

Deepening Emotional and Relational Experiencing in ACT

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Our Story / Inspiration for Workshop



- ACT = primary model 20+ yrs
- Affective neuroscience research
- Training in AEDP, EFT, EFiT & FAP
- What we discovered...

Workshop Goal

To demonstrate how to prioritize emotional experience while highlighting the relational context in order to enhance an experiential process of acceptance that has granularity and depth, and generate a felt-sense of values and belonging from the bottom-up.

Emotion in ACT

Emotions in ACT

- Viewed as just one of many internal events
 - E.g., thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges
- Often motivates avoidance
 - Short-term, impulsive moves to avoid or control what is painful / aversive
- Bus Metaphor
 - Mindfully allow feelings but keep driving toward your values (internal process)



Emotions in ACT

- Coin Metaphor
- There is meaning in that pain!
- If you avoid, you lose experiential contact with what matters
- Can happen in therapy if defuse / focus on action too quickly



Flip side of pain = values

Using Emotion-Focus & Relational (EFR) Interventions in ACT

EFR* Approaches

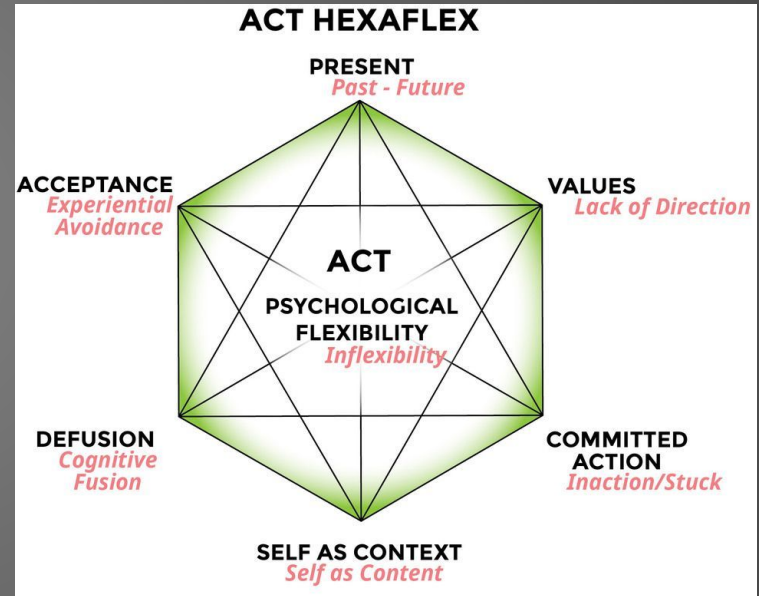
- Trust in validity / worth of emotion (signals importance)
 - Emotions as guide or “rudder” into new territory & discovery
- Deepen into / distill “primary” feelings (accept)
 - Pain: fear, anger, sad, joy, surprise, disgust, shame, lonely
 - Notice / disengage from defenses (avoidance moves) & related secondary feelings (anxiety, shame)
- Emphasis on the interpersonal context of emotion
 - “Undoing aloneness” of what was unbearable / shameful
 - New relational behaviors & “corrective” experience



“EFR” is our short-hand (not an official acronym)

EFR Interventions: Facilitating ACT Processes

- Fosters present moment contact and flexibility under aversive conditions
- Can accelerate / deepen experiential process of acceptance (pain)
- Defusion from secondary struggle and emotions (e.g., shame)
- Helps clients access “bottom up” experiential contact with values
- Gain felt-sense of self-as-context & greater capacity to take committed action



Experiential Avoidance



Experiential Contact

Research Supporting EF&R Processes

- EFT RCTs: efficacious (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016; Watson et al., 2006)
- Meta-analysis 10 EFT studies: higher experiencing levels predict improvement in symptoms (Pascual-Leone & Yeryomenko, 2017)
- Vulnerable emotional expression in EFT for couples predicts outcome (McKinnen & Greenberg, 2017)
- FAP therapists provide effective social reinforcement for client interpersonal behaviors (CRB2's) (Kanter et al., 2017)

Clinical Techniques

Explore Feelings

(Attune, explore, deepen)



Highlight Relationship

(Invite engagement & track mutual experience / impact)

Integrate

(authentic / connected self, organic expression of values, revised story)



Explore & Deepen Feelings



Therapist Moves	Client Process / Learning
SLOW, ATTUNE, TRACK	Present moment awareness
NOTICE / BLOCK / DEFUSE from avoidance moves & secondary affects (anxiety, shame)	Flexibility under aversive conditions, discernment of function, defusion
DISTILL / DEEPEN INTO / COMPASSION for primary pain	Acceptance, self-compassion, anxiety/shame extinction, felt-sense of values
NATURALLY REINFORCE	Courage, curiosity, vulnerability, connecting, risk-taking (broader, flexible, value-consistent repertoire)

Engage Relationally



Therapist Moves	Client Process / Learning
INVITE RELATIONAL ENCOUNTER (with therapist/partner/part)	Interpersonal, value-driven risk taking (authentic/vulnerable sharing); contacting direct contingencies of relational responding
MAKE RELATIONAL EXPERIENCE EXPLICIT ("What's it like to share that with me?")	Client tracks their own experience of being seen, cared-for, joined; intensifies and deepens experience
THERAPIST OR PARTNER DISCLOSES (e.g., feeling moved/ touched/ connected)	Client tracks their impact on the therapist/partner; reinforces risk taking; effective co-regulation; co-creating intimacy

Integrate



Therapist Moves	Client Process / Learning
LINGER / HIGHLIGHT POSITIVE AFFECTS	Noticing markers of relief, “healing,” intimacy, authentic & connected sense of self/ other direct emotional / relational contingencies)
Explore FELT-SENSE OF VALUES in the current state	Experiential contact with values from bottom-up (“this is who I want to be!”), inhabiting self-as-context (belonging)
SUMMARIZE / INTEGRATE DISCOVERIES	Meta-cognitive reflection of new behaviors & discoveries (direct emotional / relational contingencies); construction of useful, flexible frames of self/other that support committed action

Video Demonstrations

Video Individual Therapy

With Victoria

Video Observations

Client's experiential avoidance:

- Self-blame (something “wrong” with her for feeling lonely / wanting connection, self-criticism instead of feeling painful feelings); secondary emotion = shame
- Giving lots of examples (talk, don't feel in the moment!)
- Analyzing (try to understand “why” to “fix” herself: get rid of feelings in the future)

Client's experiential contact:

- Defusion: of broken / blame story & secondary response (shame)
- Acceptance: primary emotion (loneliness), desire for connection (value);
- Values (what she does in session & learns from): Authenticity, vulnerable sharing, curiosity, learning, deep emotional connection
- Discovery through engagement (revised view of self/other): loneliness is human, pain part of life; sharing feelings deepens self-acceptance & connection
- Self-as-context: direct experience of spacious trust, worth, belonging

Video Couples Therapy

With Viveka

Video Observations

Male client's experiential avoidance:

- Fused self-blame story (anxiety = something “wrong” w/ him; 2ndary shame)
- Fused vulnerable = unattractive story (she won't like my uncertain, wobbly side, secondary anxiety / shame)
- Don't show authentic self - project calm competence, hide anxiety

Mail clients' experiential contact:

- Defusion: old story that having anxiety is “wrong” and “unattractive”
- Acceptance: whole self (wobbly parts); fear of rejection / judgement (it IS risky)
- Values (his “new” behavior): authentic connection
- Discovery through engagement: (revised view of self/other; broadens repertoire): familiar behavior (projecting competence) distances partner; imperfection, vulnerability are desired by partner brings emotional closeness (value)
- SAC: moments of trust, worth, more parts of him belonging

When to Use EFR Tools?

- These are tools - use your clinical judgment based on context
- Try experimenting when emotion is present or suspected
- Always check in with client about their willingness & experience
- When NOT to
 - Crisis, ongoing trauma
 - Client isn't willing
 - Client reports during / later that it wasn't helpful (or too painful)
 - Keeps client stuck / dysregulated; can't access self-as-context

THANK YOU!