions keep the person in contact with the hurt
- People don’t like hurting

  - *They want to avoid the hurt*
  - *They try to control their thinking about the hurt*
WEGNER ‘WHITE BEAR’ EXPERIMENTS
• Problem:
  • The language based relationship of “not thinking about X” means X is in the rule

• Result:
  • Even during “Avoid Anxiety” – Anxiety is in the room
Life pain happens. Pain doesn’t feel good. And yet…

What if we could shift the energy to work on reducing suffering?

Feel: Angry, Ashamed.
Think: “It’s not fair!”; “I’m so stupid”
Response: Don’t pay it (avoidance move)
Outcome: Fine increases
Feel: More anger, more shame

PAIN IS INEVITABLE
SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL
ACT STANCE

- Suffering happens for all of us -- thanks to our minds!
- We do not “KNOW” -- but have a unique perspective
  - Model tells us what difficulties may be in a person’s life
  - Asking questions, oriented toward successful working in valued directions, allows the client to assess for themselves

Two Mountains Metaphor
ACT STANCE

- **Balance:**
  - Being Active and Being With the client in their suffering

- Allowing change to happen at client’s own pace
  - Painful to watch suffering
  - Remember: something is working for that client, maintaining behavior
  - Focusing on values (strengths) can increase quality of life
  - May never remove all suffering
INCREASING AWARENESS: EXPLORING CONTROL

• **Exploring** attempts at controlling internal experiences

• Increase awareness of tendency to overuse problem-solving, fixing, or controlling strategies
  • External objects, situations – possible (e.g., repaint the room)
  • Internal experience – more tricky (e.g., can you pain over sadness?)

• What has **your experience** been? How has that worked to get you where you want to be?
  • How much effort does it take?
  • How would you choose to use your time?
AWARENESS
(PRESENT MOMENT)

- Mindfulness
- Perspective taking
- Flexible attention
- Noticing parts of experience, reactions to it
  - De-mystify, label (e.g., Physicalizing)
  - Practice willingness for parts (e.g., Tin Can Monster)
    - What about tenseness in your chest is ‘impossible’ to have?
- At home or in session practice
  - Encourage contact with the here and now
OPEN UP (ACCEPTANCE/ WILTINGNESS)

• Allowing, make space for, be with experience
  • Chinese Finger Traps – lean in
  • Quicksand – increase contact with
  • Physicalize it
  • Bring the unwanted along for the ride
    • Take your keys with you
  • Willingness is not wanting

■ PAIN FOR A PURPOSE:
Values dignify being open to experience
EXERCISE:
YOUR THERAPIST VALUES
You can't get rid of your fears... but you can learn to live with them.
OPEN UP (DEFUSION)

- Catch the process of thinking

- Catching the evaluative process of our minds

- Catching the tendency is to respond to thoughts as if they are reality
  - Language supports this – “I am a bad person”

All in service of getting “unstuck” from the traps of our minds
OPENNESS TO THOUGHTS STRATEGIES...
A GOOD START ARE MINDFULNESS EXERCISES AIMED AT OBSERVING THOUGHTS

No one will ever love me
I can’t handle this!!
I am a freak
I am worthless

I am noticing the thought that...
AWARENESS (OBSERVER SELF)

- Sense of observing one’s own experience
- Observation has been the constant
- Help transcend limitations of a rigid conceptualization of self
- Helpful to strengthen when there has been some ‘shift’ in sense of self
  - Trauma
  - Acquired disability
  - Re-adjusting to civilian life
ACTIVE
Situating Meaning and Action

VALUE = Guiding Principle for Behavior

Specific Goal

Action

Specific Goal

Action

Specific Goal

Action
Build patterns of actions linked to Values

Guiding Principle (value)

Specific Goal

Action

Specific Goal

Action

Specific Goal

Action

EXPANDING
GUIDING PRINCIPLE ACTIVITY WORKSHEET: EXAMPLE 1

**Relationships**
Guiding Principle: *Sharing & being present*

- Action: *Go to dinner with friends*
- When, Where, Who with: *Thurs night*

**Hobby/Free Time**
Guiding Principle:

- Action: ______________________
- When, Where, Who with: __________

**Work/Community**
Guiding Principle:

- Action: ______________________
- When, Where, Who with: __________

**Health/Well-Being**
Guiding Principle: *Connecting with Nature*

- Action: *Walk 10 mins_____________
- When, Where, Who with: *In mornings in the woods*
GUIDING PRINCIPLE ACTIVITY WORKSHEET: EXAMPLE 2

Relationships
Guiding Principle:

Action: _______________________
When, Where, Who with: ________

Hobby/Free Time
Guiding Principle: Being Playful

Action: Watch a funny movie
When, Where, Who with: by myself

Work/Community
Guiding Principle:

Action: Bringing food to a pantry
When, Where, Who with: Tuesday morns

Health/Well-Being
Guiding Principle:

Action: _______________________
When, Where, Who with: ____________
FURTHER CLARIFYING VALUES: AFTER DOING OPENNESS AND AWARENESS WORK

• Common for clients to use values as rigid guides rather than flexible ones

• With openness and awareness, can start to look at where values become rigid, or values act as indicator for “failure”

Importance of self-compassion for our (shared) humanness
VALUES RIGIDITY:
EXAMPLE
ACT APPLIED TO COMMON ISSUES

- Anxiety/Worry
  - Workability of avoidance / behaving based on worries
  - Goes well with exposure techniques
- Depression
  - Don’t have to “feel like it” in order to do what is meaningful
  - Goes well with Behavioral Activation
- Substance Use Treatment
  - Consistent with Motivational Interviewing
  - Goes well with emotion regulation model of substance use
- Health/Medical settings
  - Begin re-orienting to values, even with changes in functioning
  - A softer, gentler way to increase compliance with medical recs
- Acculturation stress
  - Increase flexibility of values expression
  - Values are not inconsistent with religious or cultural beliefs
- Improving communication/family functioning
  - Attention to values as a process can improve communication, understanding, and interpersonal functioning
WHAT TO DO NEXT...

- Get connected
  
  www.contextualscience.org

  - Values based dues get you loads of free documents/handouts, protocols, research articles, etc.

Learn More:

- Lots of great texts to read

- One day workshop on Values in particular here at UNC on April 26, 2019

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SELF-HELP RESOURCES/ADJUNCT TO THERAPY

- Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life
- Finding Life Beyond Trauma
- The Mindfulness & Acceptance Workbook for Depression
- The Happiness Trap
- Living Beyond Your Pain
- The Wisdom to Know the Difference