



# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

## Introduction

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an evidence-based treatment that is helpful in treating mental health conditions. An evidence-based treatment is a treatment that has many studies supporting that it is effective for helping people that have mental health conditions. ACT is used to treat a variety of mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, and psychosis. It can also help people cope with the stress of medical conditions such as chronic pain, substance abuse, and diabetes.<sup>1, 2</sup> ACT may also be a helpful therapy for people with autism and learning disabilities.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup> If you or someone you know is struggling with a mental health issue, ACT might be a suitable option.

This fact sheet will explain:

- 1) How ACT works;
- 2) What a person can expect to do in ACT therapy;
- 3) How to make therapy successful, and
- 4) How to find an ACT provider if you feel that ACT is the right option.

## How ACT Works

ACT helps people experience their difficult thoughts and emotions while also pursuing a life filled with purpose. ACT works by increasing psychological flexibility, which means to be flexible with our thoughts and feelings. Flexibility is the ability and willingness to be open to new experiences and make positive changes towards values or things we care about. Psychological flexibility involves six different skills: 1) contacting the present moment; 2) acceptance; 3) defusion; 4) self-as-context; 5) identifying values and 6) committed action toward values.<sup>4, 5</sup>

### 1) *Contacting the Present Moment*

Contacting the present moment is the ability to pay attention to what is happening in-the-moment in your mind and body. This is done by a process called mindfulness. Mindfulness is using your senses to pay attention to yourself or surroundings, on purpose and without judgement.<sup>3</sup> Contacting the present moment is important because the here and now is the only time it is possible to take action.

### 2) *Acceptance*

Sometimes it can be difficult for people to contact the present moment because of their negative feelings or thoughts about the present moment. It is not uncommon for people to resist accepting what is happening in the present and think 'why me?' or 'this isn't fair!'. For example, a person might feel anxious every time they go to a social event, so they decide to completely avoid social events. Acceptance is the act of fully accepting the present by opening up to the experience instead of fighting it. Sometimes, this can be done by allowing yourself to accept all feelings, even those that are negative or make you feel guilty.

### 3) *Defusion*

Defusion is a way to cope with unhelpful thoughts and uncomfortable feelings. Many times, problems arise because you believe that your unhelpful thoughts are true. For example, if you have the thought that you are not lovable and you believe that thought is true, it can lead you to other uncomfortable feelings that bring on more unhelpful thoughts. Defusion is the process of distancing those thoughts and feelings without judgement and recognizing that they are just thoughts and feelings, not facts.

#### 4) *Self-as-context*

Self-as-context is the part of you that can mindfully observe thoughts and feelings, which makes acceptance and defusion possible. In ACT, this is often called the observing self. Accessing the observing self allows you to realize that you are not your thoughts and feelings by taking a step back from them and gently exploring and observing them.

#### 5) *Values*

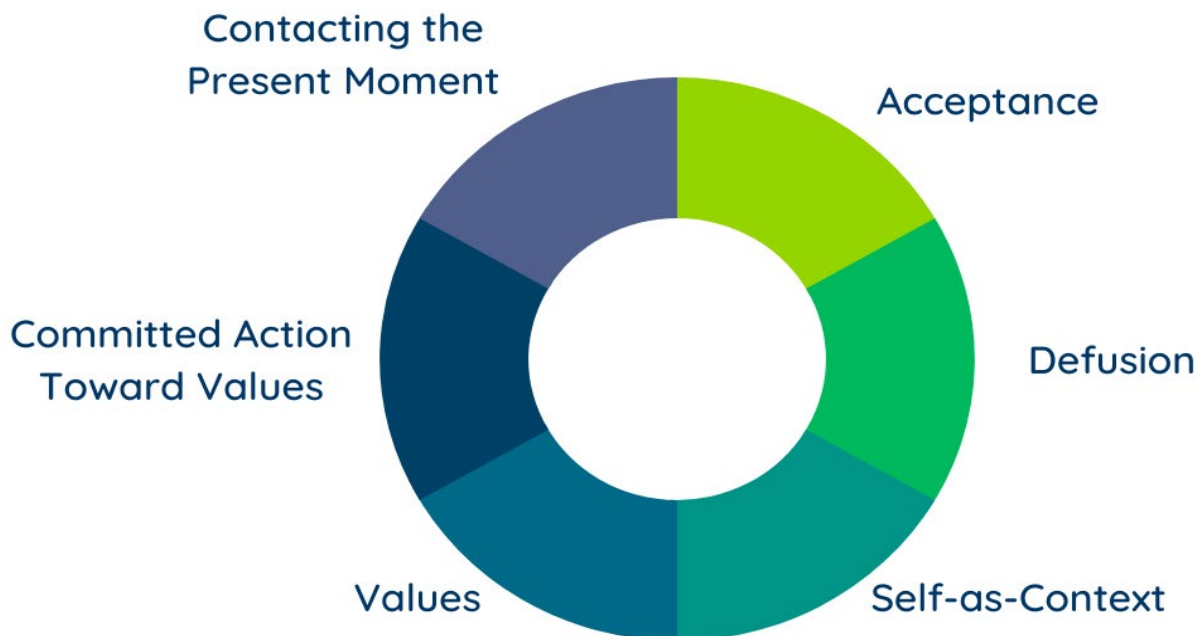
Values are traits that people find important to them and the activities that give life meaning. Values are about how you want to behave toward yourself at others. Everyone has a different set of values. Some examples of values are acting kindly, generously,

adventurously, creatively or honestly. Knowing your values can help guide in knowing what choices are important for you to make in your life.

#### 6) *Committed Action Towards Values*

When you learn to use all the skills that ACT teaches, you will be better prepared to take actions that bring you closer to your values and which will help you feel more fulfillment in your life. As you practice living and clarifying your values, challenges will likely come up that include uncomfortable or unpleasant thoughts and feelings. As challenges arise, you will practice the skills that you need to flexibly work toward your personal values and make behavior changes.

## Psychological Flexibility



## What to Expect in Therapy

If you choose to see an ACT provider, there are many activities you might do. When you first meet with a mental health provider, they will tell you a little bit about how therapy works, how long therapy should take, and ask if you have any questions or concerns. Be sure to ask any questions you have about the therapy process and let the provider know if you do not understand what is being said. It is important that you feel comfortable asking questions, expressing your needs, and that your relationship with the provider is a good fit for you. Let the provider know if you will need accommodations so they can be made ahead of time.

Next, the provider will ask you to tell them about yourself, your recent moods, problems that you have that you would like help with, and what you think your strengths are as a person. As therapy continues, the provider will help you identify ways that you can become more psychologically flexible so that you can overcome uncomfortable thoughts and emotions rather than avoiding them.

The provider will likely help you identify your values by talking to you about what you find important in your life. They will also teach you ways to cope with unpleasant thoughts and emotions that can get in the way of living your values. To explain these concepts, ACT providers often make comparisons of ACT concepts to other objects or stories. If you do not understand the comparisons the provider is using, be sure to let your provider know and ask them to explain it to you again or in a different way. The provider will also help you practice these skills by guiding you through various mindfulness exercises or other activities so that you can practice being more flexible. Then, you and the provider might work together to come up with activities that you can do outside of therapy as homework, so that you can better improve on the skills you are learning and live a life based on your values.<sup>4</sup>

## How to Make Therapy Successful

Though the mental health provider will have tools and activities that can be helpful, you as the client also play a significant role in making therapy successful. Before seeing a provider, start identifying

values that are important to you in your life. Think of the values currently guiding your life, and identify some that you would like to improve on.<sup>4</sup> When you meet with a provider, it is important to form a trusting relationship with them. You may want to ask some questions to get to know them and make sure they are a good fit for you. It's also important to have a conversation with a provider to find out if they have experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities and if they are able to make any accommodations you may need. As you talk more about your values and what you want to accomplish in therapy, make sure that your provider is willing to support you changing your behavior to serve your values. If you ever feel hesitant about the therapy process, be honest with your provider and let them know how you are feeling. It might also be helpful to invite someone you trust to come to therapy with you. This will help you feel supported in living your values and you will have someone that can help with your homework outside of therapy. If you choose to bring someone to therapy, make sure that therapy is still focused on you as the client.<sup>9</sup>

## Helpful Questions to Ask Your Provider

- 1) Are you comfortable working with someone with a developmental disability?**
- 2) How do you meet your client's needs?**
- 3) Can you help me set some goals that focus on my strengths?**
- 4) What will my treatment plan look like?**

## How to Find an ACT Provider

If you feel that that ACT would be helpful for you, the next step would be to find an ACT provider. Providers often have websites or online profiles where they will share information about the method of therapy they use. You can also call their office to ask. Some websites have the option for you to search for providers that use ACT methods.

Websites that allow you to search for providers:

[Psychology Today's Types of Therapy and Therapist Search Tool](#)

[GoodTherapy's Find a Therapist Tool](#)

[Association for Contextual Behavioral Science's Online Database of ACT Therapists](#)

## Conclusion

ACT is a method of therapy that helps live in service to your values by helping you be more flexible with unhelpful thoughts and feelings rather than avoiding them. If you enjoy mindfulness exercises, or you want to become more psychologically flexible, ACT might be a good fit. ACT has been found to be helpful in treating various mental health conditions and could help you or someone you know cope with difficult thoughts and emotions and live a more fulfilling life.<sup>1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8</sup>

## Contributors

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