

# An Interpretative Phenomenological Exploration of Group-Based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy with Adolescents

Tajinder Uppal Dhariwal & Sheri Turrell

## BACKGROUND

- Emerging research support for group-based ACT with adolescents (Halliburton & Cooper, 2015)
- Research using qualitative methodology with ACT is scarce and limited to the adult population
- Qualitative research to explore experience of group-based ACT with adolescents has not yet been conducted
- Present study is a follow-up to quantitative open trial examining effectiveness of group-based ACT with adolescents

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Explore adolescents' experience of participating in 10 weeks of group-based ACT in a community hospital's outpatient setting. More specifically, adolescents experience of:
  - Learning and using ACT
  - Perceptions regarding utility of ACT
  - Benefits of ACT and/or other factors to psychiatric difficulties and functioning

## METHODS

**INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA):** Examine experience through semi-structured interviewing at post-treatment and three months following treatment

**PARTICIPANTS:** 10 adolescents ages 13 to 18 ( $M=16.10$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ); 9 female, 1 male, with primary diagnosis of GAD ( $n=2$ ), depression ( $n=4$ ) and GAD and depression ( $n=4$ )

**DATA ANALYSIS:** IPA guidelines used to identify data-driven themes addressing research objectives, case-by-case and then across cases

## RESULTS

### 1 Usefulness of ACT

- Gained understanding of internal experiences
- Developed awareness of experiential avoidance and impact of experiential avoidance
- Learned and utilized ACT

"It's given me a way to cope, it's given me tools that I can use everyday like when I just have a fleeting thought that makes me uncomfortable like when I'm just having a bad day, it just gives me a way to deal with it so I get past it and go on with my life"

### 2 Improvements attributed to ACT

- Improved ability to cope with emotional difficulties and reductions in emotional distress
- Gains in behavioural functioning

"Things are a lot calmer inside my head. I can definitely better cope with all the emotions and I'm not overwhelmed so much anymore."

"I felt like setting goals made me work towards something and having a goal to work towards was like I'm not just going through life anymore, I'm actually working towards something so it made me feel more purposeful."

### 3 Non-ACT factors

- Other treatments and/or additional strategies

"I read a lot, like when I get really over stressed I read. It's sort of like an escape, and I listen to music."

"Talking to friends... Having a simple conversation with a friend can kind of just ease me. I've been trying to get back in touch with old hobbies"

### 4 Barriers to treatment use

- Understanding of ACT exercises and their use
- Unpleasant internal experiences

"Setting the goals and writing up the steps was anxiety provoking because you know you are going to be taking those steps and getting closer to that goal and as much as you want to be there but that journey there involves work and involves being submerged in all these feelings that aren't necessarily pleasant."

### 5 Treatment within a group context

- Experienced anxiety initially
- Normalized difficulties
- Fostered social connection

"I was really nervous, like I was really anxious, just because I didn't get that other people could be feeling the same way that I felt, like I really thought I was the only one and there was probably something really wrong with me, that I would feel the way I did, but then seeing other people like me, and maybe we didn't have the exact same situations and we had the same feelings really made a big difference."

## DISCUSSION

- The present study provides support for group-based ACT to help participants understand and become more aware of internal experiences and experiential avoidance as well as learning and implementing ACT
- All participants attributed improvements in learning to live with their emotion and emotional distress, and increased values based behaviour to their participation in ACT
- There are several limitations to the present study. Additional qualitative research examining individual level experience of ACT has potential to yield important directions for future development of the intervention, particularly related to usefulness, influence on functioning, and potential mechanisms of change