

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Core Principles of ACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, known as “ACT” is a mindfulness-based behavioral therapy that challenges the ground rules of most Western psychology. It utilizes an eclectic mix of metaphor, paradox, and mindfulness skills, along with a wide range of experiential exercises and values-guided behavioral interventions. ACT has proven effective with a diverse range of clinical conditions: depression, OCD, workplace stress, chronic pain, the stress of terminal cancer, anxiety, PTSD, anorexia, heroin abuse, marijuana abuse, and even schizophrenia.

The goal of ACT is to create a rich and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it. “ACT” is a good abbreviation, because this therapy is about taking effective action guided by our deepest values and in which we are fully present and engaged. It is only through mindful action that we can create a meaningful life. Of course, as we attempt to create such a life, we will encounter all sorts of barriers, in the form of unpleasant and unwanted “private experiences” (thoughts, images, feelings, sensations, urges, and memories). ACT reaches mindfulness skills as an effective way to handle these private experiences.

ACT does not have symptom reduction as a goal. This is based on the view that the ongoing attempt to get rid of “symptoms” actually creates a clinical disorder in the first place. As soon as a private experience is labeled a “symptom,” a struggle with the “symptom” is created. A “symptom” is by definition something “pathological” and something we should try to get rid of. In ACT, the aim is to transform our relationship with our difficult thoughts and feelings, so that we no longer perceive them as “symptoms.” Instead, we learn to perceive them as harmless, even if uncomfortable, transient psychological events. Ironically, it is through this process that ACT actually achieves symptom reduction—but as a by-product and not the goal.

Another way in which ACT is unique, is that it doesn't rest on the assumption of “healthy normality.” Western psychology is founded on the assumption of healthy normality: that by their nature, humans are psychologically healthy, and given a healthy environment, lifestyle, and social context (with

opportunities for “self-actualization”), humans will naturally be happy and content. From this perspective, psychological suffering is seen as abnormal; a disease or syndrome driven by unusual pathological processes.

Why does ACT suspect this assumption to be false? If we examine the statistics we find that in any year almost 30 percent of the adult population will suffer from a recognized psychiatric disorder.

The WHO estimates that depression is currently the fourth biggest, most costly, and most debilitating disease in the world, and by soon it will be the second biggest. In any week, one-tenth of the adult population is suffering from clinical depression, and one in five people will suffer from it at some point in their lifetime. Furthermore, one in four adults, at some stage in their lifetime, will suffer from drug or alcohol addiction. There are now over twenty million alcoholics in the United States alone.

More startling and sobering is the finding that almost one in two people will go through a stage in life when they consider suicide seriously, and will struggle with it for a period of two weeks or more. Scarier still, one in ten people at some point attempt to kill themselves.

In addition, consider the many forms of psychological suffering that do not constitute “clinical disorders”—loneliness, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness, low self-esteem, existential angst, and pain associated with issues such as racism, bullying, sexism, domestic violence, and divorce. Clearly, even though our standard of living is higher than ever before in recorded history, psychological suffering is all around us.

ACT assumes that the psychological processes of a normal human mind are often destructive, and create psychological suffering for us all, sooner or later. Furthermore, ACT postulates that the root of this suffering is human language itself. Human language is a highly complex system of symbols, which includes words, images, sounds, facial expressions and physical gestures. We use this language in two domains: public and private. The public use of language includes speaking, talking, miming, gesturing, writing, painting, singing, dancing and so on. The private use of language includes thinking, imagining, daydreaming, planning, visualizing and so on. A more technical term for the private use of language is “cognition.”

The mind is not a “thing” or an “object.” Rather, it is a complex set of cognitive processes—such as analyzing, comparing, evaluating, planning, remembering, visualizing—and all of these processes rely on human language. Thus in ACT, the word “mind” is used as a metaphor for human language itself.

ACT offers clients an alternative to experiential avoidance through a variety of therapeutic interventions. In general, clients come to therapy with an agenda of emotional control. They want to get rid of their depression, anxiety, urges to drink, traumatic memories, low self-esteem, fear of rejection, anger, grief and so on. In ACT, there is no attempt to try to reduce, change, avoid, suppress or control these private experiences. Instead, clients learn to reduce the impact and influence of unwanted thoughts and feelings through the effective use of mindfulness. Clients learn to stop fighting with their private experiences—to open up to them, make room for them, and allow them to come and go without a struggle. The time, energy, and money that they wasted previously on trying to control how they feel is then invested in taking effective action (guided by their values) to change their life for the better.

ACT interventions focus around two main processes: Developing acceptance of unwanted private experiences which are out of personal control; Commitment and action toward living a valued life.

Six Core Principle of ACT

- Defusion
- Acceptance
- Contact with the present moment
- The Observing Self
- Values
- Committed action

Each principle has its own specific methodology, exercises, homework and metaphors. All will be discussed in the sessions provided.