

FACT SHEET: What is Acceptance & Commitment Therapy

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has been developed by Steven Hayes, Kirk Stosahl and Kelly Wilson (2004).
- The overarching goal of ACT is: to **accept** what is out of your personal control, and **commit** to action that improves and enriches your life.
- ACT is considered part of the “third wave” of behaviour therapy for anxiety and depression. The first and second wave of psychological interventions focussed largely on changing thoughts or behaviours. ACT differs from these approaches as it does not have the goal of symptom reduction (although this may be a side effect of it), rather it emphasises the importance of **changing the way we relate** to painful thoughts and feelings.

6 Core Goals of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

1. **Being in contact with the present moment** - paying attention non-judgementally to what is happening in the present. Being open and curious to what is happening in the here and now.
2. **Defusion** - Practicing taking a step back from your thoughts so that difficult feelings have less influence and control over you (ie being less attached and caught up in your thoughts)
3. **Acceptance** - making room for difficult emotions, feelings and sensations.
4. Getting in touch with your “**observing self**” - the part of you that is responsible for your awareness and where you direct your attention (as opposed to the thinking part of ourselves which is thinking, planning, judging). This can involve what is known as “perspective taking”.
5. To help you **clarify your core values** and what is truly important and meaningful to you. You can then use that knowledge to guide and motivate yourself to work towards a better quality of life.
6. **Committed action** means taking action guided by your values, doing what matters - even if it's difficult or uncomfortable.

Ways to achieve these goals:

Develop greater Psychological Flexibility:

- Recognising and adapting to the particular demands/problems a situation may present.
- Shifting mindsets or behaviours when a current strategy/behaviour compromises personal or social functioning.
- Maintaining balance among important life domains: such as family, friends, physical health, parenting, study/work, spiritual life, intimate relationship, community, environment.
- Being aware, open, and committed to behaviours that are congruent with deeply held values.

Cultivate Mindfulness Skills:

- Mindfulness involves: Paying attention, on purpose, non-judgementally, in the present moment.
- Regulating the sympathetic nervous system which is responsible for flight/fight response
- Formal mindfulness happens by making time each day to bring you awareness to what is happening in the present. The focus can be on the breath, bodily sensations or feelings and thoughts.

Some specific strategies, tasks used in ACT may involve:

- Clarifying your life values and discussing how consistently you feel your life actions and decisions reflect these
- Looking at what is keeping unhelpful behaviour happening e.g. what is keeping the unhelpful behaviour going.
- The use of metaphors such as the “struggle switch” - opening up and making room for difficult feelings rather than struggling against painful emotions.
 - The “free will switch” - the decision to make the choices to change rather than feel obligated.
 - “Drop anchor” - grounding yourself by moving away from the emotional storm of thoughts and coming back to your physical senses e.g. your feet on the floor, the room around you.

For more information on ACT the following resources may be helpful:

Website: ACTmindfully.com

Harris, Russ (2009) ACT Made Simple: An Easy to Read Primer New Harbinger.