

UNC School of Social Work Clinical Lecture Series

ACT and Exposure Therapy

A Combined Approach
to Enhance Treatment Engagement

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Outline

- ▶ ERP and ACT: What are they and how do they work?
- ▶ Similarities and differences
- ▶ Synthesizing ERP and ACT ("Acceptance-Based ERP")
 - ▶ Why?
 - ▶ Techniques to help the patient understand how OCD works
 - ▶ Treatment rationale
 - ▶ Shifting from anxiety to willingness
 - ▶ Focusing on values
 - ▶ Implementing ERP from an acceptance perspective

Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) for OCD

- ▶ Theoretical basis
 - ▶ Learning theory of classical and operant conditioning
- ▶ Basic techniques
 - ▶ Confront fears (in vivo, imaginal)
 - ▶ Resist urges to perform rituals
 - ▶ Observe levels of anxiety (SUDS)
- ▶ Mechanisms of action
 - ▶ Habituation
 - ▶ Inhibitory learning
- ▶ Outcome studies
 - ▶ Consistently demonstrates strong efficacy
 - ▶ Some concerns about acceptability and drop out

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for OCD

- ▶ Theoretical basis
 - ▶ Relational frame theory (RFT): cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in relation to one another and to their histories ("functional contextualism")
 - ▶ OCD results from experiential avoidance
- ▶ Basic techniques
 - ▶ Experiential metaphors to address 6 core processes (e.g., acceptance, defusion, values)
- ▶ Mechanisms of action
 - ▶ Enhances psychological flexibility
- ▶ Outcome studies
 - ▶ Promising; more work needed

ERP and ACT

- ▶ How are they similar?
 - ▶ Focus on changing behavior
 - ▶ Broaden patient's engagement with feared stimuli
- ▶ How is ACT different from ERP?
 - ▶ Explicit focus on values
 - ▶ Not concerned about levels of anxiety/fear
 - ▶ No explicit focus on cognitive change
 - ▶ Less directive (no instructions to confront fears or resist rituals)
 - ▶ Relies more on the use of metaphors

Why "Acceptance-Based ERP"?

- ▶ Improve adherence and tolerance
- ▶ Enhance patients' understanding of OCD and its treatment
- ▶ Dissatisfaction with the habituation model
- ▶ Synergy

Understanding how OCD works

- ▶ An ACT perspective on OCD: 3 parts
 - ▶ OCD related inner experiences
 - ▶ Attempts to resist and control these experiences
 - ▶ Interference with quality of life

- ▶ Man in the hole metaphor

Treatment rationale

- ▶ Shifting focus from the “anxiety scale” to the “willingness scale”

- ▶ Emphasizing values
 - ▶ Choosing what direction one wants life to take (not letting OCD choose the direction life goes)
 - ▶ Examples from OCD patients
 - ▶ Values bull's-eye
 - ▶ Moving through a swamp metaphor

BULL'S EYE ILLUSTRATION

My life is just as I want it to be

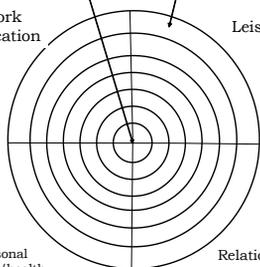
My life is far from how I want it to be

Work
Education

Leisure

Personal
growth/health

Relationships



- ▶ What do you value?
- ▶ What do you want your life to be about?
- ▶ What do each of these categories mean to you?
- ▶ In what ways has OCD been getting in the way of living life in the direction of your values?

Moving through a swamp

- ▶ Swamp = OCD-related inner experiences and triggers
- ▶ Exposure = learning how to handle whatever comes up while still moving forward through swamp
- ▶ Willingness to go into the swamp without resisting (avoiding or using compulsive rituals)
- ▶ Why are we doing this?
 - ▶ Getting dirty and muddy but for a purpose
 - ▶ Not wallowing in the swamp
 - ▶ Things you value are on the other side of the swamp (only way is through it!)

Implementing ERP from an acceptance perspective I

- ▶ Metaphors to set up exposures
 - ▶ “Jerk at the door”
 - ▶ Chessboard
 - ▶ Tug of war with a monster
 - ▶ Passengers on the bus
 - ▶ Milk, Milk, Milk

Implementing ERP from an acceptance perspective II

- ▶ Exposures to increase willingness vs. to reduce anxiety
 - ▶ Choose hierarchy items based on interference with quality of life
 - ▶ Emphasize increasing *willingness* to experience obsessional distress
 - ▶ Rating willingness instead of SUDS
- ▶ Response prevention based on values
