

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: A Christian Introduction to Application



Timothy A. Sisemore, Ph.D.
Richmont Graduate University

Simple Mindfulness Exercise

- ☞ **Stop** what you are doing
- ☞ **Take** a few breaths
- ☞ **Observe** your
 - Body
 - Feelings
 - Thoughts
- ☞ **Proceed**

Why ACT?

- ✎ Rigorously grounded in science
- ✎ And supported empirically with many disorders
- ✎ Yet may be most compatible therapy with Christianity I've seen
- ✎ So, a valuable resource for an evidence-based practice for Christian clients and therapists
- ✎ Both the “ends” of ACT match
 - Pursuing a life of what one values
- ✎ And the “means” to pursue the goal
 - Accepting rather than focusing on suffering

Core Problem Leading to Suffering

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLEXIBILITY



Forms Twin Problems Behind Suffering in ACT

∞ Cognitive Fusion

- An “allergy” to our own thoughts
- When people believe the literal contents of their minds and they fuse with that content
- Thought and referent are bound too tightly together
 - E.g., I’m stupid and not deterred by evidence to contrary
- Caught up also with the “right” way to be at a moment
- Work to maintain control over such feelings
- This process IS disorder
- Self vs. Spirit-control
- Overcommitment to certain idea of the Christian life

∞ Experiential Avoidance

- Flows directly from effort to maintain cognitive fusion and to eliminate distressing feelings
 - Yet this leads to upsurge in the same feelings
- ∞ *Thus ACT holds it is psychologically healthy to have unpleasant thoughts and feelings as well as pleasant ones*
- *This is “clean suffering”*
 - *Other is “dirty suffering”*
- ∞ *Jesus dreaded the cross, but did not try to avoid it*

Comprehending Mindfulness

- ☞ Based on notion that we struggle to keep attention on the present
 - Clinging to past problems
 - Worrying about future possibilities
 - Judging and problem solving in the present
 - Evading entering into the present moment because of electronics
- ☞ ACT does not include any formal meditation activities
 - Though moving in that direction
- ☞ “Our true home is in the present moment.”
 - (Thich Nhat Hanh)
- ☞ ACT differs with Buddhism (and many psychological applications of mindfulness) in the purpose of mindfulness:

Evaluating Mindfulness

- ☞ In Buddhism, this moves toward no-self and rising above the vicissitudes of life
 - Moves one toward nirvana where one achieves total indifference
- ☞ So, nirvana is essentially a negative reinforcement vs. heaven as a positive one
- ☞ Valueless/desireless; so above morality
- ☞ While Buddhist meditation emphasizes emptying, Christian practice aims to contemplate God who is the ultimate reality
 - E.g. the Bible promotes meditating on God's precepts, contrasting with indifference
- ☞ Other therapies use it primarily for relaxation
- ☞ **Use in ACT, though, is to promote present moment awareness**
- ☞ **And thus “defuse” from interpretive processes**
- ☞ Christians encouraged to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10)
 - Seems consistent with being “mindful” of God moment by moment
 - But with content and hope
 - [Peaceful Meditation on Nature \[& God\] HD - YouTube](#)

Translating Mindfulness

- ☞ **Not the same as meditation**
 - Though one must keep one's attention present to meditate
- ☞ Present moment awareness is not a no self event, but one shared with God
- ☞ Called “the sacrament of the present moment”
- ☞ Not just observing the sunset, but worshipping God in the process
- ☞ Skills facilitate worship
- ☞ Yet goal is to be “mindful” of the Word, not wordless
- ☞ *Mindfulness per ACT* can help believers observe fusion of words (like “forgiveness”) as intellectual content separate from external reality
- ☞ The present moment is when and where God is with us
 - Don't pray “God be with us” so much as that we'll be with God



Psychological Flexibility



“Stuck, not broken”

Comprehending Psychological Flexibility

- ☞ Health is psychological flexibility
- ☞ Has six core processes as we'll see
- ☞ Sees pain as natural
- ☞ But suffering comes when psychological rigidity prevents the person from adapting to internal and external contexts
- ☞ SO, CLIENTS SEEN AS STUCK – not broken (needing healing) or ILL (needing medication)
- ☞ “The ultimate goal of ACT is to bring verbal cognitive processes under better contextual control and to have the client spend more time in contact with the positive consequences of his or her actions immediately in the present as part of a valued path” (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 65)
- ☞ [Example](#)

Evaluating and Translating Psychological Flexibility

- ∞ Valued goal is following Christ
- ∞ Christians easily form “rules” for
 - What this should look like
 - How it should happen
- ∞ Become rigid in seeking wrong goals for faith (inconsistent with gospel)
 - “This is how everyone’s faith should look”
 - “I must never feel this way if I am to be a good Christian”
- ∞ Techniques help, but the Holy Spirit is seen as active in change as well
- ∞ Maybe translate health as “psychospiritual flexibility”
 - Blocked by fusion or experiential avoidance
 - Open to God’s call without demanding a specific plan
 - Like Abraham leaving home
 - More spiritual adventure than spiritual step-by-step plan

Aspects of Psychospiritual Flexibility

∞ Mindfulness and acceptance processes

- Flexible attention to the present moment
- Acceptance
- Defusion
- Self-as-context
- Seeing what God is up to right now
 - Trusting his direction, like walking a road on a dark night with a person familiar with it

∞ Commitment and behavioral activation processes

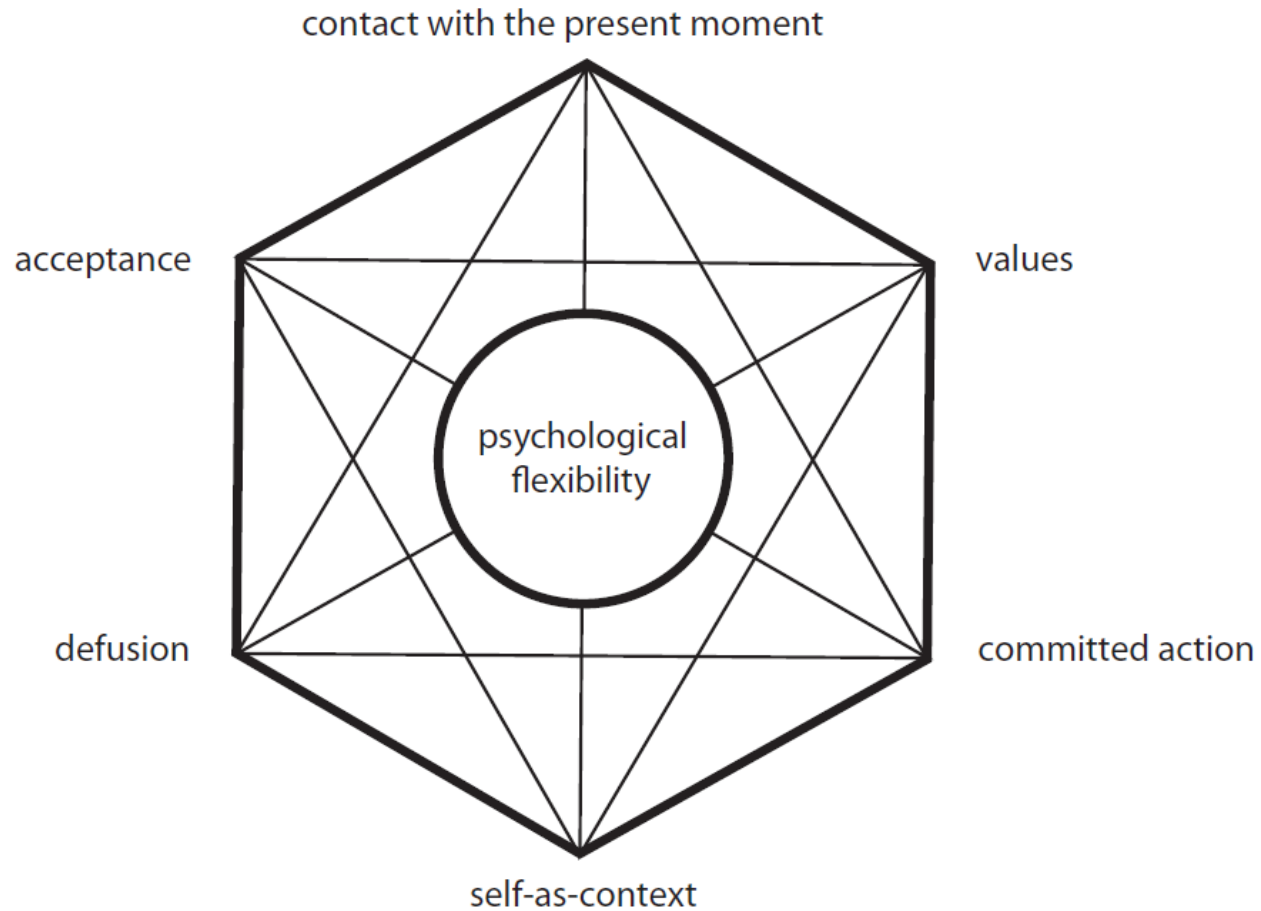
- Flexible attention to the present moment
- Self-as-context
- Values
- Committed action
- Abandonment to divine providence
 - Following what he has at each moment
 - Rather than rigid idea of “God’s plan for my life”

Let's Summarize

- ☞ Overall, ACT can be translated nicely into a Christian-accommodative form
- ☞ Keep in mind the nuances of language we've discussed
- ☞ And the clear distinction of mindfulness vs. meditation - and the ACT use of mindfulness
- ☞ And careful that the "ought" direction for Christian values is truly valued by clients and not just stated

Summary

The Hexaflex



Pulling It All Together

- ☞ These 6 make 30 directional relationships that are interrelated
- ☞ **“ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness processes and commitment and behavioral activation to produce psychological flexibility.”** (Hayes, et al., 2012, p. 97)
- ☞ Wide range of studies support the elements of ACT as effective across a wide range of problems
- ☞ It is a model, not a specific technology
 - Thus no “play by play” therapy approach

The Therapeutic Relationship in ACT



- ∞ ACT is intensive and experiential
- ∞ Therapist must model psychological flexibility
- ∞ Many ACT skills are “contingency shaped”
 - I.e., learned through experience
- ∞ Collaborative
 - “We’re in this stew together”
- ∞ Open to spirituality
- ∞ Research shows those just learning ACT are less comfortable than with CBT, but more effective!

Unique Aspects of ACT Assessment

∞ Identify Dead Person's Goals

- Any goal a corpse can do better than a live person

∞ Functional analysis:

- Know the time line of the problem
- Trajectory of the problem: is it getting better, worse?
- Antecedents and consequences, both public and private
- Here is where behavioral therapy skills help

∞ Values interview:

- Work
- Love
- Play
- Avoid “ought” values to identify actual values

∞ EXPLORE:

- What have you tried?
- How did it work?
- What did it cost you?

Psychological (In)Flexibility Processes

☞ Can client stay centered in the present moment? (Present/self domain)

- Can client speak of problem in past without getting stuck?
- Worry or rumination?
- Distractibility?
 - Especially if avoidance, e.g. if trauma in past
- Dissociation

☞ Self-as-process

- Fusion of verbal conceptions with the self
- I = problem

☞ Can the client stay open? (Acceptance/defusion domain)

- Look for avoided content and avoidant behavior
- Questionnaires available also

☞ Fusion

- Can client describe without comparing and evaluating?
- More justifying than telling?

Psychological (In)Flexibility Processes

- ☞ Can the client engage life?
(Values/Commitment domain)
 - Worst problem is when the presenting issues cause client to lose contact with valued domains of living
- ☞ Commitment
 - Impulsivity, immobility, persistent avoidance
- ☞ Can rate each of the dimensions 1-10 and total to track progress



ACT Explanations

- ☞ **How would you relate the following to psychological (in)flexibility?**
- ☞ John and Sally come for marital counseling; she complains he works too much; he complains she complains too much
- ☞ Albert won't speak in public as he fears he'll be laughed at
- ☞ Mary feels she'll never be a good Christian because she went through a period of sexual promiscuity in college
- ☞ Jerome's wife left him and he believes he is a spiritual failure and doomed to loneliness without her
- ☞ Carol witnessed a murder three years ago and can't get it off of her mind
- ☞ Ralph won't go to job interviews because he is confident he'll not get the job anyway
- ☞ Cindy feels distant from God because He won't answer her prayer for a husband

Working with the Six Processes



The Six Processes



Developing Willingness and Acceptance:

Open Up

Prelude: Creative Hopelessness

- ✎ Not a term to use with clients
- ✎ Amounts to confronting CONTROL as an agenda
- ✎ Control strategies are things we do to try to get ride of bad thoughts and feelings
- ✎ Motivated by experiential avoidance
 - For Christians, e.g., prayer for “rescue” is an example
- ✎ Demonstrating limited control
 - Don’t think about an orange elephant
 - Delete a memory
 - Make your leg no numb

In Short, to Work on Control

- ∞ What have you tried?
- ∞ How has it worked?
- ∞ What has it cost?



Developing Willingness/Acceptance

- ☞ Concedes inevitability of pain
- ☞ AND our tendency (based in language and culture) to try to avoid it
 - **Willingness:** “being open to one’s whole experience while also actively and intentionally choosing to move in a valued life direction” (Luoma et al. 2007, p. 24)
- ☞ Willingness is an action
 - Tolerance is a step in the direction, but falls short of being willing to accept adversity
- ☞ Willingness is not a feeling
 - Don’t have to feel willing to be willing
 - Don’t have to want to feel negative affect to be willing to accept it
- ☞ Willingness is active
 - Thus preferred in ACT to “acceptance” which may imply passivity
 - Active obedience to Christ vs. being dragged along
 - Stepping out of the boat, so to speak

Willingness/Acceptance, cont.

- ☞ ACT therapists engage in specific activities to structure the possibility the client choosing to experience unpleasant things
 - Recall clean vs. dirty pain
- ☞ Living life just to feel “good” is not to live in service of deep values
- ☞ Willingness and defusion
 - We often fuse experience and our verbal conceptions of it
 - Then our cognitive content may override the opportunities of the situation
 - May be fused with ideas that negative thoughts or emotions are bad
 - Or that health and wholeness means all positive feelings
 - So may seek strategies to control rather than accept the negative feelings

Undermining Control

∞ “Suppose I have you hooked up to the best polygraph machine that’s ever been built. This is a perfect machine, the most sensitive ever made. When you are all wired up to it, there is no way you can be emotionally aroused or anxious without the machine detecting it. So, I tell you that you have a very simple task here, namely, all you have to do is stay relaxed! If you get the least bit nervous, however, I will know it. I know you want to try hard, but I want to give you an extra incentive – so, I also have a .44 Magnum that I will hold to your head. If you just stay relaxed, I won’t blow your brains out, but if you get nervous (and I’ll know it because you’re wired up to this perfect machine), I’m going to have to kill you. So, just relax! ... What do you think would happen? ... Guess what you’d get? ... The tiniest bit of anxiety would be terrifying. [You’d just know you’d get nervous, and then] “Here it comes!” Bam! How could it be otherwise?

- Hayes et al., 2012, p. 182
- Chinese Finger Trap

Two Methods on Willingness

Undermining Control

- ☞ “Draw out the system”
 - “With what are you struggling?”
 - Show it is an emotion or self-evaluation
- ☞ Examine **workability**
 - Have efforts proved successful?
 - How does strategy limited living out one’s values?
- ☞ *Creative hopelessness*
 - A stance of self-validation
 - Maybe client has done all to follow strategy
 - Conceding it is hopeless opens up to new options (creativity)
- ☞ How so with Adrian?

Practicing Acceptance

- ☞ Teach willingness
 - Embracing each moment as it unfolds
 - It is a choice to be willing to be present in every moment
- ☞ Practice it
 - Many exercises
 - ACT APP: dealing with discomfort
 - Begin with single contexts/feelings
 - Be a mental play by play announcer
 - [The Unwelcome Party Guest - an Acceptance & Commitment Therapy \(ACT\) Metaphor - YouTube](#)

Acceptance Metaphor

∞ Ball in a Pool

- What if what you're doing with these thoughts, memories, and feelings is like fighting with a ball in a pool. You don't like these things. You don't want them, and you want them out of your life. So you try to push the ball under the water and out of your consciousness. However, the ball keeps popping back up to the surface, so you have to keep pushing it down or holding it under the water. Struggling with the ball in this way keeps it close to you, and it's tiring and futile. If you were to let go of the ball, it would pop up and float on the surface near you, and you probably wouldn't like it. But if you let it float there for a while without grabbing it, it could eventually drift away to the other side of the pool. And even if it didn't, at least you'd be able to use your arms and enjoy your swim, rather than spend your time fighting. (Stoddard et al., p. 39)

The Six Processes



Undermining Cognitive Fusion:

Watch Your Thinking

Undermining Cognitive Fusion

- ☞ Suffering often comes from spending too much time “lost” in our thoughts
 - Being “in” them or looking “from” them
- ☞ Defusion teaches awareness of this and skills at looking “at” thought and feeling processes
- ☞ EXERCISE:
 - Taking your mind for a walk
- ☞ When to use these techniques?
 - When client is stuck in problematic thinking
 - Being overly literal in word meanings
 - Controlling thinking
 - Justifying behavior
 - Insisting on being right even at personal expense
 - All tend to have thoughts excessively structure situations
 - Akin to negative automatic thoughts or even core beliefs
 - Now *defuse rather than debate*

Ways to Defuse Cognition

- ∞ Teach limits of language in rediscovering experience
 - Words can't express all one knows about experience
 - E.g., describe how to tie your shoes
 - Ask client to tell how to walk to door and keep asking "And how do you do that?"
- ∞ Create distance between thought and thinker; feeling and feeler
 - E.g. how used in OCD
 - "You don't have to believe everything you think."
 - Write obsessive thought on a balloon and play with it
 - Looking at thoughts rather than *from* them
 - Monitor thoughts and their flow
 - EXERCISE: leaves on a stream
"Orange, orange" exercise
 - What does God see in your situation?
 - Politician maneuver: Won't give that the dignity of a response
 - Drunk coming down road...everyone else ignores and you get onto him. Result?

Ways to Defuse Cognition, cont.

- ∞ Reveal hidden properties of language
 - Specifically, description vs. evaluation
 - Goal is not to avoid all evaluation, but to be flexible
 - Say negative statements in different voices/accents much like “Orange” exercise
 - Say relevant and irrelevant statements to client’s problems and evaluate if judging it or not
 - Client writes his or her story with interpretations
 - Then rewrites with different interpretive plan
- ∞ In session observations
 - Rephrase statements
 - E.g., “I am **having the thought that** I’m worthless” rather than “I’m worthless.”
 - Cue client by saying “And what is that story in service of”?
 - Or, “If we assume you’re correct, now what?”

The Six Processes



Getting in Contact with the Present Moment:

Be Here Now

What is Contact with the Present Moment?

- ☞ Bringing awareness to internal and external experiences on a moment by moment basis
- ☞ AKA mindfulness, or attention training
- ☞ Key is not to learn mindfulness as end, but as means to end of psychological flexibility
- ☞ And careful not to let client believe relaxation is the goal



Present Moment: Why?

- ☞ Cognitive fusion can catch us up in states of negative evaluations
- ☞ We may live in a world as conceptualized by our minds rather than opportunities presenting themselves moment by moment
 - May be caught up in our own ideas of God's plan and miss his showing us his moment-by-moment plan
- ☞ Contact with the here and now undermines avoidance and struggle
 - E.g. a “no show” can make us question our effectiveness, or cause us to ask “God, what is it you have for me during this time?”
 - These are relational frames
- ☞ Enables one to receive or take what occurs in life
 - Can't change the past
 - Future events haven't yet happened
- ☞ PRACTICE: hold thought in your mind and raise hand when losing it
 - Versus “white bear” experiment

Present Moment: Helpful when...

- ☞ Client seems out of touch with feelings
- ☞ Therapy too intellectualized
- ☞ Trouble tracking ebb and flow of therapy
- ☞ Bound up with a well-practiced pattern
- ☞ Misses opportunities for valued choices



Promoting Contact with Present Moment

- ☞ May have to work on self-as-context first
- ☞ Use structured mindfulness exercises
- ☞ E.g., Leaves on a Stream
 - Christians might picture laying thoughts at the foot of the cross
 - Observe events without judging or trying to control
- ☞ Observe each experience as it comes
 - Move from internal to external
- ☞ [Easy Mindfulness Exercises – YouTube](#)
- ☞ [Mindfulness](#) practice
- ☞ Notice in therapy when person jumps from the moment
 - E.g. if changes subject if emotion comes up
- ☞ Develop this skill in relationships
 - Deal with real people, not “cartoon characters” built out of preconceptions
- ☞ Overall goal: develop flexibility in ability to allocate attention
 - And thus to be freer from fixation on certain thoughts

The Six Processes



Distinguishing Self as Context:

Pure Awareness

Aspects of Self

Self as Concept

- ☞ Important in many ways
- ☞ The ways we say “I am”
 - The beliefs about who we are
 - Versus the Divine “I am” which defines, not describes, God as a Person
- ☞ This is the mental stuff we call our “identity”
- ☞ Helpful socially
 - “I am a psychologist, husband, etc.”
- ☞ But can be destructive if we are controlled by rigid (and inappropriate) concepts
 - “I am a loser”

Self as Context

- ☞ RFT explains how social training leads to both senses of self
 - I/you is a relational frame, as is here/there; now/then
 - So I/here/now is a context
- ☞ Essentially a social self
- ☞ And a transcendent one
 - Our experience is in a sense separate from our experience
 - E.g., “observing ego”
 - It is the “I-ness” from which I view others
 - It is a timeless me
 - Might be seen as my walking with God moment by moment

Why Distinguish These?

- ∞ We are not one or the other
- ∞ But helpful in decreasing attachment to a conceptualized self
- ∞ Create a context for acceptance and defusion that is not threatening
- ∞ Fosters greater flexibility
- ∞ E.g., “I can’t stand this feeling”
 - Triggers emotion and avoidance for one who sees this as concept
 - But context allows to “observe” the feeling and that it passes



When to Address This?

- ⌘ When attachment to a conceptualized self hinders progress
 - E.g. so tied to identity as a victim
 - Must help separate from content of the mind here
- ⌘ Finding a secure place to contact/confront unpleasant emotions, memories, thoughts, and sensations
 - We have these, but are not these



Putting It into Practice

- ∞ Mindfulness and defusing are helpful with this, too
- ∞ Chessboard metaphor
 - You are the board; thoughts and feelings are the pieces
- ∞ Pick an Identity
 - Play role to show it is not who we are
 - Consider how we confuse actors with their roles in movies/TV
- ∞ “I” is more than experiences
- ∞ Center, then observe an event, such as eating breakfast. Describe it keeping in mind the perspective from which it is seen.
- ∞ If fused to self-evaluations, don’t “correct” the evaluations (a la CBT)
 - Rather, see self as separate from evaluations
- ∞ Once operating as context, can see thoughts and feelings without avoidance of fusion
 - E.g., might say “I can’t” but do it anyway
 - EXERCISE TO PRACTICE THIS (disobey one’s own statements)
- ∞ Spirituality as a form of perspective taking
- ∞ Seeing something as God sees it

The Six Processes



Defining Valued Directions:
Know What Matters

What are Values?

- ∞ Life directions that are
 - Verbally constructed
 - Global
 - Desired
 - Chosen
- ∞ Heart of meaning and purpose
- ∞ In a world where you could choose to have your life be about something, what would you choose?

Role of Values in ACT

- ∞ Often clients are lost in escape, avoidance, and fusion, and values gives constructive direction
 - Though true values need to be distinguished from “ought” values
- ∞ They are linked to choice and provide response flexibility and motivation
- ∞ Motivate movement through tougher ACT processes
- ∞ Provide consistent direction
- ∞ Effective for goal setting – GOALS being specific, concrete targets or outcomes; VALUES are ongoing patterns and direction
 - I want to be more active in my church vs. I value spiritual community
- ∞ Pursuing God’s ends, once chosen, invokes biblical promises

Qualities of Effective Values Conversations

☞ Vitality

- Draw out client's hopes and dreams regardless of emotions
- Recall past experiences relating to values
- Ask: Who inspires you?

☞ Choice

- Selected freely without avoidance, rigid rules, or social manipulation
- Not a reasoned conclusion, but an embraced one
 - (Cp. Carly Simon's "That's the Way" as embracing an inevitability to marriage)

☞ Present oriented

- Bring future events (e.g. attending a sibling's graduation) into present as values are not just future, but now

☞ Willing vulnerability

- May bring tears as client discusses this

☞ Handling denial of values

- May associate pain with caring

Method of Value Discussions

- ☞ Guide clients to contact values and state them explicitly
 - Heroes worksheet
- ☞ Coach clients to stand for values
 - E.g. stating them publicly
- ☞ Help clients examine current life directions in relation to values
- ☞ Values as directions vs. goals as specific outcomes
- ☞ Therapist exercise (Luoma p. 146)



The Six Processes



Building Patterns of Committed Action:
Do What It Takes

I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life.

And that is why I Succeeded.

~ Michael Jordan



www.gauraw.com

Committed Action

- ☞ The “step-by-step process of acting to create a whole life, a life of integrity, true to one’s deepest wishes and longings” (Luoma et al., 2007, p. 158)
- ☞ The ability to respond
 - To link action to values in any situation
- ☞ Here traditional behavioral models are incorporated into ACT
 - E.g. exposure
 - Behavioral management



Thoughts on Committed Action

- ∞ Willingness to endure hardship in the “swamp” allows committed action toward the pleasant fields on the other side
 - Cp. Jesus enduring cross for joy set before Him
- ∞ Key is translating abstract values into committed action
- ∞ Stepping out on faith



Methods for Committed Action

- ∞ Identify valued life goals and link to an action plan
 - Best if high priorities to client
 - And activates unpleasant internal experiences
 - Should be specific and measurable
 - Practical and within ability
 - Avoid goals of being “less” this or that
 - Publicly commit to goals
- ∞ Link to client needs
- ∞ Keep commitments in the presence of emotional barriers
 - E.g., exposure used in service of values, but still challenging
 - Defusion and acceptance enable a more effective exposure

- ∞ Appreciating qualities of committed action
 - Use metaphors to promote growth and vitality toward goals
 - E.g. playing a game rather than commenting on it
 - Journey metaphors
- ∞ Build patterns of action over time
 - E.g. in losing weight
- ∞ Watch for relapses and slips

In Conclusion

- ∞ ACT offers a view of health and disorder that is easily incorporated with Christian faith
- ∞ While there are Buddhist ideas, not used in service of religion
- ∞ The model can be translated into Christian approach
- ∞ It is flexible, useful, and effective
- ∞ Consider membership in ACBS (contextualscience.org)



Thanks for Coming!



tsisemore@richmont.edu

www.richmont.edu/research