The Nuts and Bolts of Exposure-Based Work in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

with John P. Forsyth and Jamie R. Forsyth
Fellow Travelers on this life journey
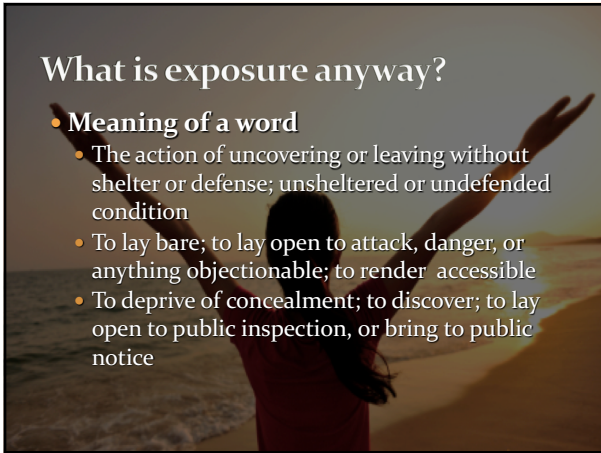Contact & Web: www.drjohnforsyth.com

Need CE credit for this session?
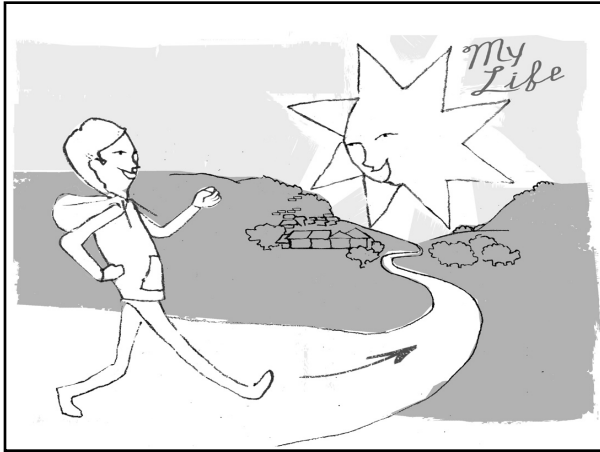Please don't forget to sign in to have your attendance tracked

Montréal
CANADA
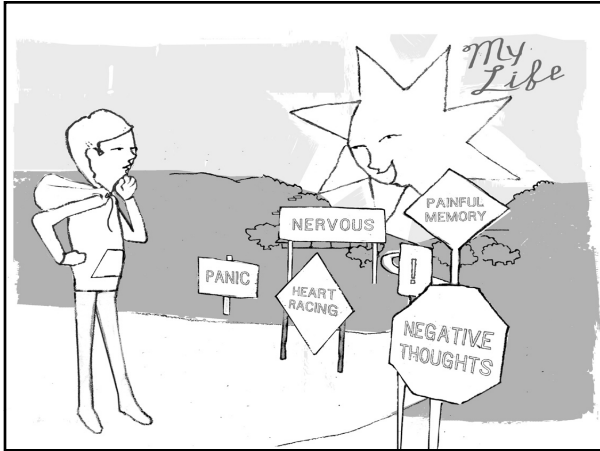ACBS Annual
World Conference 16
July 24-29, 2018

scared
chest
headache
phobia
panic attacks
trembling
stress ANXIETY tension
fear worry emotional angst
sweating jumpy
tense

Our Intentions & Yours
and, an invitation …
if for only 2.75 hours

The Nature & Purpose of

Exposure-Based Strategies

What is exposure anyway?

- **Meaning of a word**
  - The action of uncovering or leaving without shelter or defense; unsheltered or undefended condition
  - To lay bare; to lay open to attack, danger, or anything objectionable; to render accessible
  - To deprive of concealment; to discover; to lay open to public inspection, or bring to public notice
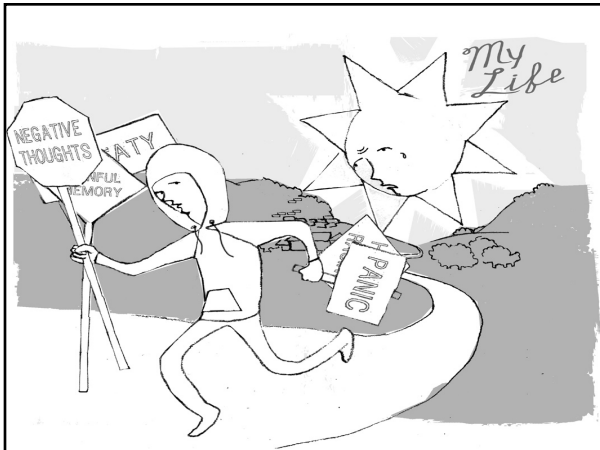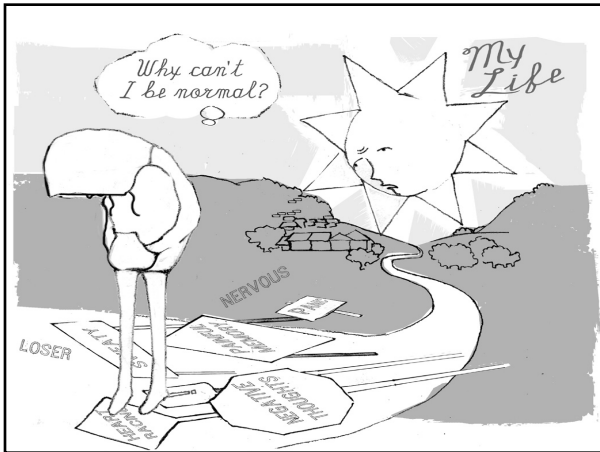

Why exposure therapy?

What exposure therapy does

- Counteracts avoidance
  - Face fear = approach behavior
- Allows for extinction processes to work
  - Get anxiety reduction over time
- Allows for new learning
  - Not unlearning
  - Not about eliminating fear or pain
  - New safety learning
  - New inhibitory learning
- Increases mastery and control

CBT

Nuts & Bolts of Exposure

- Systematic exposure to a stimulus or situation
  - Usually feared or emotionally painful
  - Usually avoided or endured with distress
  - Can also include urges, cravings, impulses
- Fear hierarchy, but not always
- Response prevention – avoidance, escape
- Processing what was learned

CBT

Types of exposure

- Exteroceptive
  - In vivo – actually confronting feared stimuli
  - Applied tension – variant of in vivo exposure for blood-injection-injury phobia
  - In Virtuo – virtual reality technologies
- Interoceptive
  - Imaginal – guided imagery, scripts
  - Writing exercises – about painful events
  - Inducing physical arousal – exercise, breathing
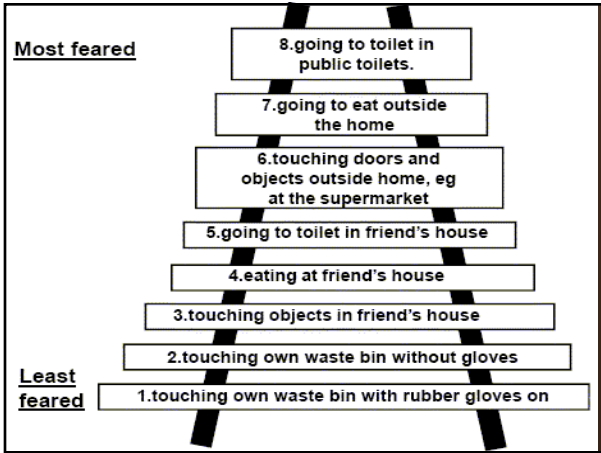 - Systematic desensitization -- imaginal

CBT

Preconditions & Contraindications

- **Preconditions**
  - Clients must be willing to "face their fears"
  - Therapists must be willing too
  - Strong therapeutic alliance
  - Procedure ought to elicit emotional discomfort
- **Contraindications**
  - Pre-existing physical conditions
  - Suicidality, psychosis, substance abuse
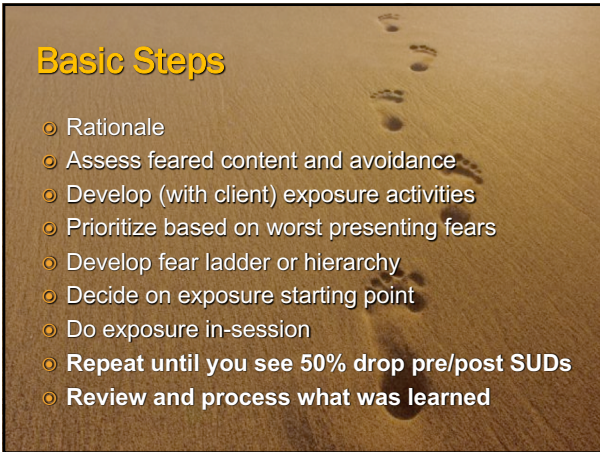 - Some medications may retard/block exposure

Basic Steps

- Rationale
- Assess feared content and avoidance
- Develop (with client) exposure activities
- Prioritize based on worst presenting fears
- Develop fear ladder or hierarchy
- **Decide on exposure starting point**
  - ✓ *If possible, begin with moderately distressing item*

Most feared

8. going to toilet in public toilets.

7. going to eat outside the home

6. touching doors and objects outside home, eg at the supermarket

5. going to toilet in friend's house

4. eating at friend's house

3. touching objects in friend's house

2. touching own waste bin without gloves

Least feared

1. touching own waste bin with rubber gloves on

Basic Steps

- Rationale
- Assess feared content and avoidance
- Develop (with client) exposure activities
- Prioritize based on worst presenting fears
- Develop fear ladder or hierarchy
- Decide on exposure starting point
- **Do exposure in-session**
  - ✓ Model first, then have client do activity
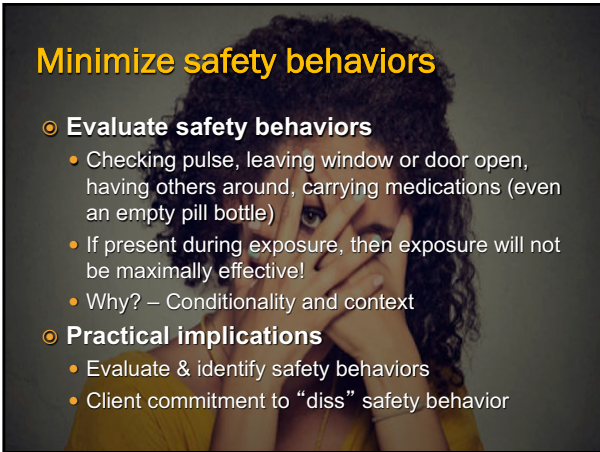 - ✓ Solicit SUDs pre and post each exposure

Basic Steps

- Rationale
- Assess feared content and avoidance
- Develop (with client) exposure activities
- Prioritize based on worst presenting fears
- Develop fear ladder or hierarchy
- Decide on exposure starting point
- Do exposure in-session
- **Repeat until you see 50% drop pre/post SUDs**
- **Review and process what was learned**

Distraction and exposure

- **The role of "dissing" exposure**
  - Distraction is bad if function is avoidance
  - "dissing" exposure gives fear more traction
- **Distraction can enhance exposure if:**
  - Client is fully engaged in exposure
  - While acting in a way that is inconsistent with a fear response, including avoidance
    - ✓ Engaging in a social conversation
    - ✓ Doing important work
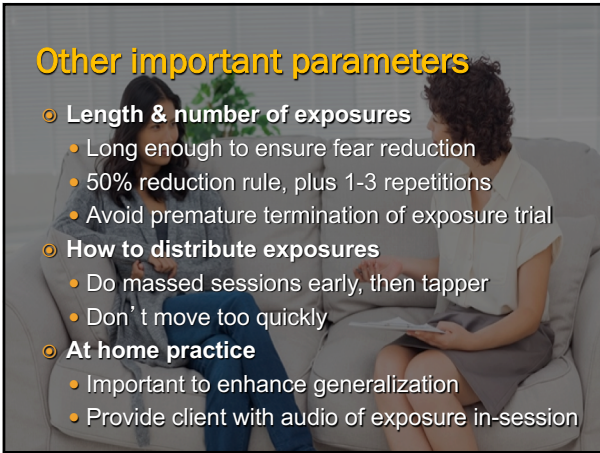
Minimize safety behaviors

- **Evaluate safety behaviors**
  - Checking pulse, leaving window or door open, having others around, carrying medications (even an empty pill bottle)
  - If present during exposure, then exposure will not be maximally effective!
  - Why? – Conditionality and context
- **Practical implications**
  - Evaluate & identify safety behaviors
  - Client commitment to "diss" safety behavior

Medications & exposure

- **Medications are often used by clients**
  - Yet, few mediations enhance exposure
  - Can retard gains, leading to drop out
  - Consensus (13+ RCTs):
    - ✓ Rapid response with medications
    - ✓ Best long-term outcomes with exposure alone

Ressler et al, 2004

Other important parameters

- **Length & number of exposures**
  - Long enough to ensure fear reduction
  - 50% reduction rule, plus 1-3 repetitions
  - Avoid premature termination of exposure trial
- **How to distribute exposures**
  - Do massed sessions early, then tapper
  - Don't move too quickly
- **At home practice**
  - Important to enhance generalization
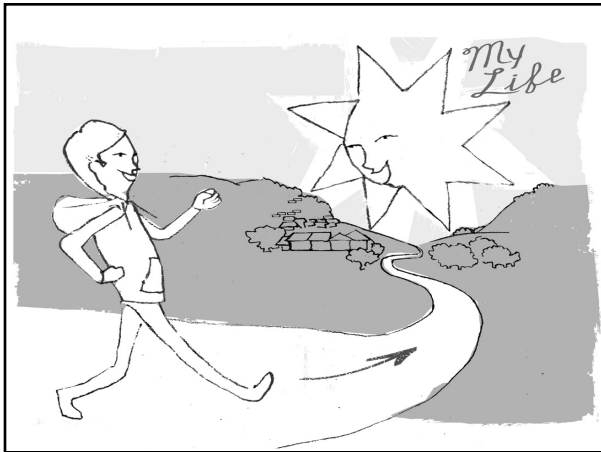 - Provide client with audio of exposure in-session
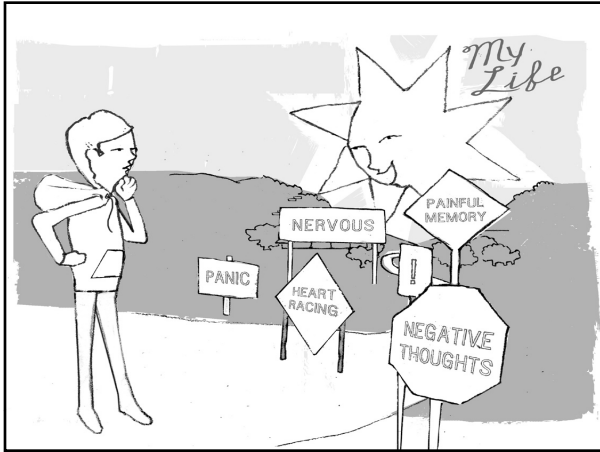
Are we doing enough?

- Down-side of "traditional" exposure
  - Many clients dislike it (and many therapists do too)
  - Many therapists do not use exposure interventions
  - Many anxious individuals fail to benefit
    - 45% OCD (Stanley & Turner, 1995)
    - 20-40% PTSD (Lauterbach & Reiland, 2009)
    - Range 7% to as high as 50%
- Context for exposure treatment
  - Anxiety & fear are the enemies
  - Supports struggle – client's do this already
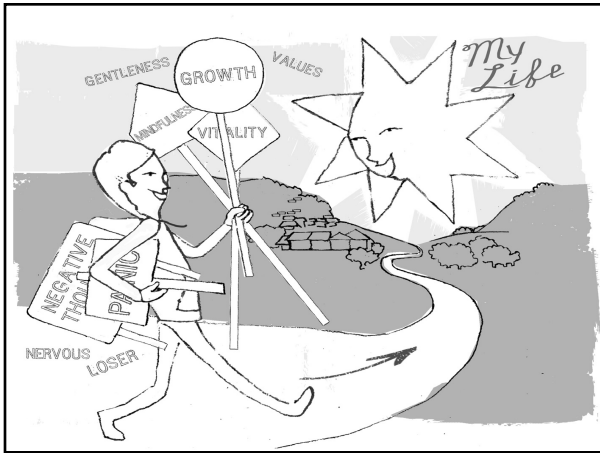
Freihei et al., 2004; Becker et al., 2003

ACT

Framing Exposure Within ACT

Changing Our Relationship With Our History

Remember that

Our commitments, our values, often invite obstacles, problems, and pain

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My Life
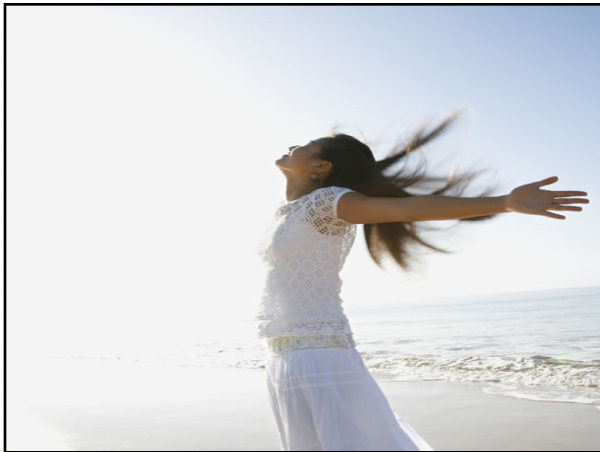
Where does exposure show up in ACT?

EVERYWHERE

The Present
Moment
*"Be Here,
Be Now"*

Acceptance
*"Opening
Up"*

Values
*"Know
What
Matters"*

**Psychological
Flexibility**
*"Be Present, Show Up,
and Do What Matters"*

Defusion
*"Watch
Your
Thinking"*

Committed
Action
*"Do What
Works"*

Self as
Context
*"Observing
Self"*
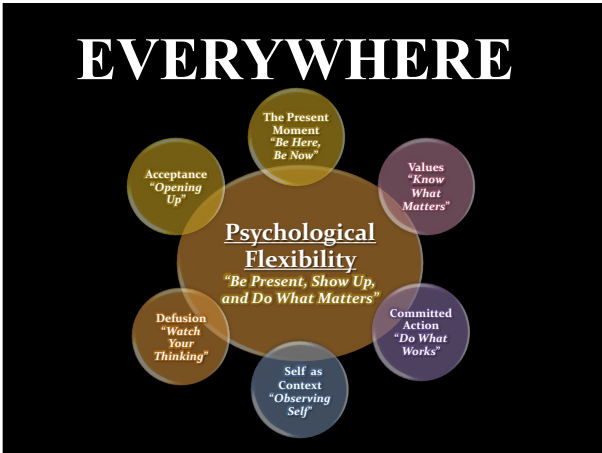
### What is exposure in the service of?

ACT Exposure -- In Service of Values

- *There's no law in the universe that says "you must feel at ease around dogs ... or that you should like them...or like thinking and feeling discomfort"*

- So, why are we doing this?
- Let's make this be about something... Your life!
- Are you willing to find out what it's like to be inside your skin, without defense?
- Let's see what's there to be thought and felt
- Are you willing to do that if that meant _____?
- If yes, then can be arranged in a hierarchy like CBT

Forsyth & Forsyth (2015)

The Elephant in the Room
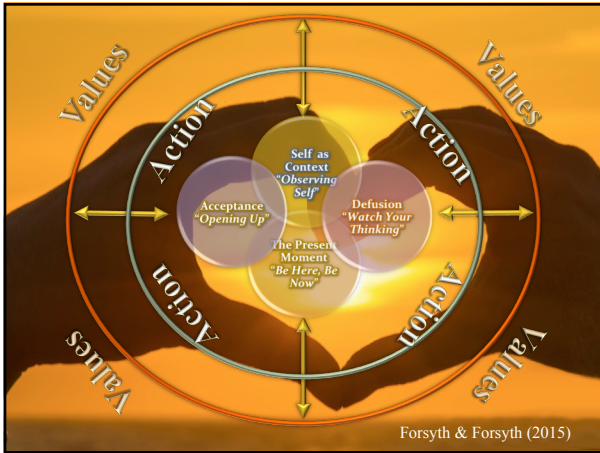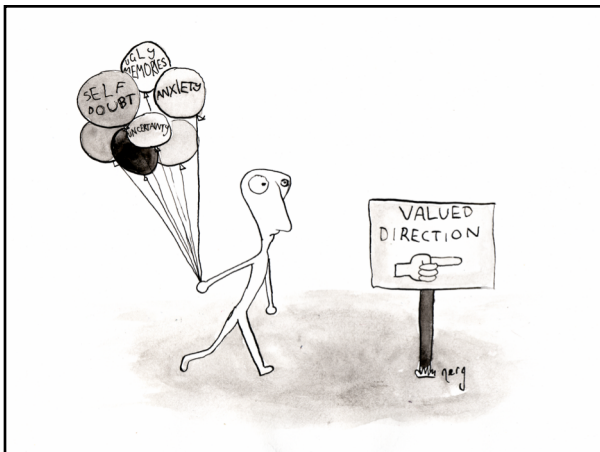
vulnerable

/ˈvʌln(ə)rəb(ə)l/

adjective

exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.
"we were in a vulnerable position"
synonyms: in danger, in peril, in jeopardy, at risk, endangered, unsafe, unprotected, ill-protected, unguarded; More

MAYBE I DON'T HAVE TO BE SO TOUGH.

MAYBE I CAN BE VULNERABLE SOMETIMES.

NEVER AGAIN.

vulnerability

where courage meets Fear

FEAR

Sinking into Fears

There is only one thing required to change your LIFE:
Action Changes Things
WILLINGNESS
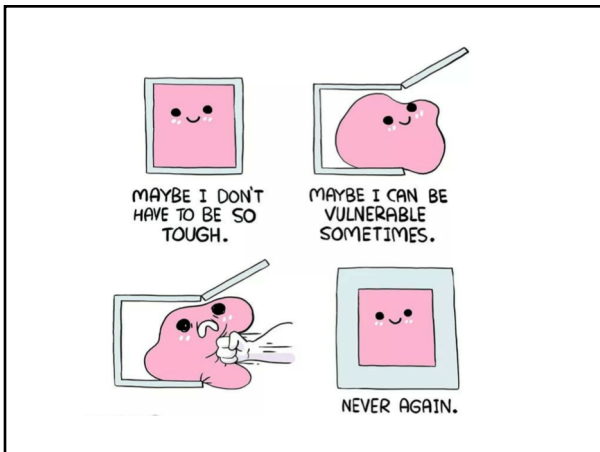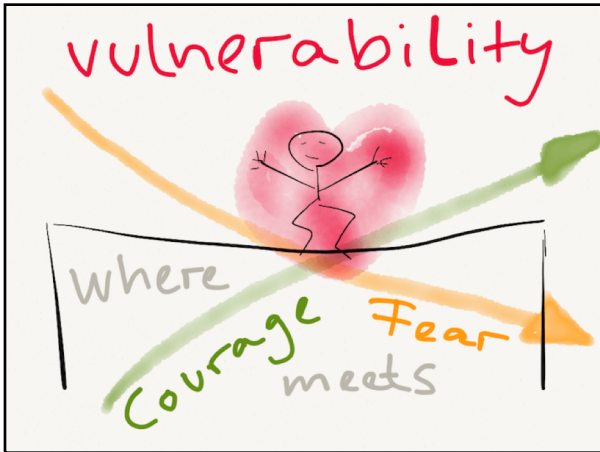
EXERCISE: Experiencing Willingness

Willingness
wholehearted intention to move toward values

Gritty
Persist toward values
despite inertia, dislike, laziness

"LESS FUSION WITH EMOTION"
*don't want to do it
and do it anyway*

e.g., going for a run
e.g., client not using drugs

Vulnerability
Know the possibility of experiencing
painful history & and do it anyway

"FUSE WITH EMOTIONS"
*don't want thoughts and feelings
and do it anyway*

e.g., walk to work in the rain
e.g., client stuckness in the room

Willingness
wholehearted intention to move toward values

Gritty
Persist toward values
despite inertia, dislike, laziness

Vulnerability
Know the possibility of experiencing
painful history & and do it anyway

Gritty Vulnerability
When we don't want to do something and we don't
want to feel the feelings/experience thoughts that go with it

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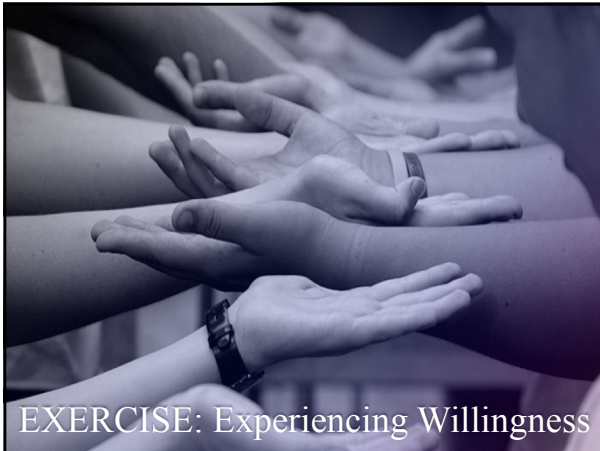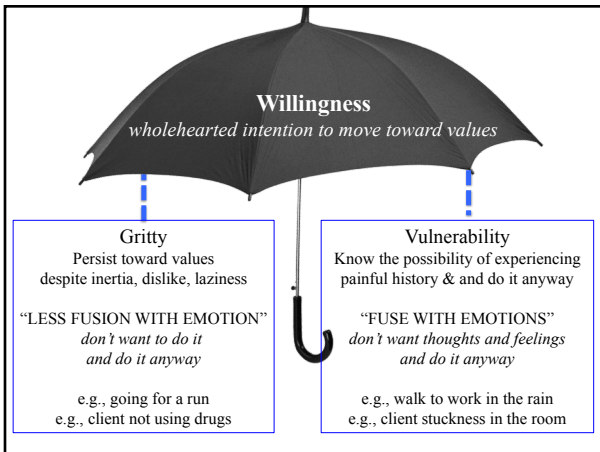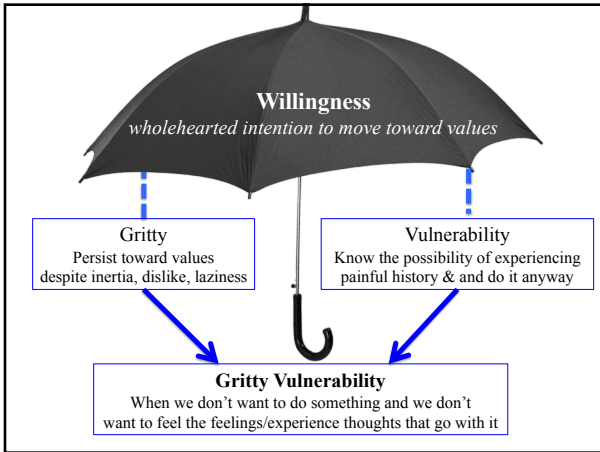*What is important is to come back to reality and recognize that this is a journey and the human experience is a fucking roller coaster but I stand here to tell you that its worth the ride. And when you might want to get off because things get uncomfortable.*

Where the
magic happens

Your
Comfort
Zone

Get uncomfortable. Because that's where the magic happens and those messy, uncomfortable, vulnerable and very human moments have built me up to be someone I am proud of and someone who can see the beauty that surrounds me again

---

To share your weakness

is to make yourself
vulnerable;

to make yourself vulnerable

is to show your strength.

- Criss Jami

*The
Great
Paradox…*

We emotionally "armor up" each morning when we face the day to avoid feeling shame, anxiety, uncertainty, sadness, and fear. The particular armor changes from person to person, but it usually comes back to a struggle with what we feel, think, sense, and remember.

Do any of these sound familiar?

The Fear & The Tunnel

The Mask I Wear

What I Want
Others to See

What I
Keep Hidden

The Mask You Wear

I constantly feel like
I'm at war with myself

FEAR

CONTROL

Dominance of Conceptualized Past and/or Feared Future

Experiential Avoidance

Lack of Values Clarity

Psychological Inflexibility

Cognitive Fusion

Inaction, impulsivity, avoidant persistence

Attachment to Conceptualized Self

AWAY
(avoidance)

TOWARD
(approach)

Approach-Avoidance Conflict

Where do you struggle to keep part of yourself hidden?

One Word

_____

What I Keep Hidden

I'm wrong   unworthy
weak   Living a lie
Feel dead inside Alone
A fraud   unhappy
Self-doubt Risky   Not enough Selfish
Insecure
I hate my life
Boring People pleaser ungrateful
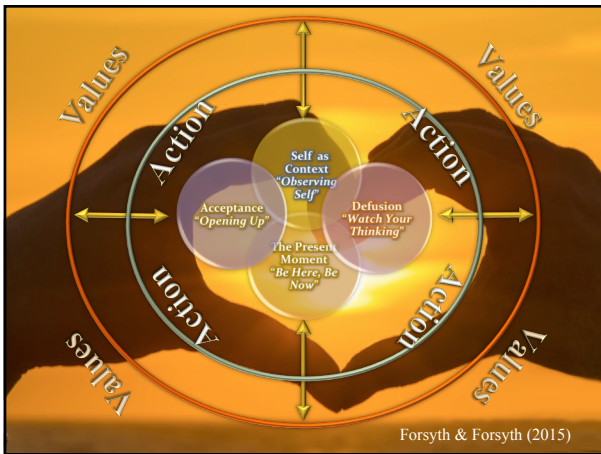Empty
Afraid Unlovable Anxious
fat   average Inflexible
Disconnected

And then the day came when the risk to remain tight as a bud was more painful than the risk it took to bloom.
~ Anais Nin

Compassionate Exposure in ACT
Cultivating a New Relationship With Ourselves

Cultivating
an Observer Perspective

Forsyth & Forsyth (2015)
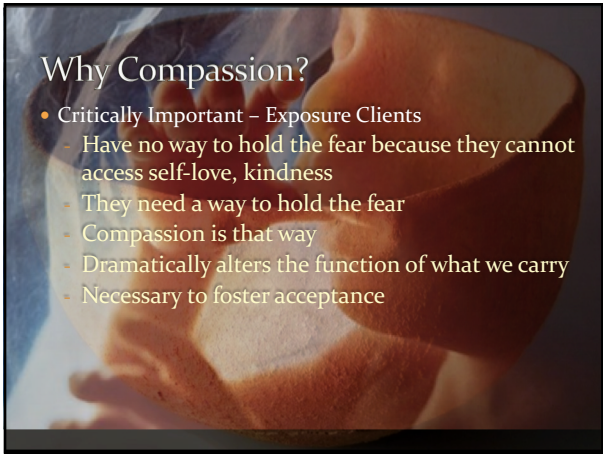
Cultivating Self-Compassion

Though we all have the seeds of fear within us, we must learn not to water those seeks and instead nourish our positive qualities – compassion, understanding, and loving kindness.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?

Mindfulness

Recognizing when we're stressed or struggling without being judgmental or over-reacting

Self-Kindness

Being supportive and understanding towards ourselves when we're having a hard time vs. being harsh and self-critical

Connectedness

Remembering that everyone makes mistakes and experiences difficulty at times. We are not alone!
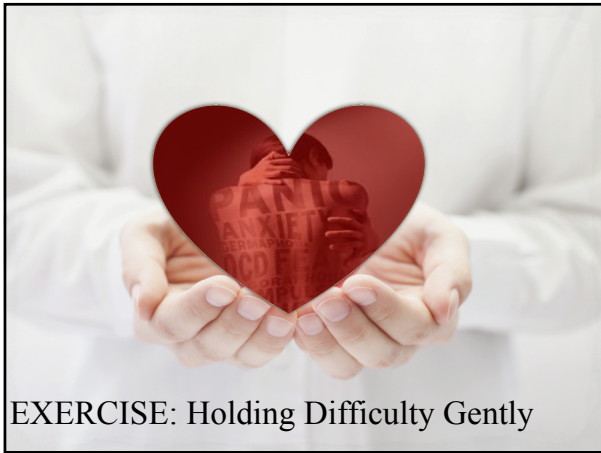
Why Compassion?

- Critically Important – Exposure Clients
  - Have no way to hold the fear because they cannot access self-love, kindness
  - They need a way to hold the fear
  - Compassion is that way
  - Dramatically alters the function of what we carry
  - Necessary to foster acceptance

- ✓ Evaluate Oppositional Frames
  - Powerful litmus test!
- ✓ Discover Phrases That Work for the Client
  - Ones they won't fight against!
- ✓ Watch Languaging in the Room
  - *"Ewww ... I hate that!"*
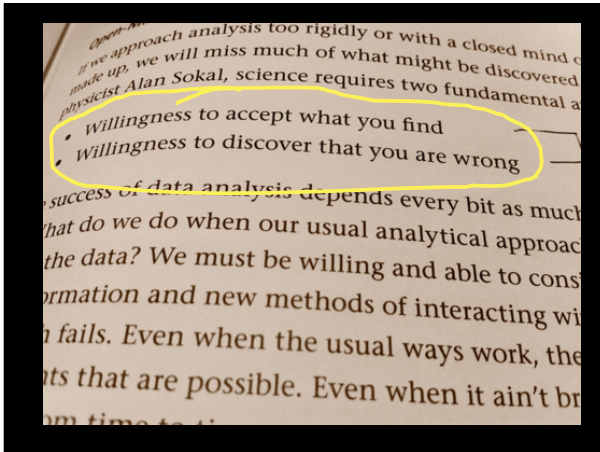- ✓ Normalize Client Experience

Compassionate Exposure

EXERCISE: Holding Difficulty Gently

YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE COMFORT ZONE

Developing Comfort in Your Own Skin

Cultivating Willingness and Compassion Guided Exposure

Willingness to accept what you find
Willingness to discover that you are wrong

ACT Exposure in 7-Steps

- Identify exercise – link barriers with values.
- Practice exercise (intero & exteroceptive) in-session & bring client value(s) in the room. Focus on willingness too!
- Client to apply ACT skills (inside sphere-a-flex).
- Chart progress – "getting with" discomfort just as it is. Use the FEEL PRACTICE FORMS.
- Reflect on practice.
- Repeat exercises (can be arranged in hierarchy).
- Review ratings on FEEL PRACTICE FORMS.

MY BARRIERS

Important Value Area (From Values Worksheet: _____

YOU	Barriers	VALUE INTENTIONS
	• **Internal**	
	- Thoughts	
	- Feelings & urges	
	- Memories	
	- Physical sensations	
	• **External**	
	- Problem solving	
	- Brainstorming	
	- Task analysis (small units)	

ACT Willingness FEAR Ladder

Valued Direction: _____

Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Willingness ☐ Yes ☐ No	FEAR 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

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FEEL Exercises

- ✓ *Willingly Dizzy*
- ✓ *Willingly Out of Breath*
- ✓ *Being Willingly Aerobic*
- ✓ *Staring at Self in a Mirror*

- Identify a valued domain
- Practice FEEL exercise
- Apply mindful acceptance & kindness skills
- Chart progress
- Reflect on practice
- Repeat FEEL exercises
- Review ratings on FEEL Worksheet

FEEL Exercises

- ✓ *Bubble Wand*
- ✓ *Kind Allowing with Disturbing Images*
- ✓ *Difficult Thoughts & Urges on Cards*
- ✓ *Stand Silently With Urges*
- ✓ *Leaves on a Stream*

- Identify a valued domain
- Practice FEEL exercise
- Apply mindful acceptance & kindness
- Chart progress
- Reflect on practice
- Repeat FEEL exercises
- Review ratings on worksheet

Bring client's awareness to other events inside and outside

There's more to notice than the psychological lion in the room

Willingness to Lift the Veil

Walking With
Self-Compassion & The Fear

Thank You