

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

("ACT" said as one word)

What is ACT? [material written by an anonymous VA intern, previously available on the web]

ACT is a scientifically-based psychotherapy that considers suffering to be directly connected to our relationship with our thoughts and feelings. When we are suffering, we try to rid ourselves of painful experiences such as anxiety, sadness, negative thoughts, bad memories, etc. Sometimes this effort to eliminate the pain becomes a source of pain itself. So in ACT, we work on viewing thoughts and feelings with a different stance or attitude. The ultimate goal is to help you build a better life based on your values.

The main goals of ACT are to (1) help you accept what is out of your personal control, (2) clarify what is truly important and meaningful to you, and (3) commit to taking action that enriches your life. Another way to think of the goals of ACT is

A – Accept your thoughts and feelings

C – Choose a valued direction

T – Take action

What will I learn in ACT?

ACT is not based on helping you to win the struggle with your unhelpful thoughts or unpleasant feelings, but rather ACT is about helping you to step out of the struggle.

In ACT, we do not work on making you think differently; instead we help you to "see" your thoughts in such a way that they don't continue to have a negative impact on you.

In ACT, we also do not try to change emotions; rather we focus on acceptance of emotions in such a way that you can "carry" emotions with you and still live the kind of life you want to live.

How is ACT different from other types of psychotherapy?

ACT is a very active therapy. Your therapist may ask you to participate in experiential exercises in session to help you learn new skills. You and your therapist will also develop activities for you to practice in-between sessions.

[MINDFULNESS] is one of the key components of this approach. You can think of mindfulness as the practice of living in the present moment and experiencing things without judgment. See next page for more.]

Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won't). – James Baraz, author

Mindfulness

What is Mindfulness? Very simply, it is a focus on **HERE and NOW**. When we are mindful, we are attending to how we are thinking and feeling and noticing what is around us **RIGHT NOW**, not what we did yesterday or how we are planning for tomorrow.

Mindfulness can also be a type of meditation. Like most forms of meditation: you are encouraged to focus on your breath and body sensations. Breathing in... and breathing out....

Many times when people begin some form of meditation or relaxation, they find that lots of thoughts intrude. You might start thinking about your grocery list, the argument you had with your neighbor yesterday, an upsetting memory, the plans you have for the week-end, or whether you're doing mindfulness **right**.

Mindfulness encourages you to bring an attitude of **ACCEPTANCE** (aka willingness, openness) to the distractions that will always get in the way of focusing on the present moment. In mindfulness, you are encouraged to notice the thoughts that get in the way, rather than to push them away. Even when thoughts are unpleasant or upsetting, in mindfulness you are encouraged to observe them.

“This too shall pass.”

One of the important values in mindfulness is to remember that distracting thoughts—even unpleasant ones—will pass. Thoughts are like clouds floating by in the sky. Just like the clouds are part of the sky, but they are not the whole sky, your thoughts are part of you, but they are not all of you. In mindfulness, you can imagine that your thoughts and feelings are the clouds in the sky, while your mind is the sky itself. For instance, you can watch your thoughts and feelings gently drifting across the sky or sometimes blowing strongly as in a storm...as you notice thoughts and feelings, you can place them in the clouds and notice/observe them, as they pass across the sky.Notice yourself as you become distracted, or immersed in the clouds, losing sight of the sky....notice how the clouds can be very light and wispy, or dark and menacing...notice how even when the clouds cover the sky, the sky exists behind them.

Mindfulness is also be practiced with an attitude of **NOT JUDGING** the thoughts, feelings, sensations, or perceptions that float through your brain and body. We can leave behind our judgments about whether they are good or bad, true or false, healthy or unhealthy, important or trivial. They are just what they are. We can observe our thoughts and feelings as they enter our minds without making evaluations of them. What makes mindfulness work ultimately? **PRACTICE PRACTICE PRACTICE !!**