



Wearing Your Hexaflex Goggles during ACT-Informed Exposure

June 17, 2022

Brian Thompson, Brian Pilecki, & Joanne Chan

INTRODUCTIONS

Brian Thompson, PhD

Brian Pilecki, PhD

Joanne Chan, PsyD



Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank the Oregon Chapter of ACBS for sponsoring this workshop

Structure of this workshop

- Brief orientation to ACT-informed exposure
- Wearing your ACT goggles: discriminating ACT processes in client behavior
- Tips for ACT-informed exposure
- Role-play exercise
- Discussion + questions

ACT definition of exposure

“organized presentation of previously repertoire-narrowing stimuli in a context designed to ensure repertoire expansion”

(Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012, p. 284)

Exposure is just another experiential exercise

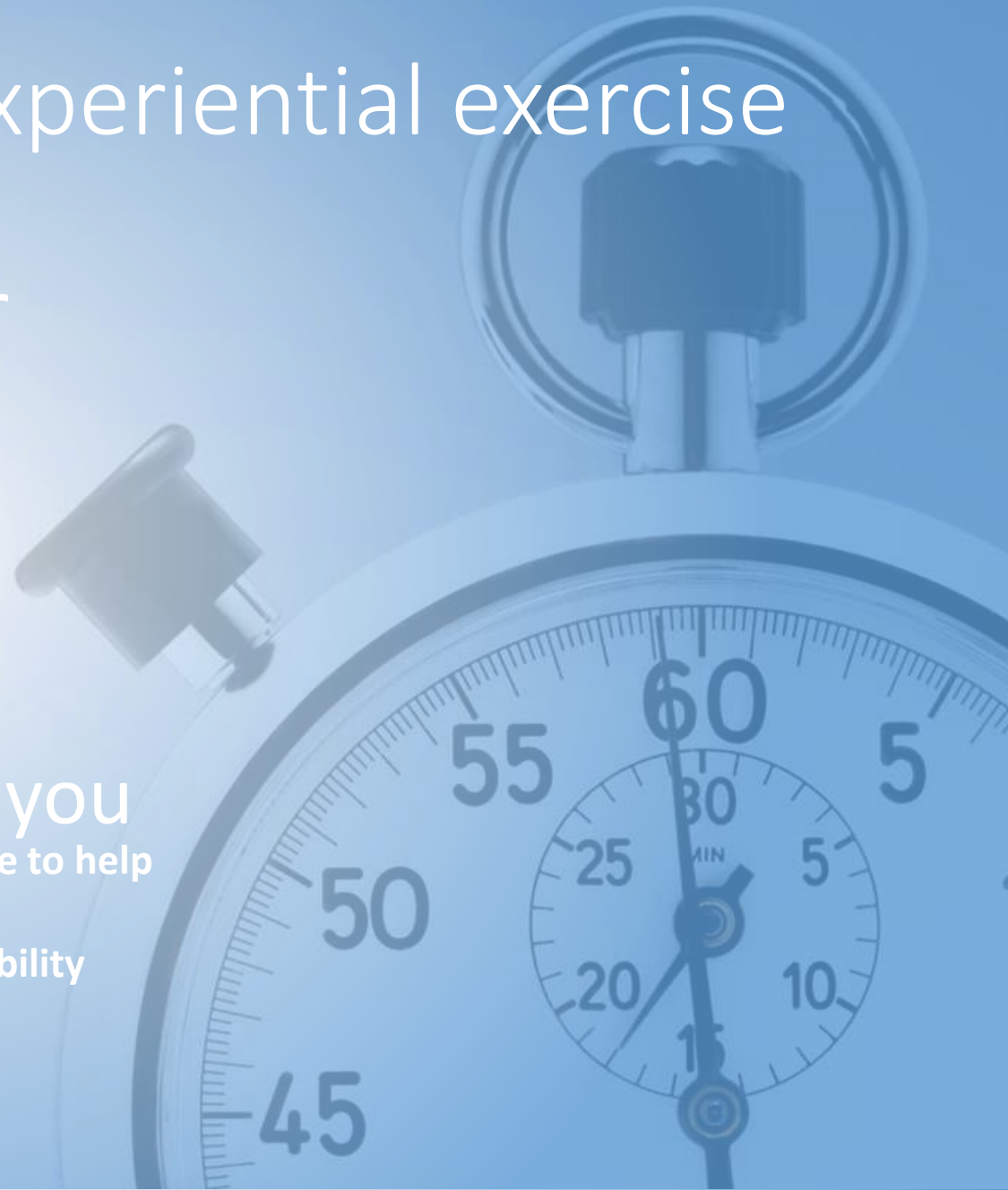
The advantage of exposure over traditional ACT experiential exercises is the emphasis on *repetition*

Let the repetition do the work for you

Frees you from overexplaining

Can tailor exposure to help clients practice psychological flexibility

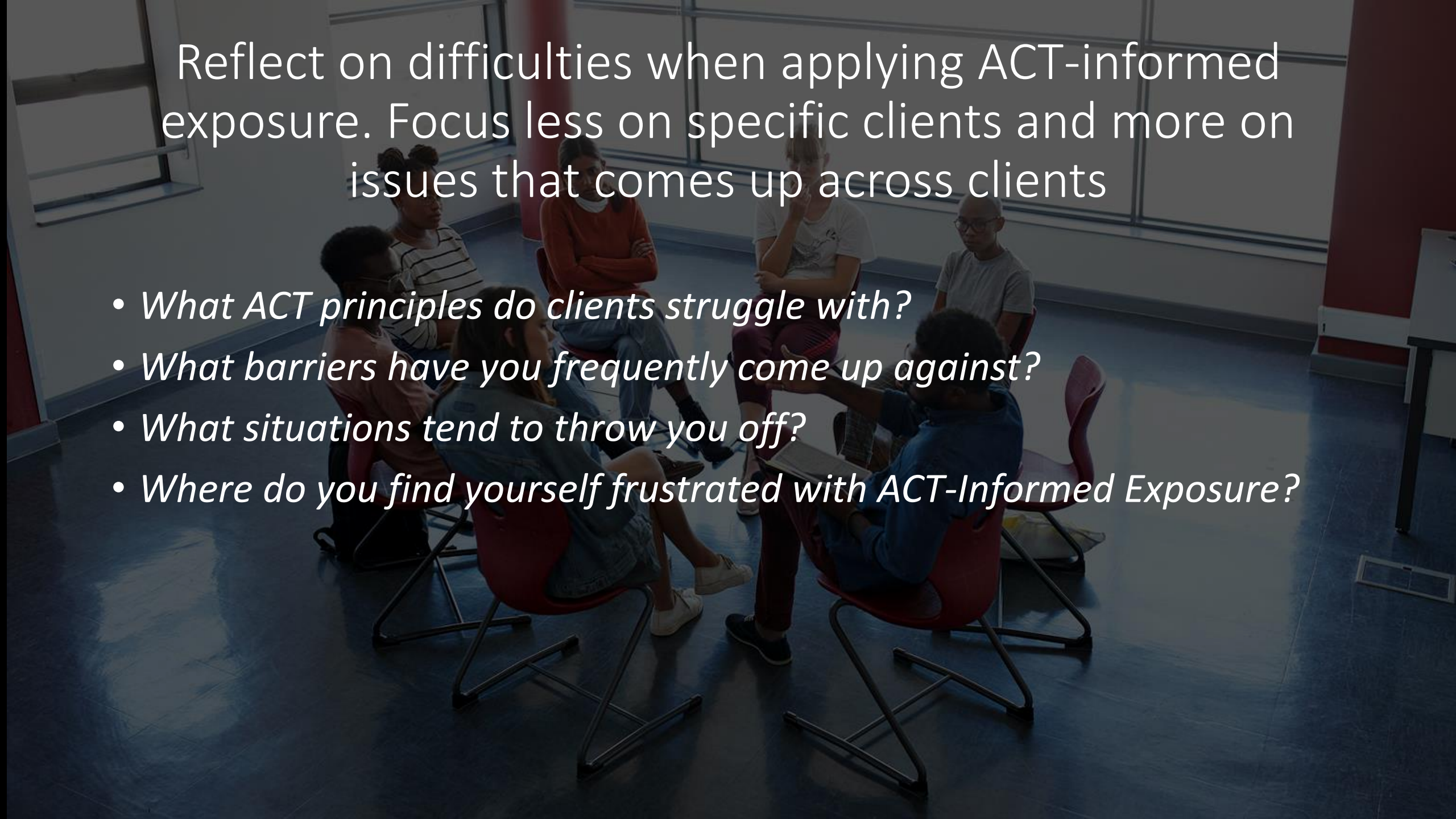
Allows clients to learn from experience



Exposure is effective cross culturally

- Although CBT and exposure are rooted in European values, White and BIPOC clients may respond equally well to CBT and exposure therapy
 - Non-White minorities drop out more often than White clients
 - People of color may have longer treatment durations
- Designing and implementing culturally-sensitive exposures
 - Ask: “*What works best for the client in their context?*”
 - Tailor exposure to be consistent with cultural values, norms and practices
 - For interdependent cultures, may be useful to elicit encouragement and support from families
 - Be respectful of religious traditions and consult with religious leaders when appropriate (E.g., OCD scrupulosity obsessions)



A group of approximately eight people are sitting in a circle on a blue floor in a room with large windows. They appear to be in a meeting or discussion. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

Reflect on difficulties when applying ACT-informed exposure. Focus less on specific clients and more on issues that comes up across clients

- *What ACT principles do clients struggle with?*
- *What barriers have you frequently come up against?*
- *What situations tend to throw you off?*
- *Where do you find yourself frustrated with ACT-Informed Exposure?*



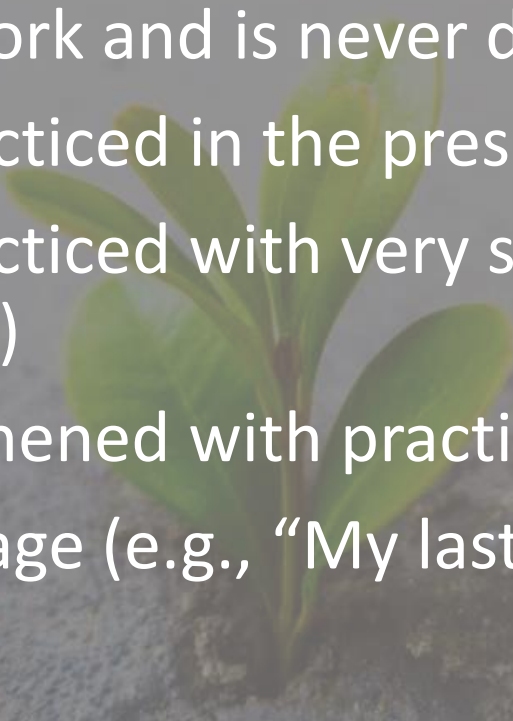
Seeing ACT Processes in Client Behavior



Acceptance or Willingness

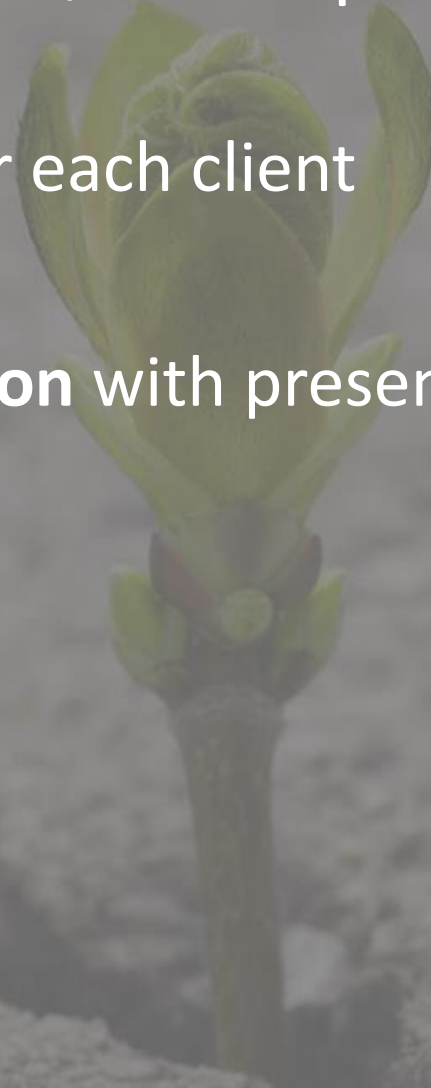
- "If I don't push away my anxiety, it'll destroy me. It's made me suicidal before."
- "I feel better when I push it away than when I try to make space for it."
- "My last therapist said to, 'just accept it.'"
- "I know what I need to do. I just need to accept it."
- "I tried practicing acceptance, but it didn't work. I still felt anxious."

Key Points About Acceptance or Willingness...

- ...is really hard
 - ...takes a lot of work and is never done
 - ...can only be practiced in the present moment
 - ...can only be practiced with very specific internal experiences (e.g., bodily sensations)
 - ...may be strengthened with practice
 - ...may have baggage (e.g., “My last therapist told me to, ‘just accept it’”)
- 
- A small green plant with several leaves is growing out of a crack in a grey concrete surface. The background is a blurred, light-colored wall with some faint, brownish stains or cracks.

Enhancing Willingness/Acceptance

- Pay attention to language that works for each client
- Validate how difficult it can be
- Help clients practice willingness **in session** with present moment focus
- Emphasize choice
- Active (not passive)
- Can be augmented with values work





Self-as-Context

- "I don't feel anxiety in my body. I just feel anxious!"
- "I've always been anxious. I don't know who I am without this anxiety."
- "If I give up this anxiety, I won't be as productive or driven."
- "I need to worry to stay safe."

Key Points About Self-as-Context

- SAC is attention to the present moment (“the now”)
- Clients can:
 - have unhelpful stories about their anxiety: *“I can't date”*
 - build identities (conceptualized self) around anxiety: *“I am neurotic”*
 - have difficulty with perspective-taking or separating self from anxiety feelings: *“I am anxious”*
- Perspective-taking (past-present, present-future, self-other, etc.)

Enhancing Self-as-Context

- Ask questions that facilitate SAC:
 - What are you noticing (e.g., thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations)?
- Listen for and gently note stories (e.g., anxiety; the self)
- Normalize reinforcing qualities of anxiety (sense of control or preparedness, identity, etc.)
- Facilitate perspective-taking using deictic framing
 - “What would a friend say?” vs. “Think of a friend. Imagine you’re them...”



Cognitive Defusion

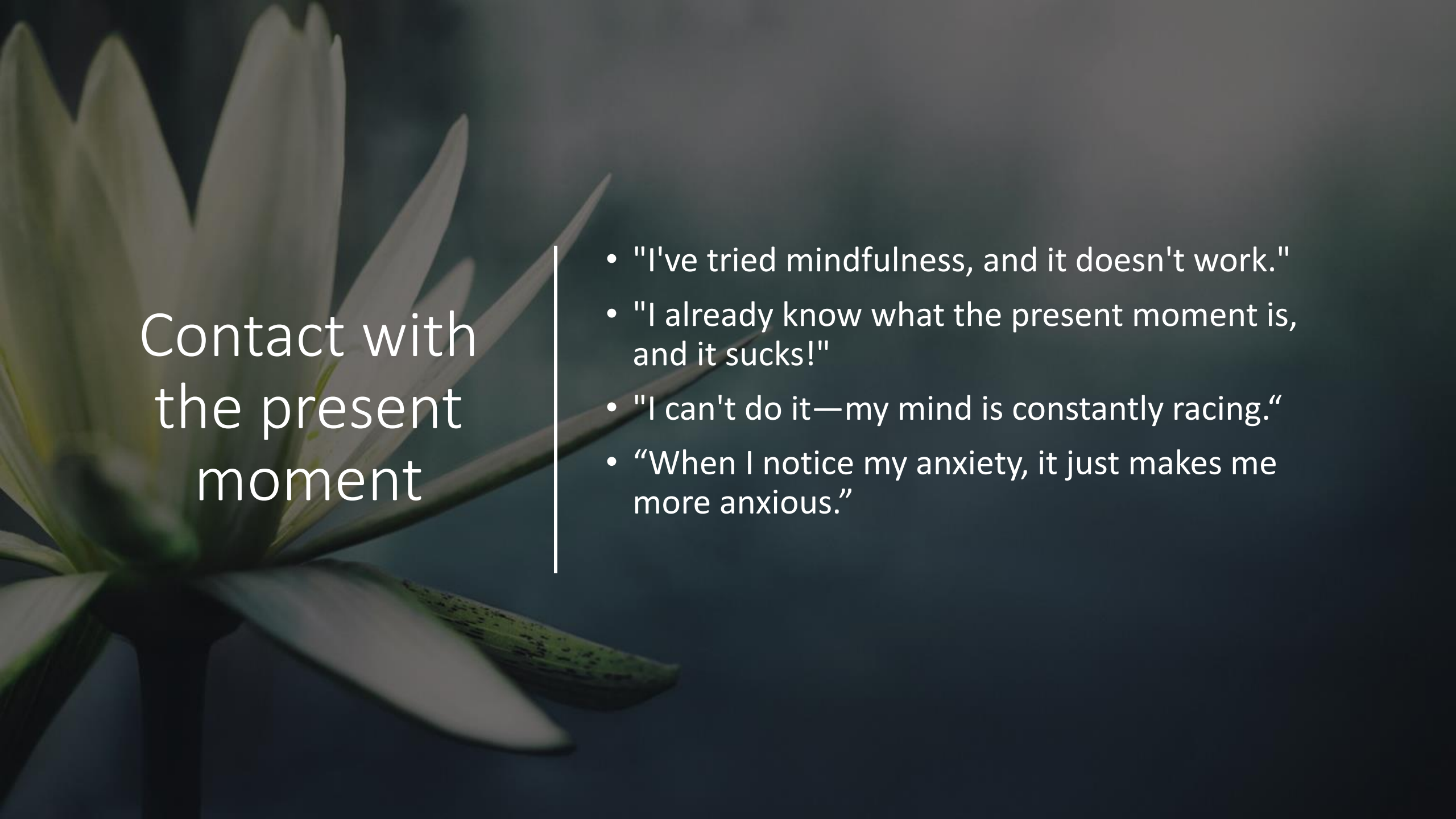
- "I get defusion! I just need to think positive!"
- "I'm not sure I understand."
- "I didn't notice anything different after repeating the word."

Key Points About Cognitive Defusion

- Fusion narrows responding and awareness of other contextual cues
- Defusion is about changing relationship with thinking
- "I am stupid" vs "I'm having the thought that I am stupid"
- We all fuse with thoughts at times (e.g., anger). Built into language and adaptive in some instances

Enhancing Cognitive Defusion

- Informal prompting (e.g., "Your mind...")
- Notice when it is happening (e.g., "Sounds like your mind is being pretty hard on you right now.")
- Rely on repetition. Let the exposure do the work



Contact with the present moment

- "I've tried mindfulness, and it doesn't work."
- "I already know what the present moment is, and it sucks!"
- "I can't do it—my mind is constantly racing."
- "When I notice my anxiety, it just makes me more anxious."



Key Points About Contact With Present Moment

- Difficult to sustain. Our tendency is to drift into autopilot
- Can be practiced
- Extremely rich, filled with gems and hidden treasures
- Present moment brings greater choices and options

Enhancing Contact With the Present Moment

- Assess. Some clients may require extra training
- Normalize challenges: goal is not to be “good at it” but to notice when we are distracted!
- Exposure
 - Integrate in-session (e.g., slowing down, pausing, taking time to reflect)
 - Process-oriented comments during exposure

A person with long brown hair is looking through black binoculars. They are wearing a light blue and white striped shirt. The background is a blurred field of tall grass under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

Values

- "I don't know what I want to be doing. I just want to stop feeling anxious."
- "I want to feel less anxious."
- "I'm already living the life I want."

A scenic landscape at sunset with rolling hills and tall grasses in the foreground. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. The hills are covered in dense vegetation, and the foreground is dominated by tall, golden-brown grasses. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, with the sun's rays visible on the right side.


Key Points About Values

- Values are motivative augmentals. If the client is motivated, valuing is not crucial
- Values are a behavior (i.e., class of rule-governed behavior)
- Freely chosen and verbally constructed
- Values are impacted by culture and identity



Enhancing Values

- Unobtrusively weave values throughout treatment (e.g., “What feels important to you about this?”)
- Listen for values in client goals
- When something is important to us, it opens us up to pain (e.g., OCD)
- Values may enhance exposure and exposure may enhance values
 - Allow clients to engage in valuing through freeing up bandwidth
 - Help clients be present in valued activities
 - Lead to natural discussions about values



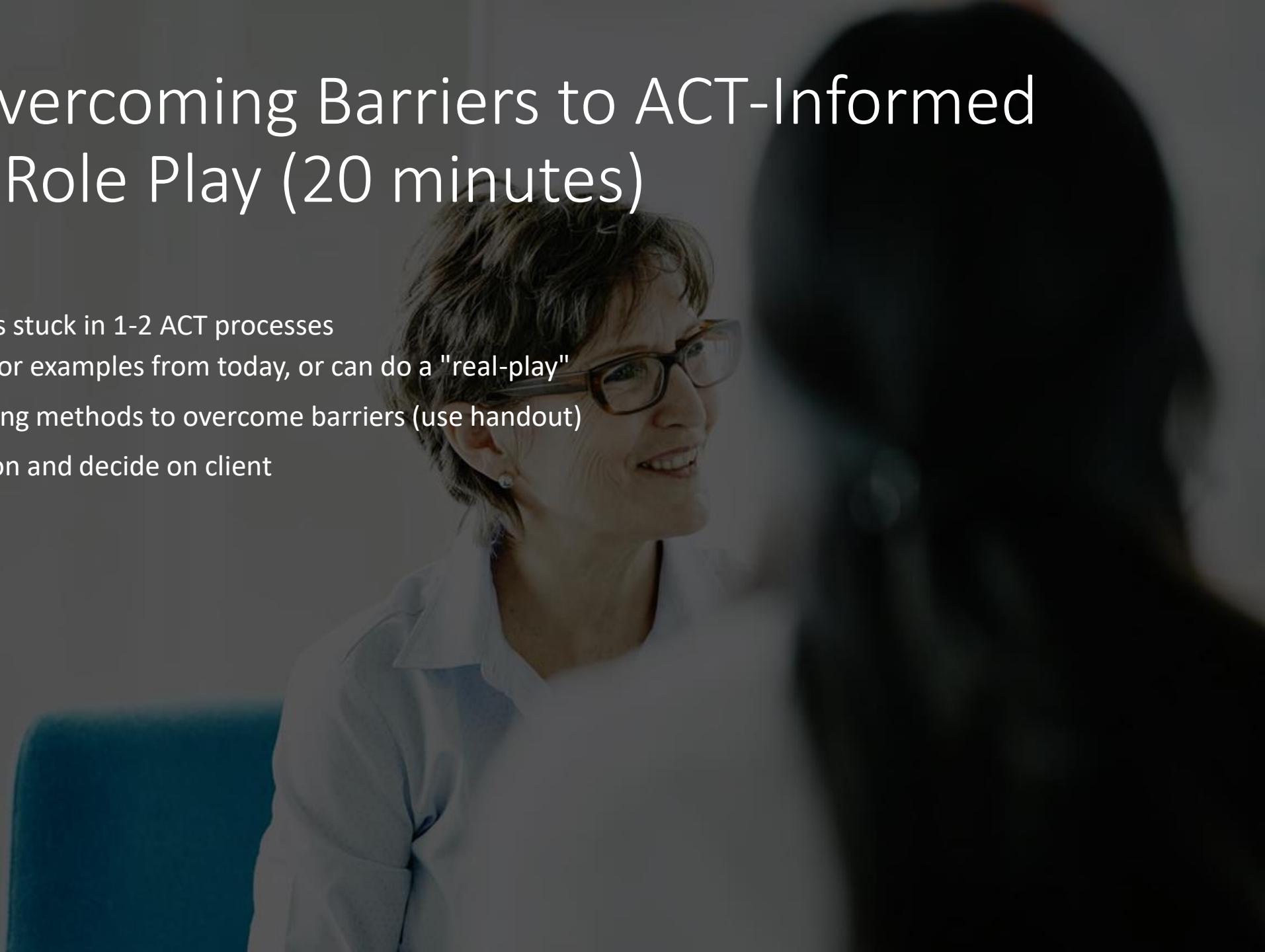
I just need to
accept my feelings
and notice my
thoughts

The ACT Parrot

- Some clients have strong intellectual understanding
 - Prior ACT therapy
 - Readings, etc.
- Disconnect between understanding and application of principles
- Blame themselves
- Exposure is one way to help these clients contact ACT processes experientially
- Focus on **experiential learning**

Practice Overcoming Barriers to ACT-Informed Exposure: Role Play (20 minutes)

- Groups of 2-3
- Roleplay: Client who is stuck in 1-2 ACT processes
 - Use a real client or examples from today, or can do a "real-play"
- Therapist: practice using methods to overcome barriers (use handout)
- 3 minutes: Introduction and decide on client
- 7 minutes: Role-play
- 5 Minutes: Debrief



Some ACT-Informed Exposure Tips

When ACT goes
wrong...

...be curious



“Help me understand your experience”

Think functionally

- **ACT theory provides a model for guidance and discipline—but don't allow yourself to feel boxed in by it**
- **Hold things lightly (including ACT)**

Language in ACT...

... a crude instrument for orienting clients to their experience, try out new behaviors, and evaluate their impact

Resources

- Trainings with Portland Psychotherapy including:
 - **Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Guide Exposure Therapy: The Basics (Sept 23, 2022)**
 - **Overcoming Barriers to Effective ACT-Informed Exposure Therapy (Oct 21, 2022)**

www.portlandpsychotherapytraining.com

- Eifert, G.H., & Forsyth, J.P (2005). *Acceptance and commitment therapy for anxiety disorders: A practitioner's treatment guide to using mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based behavior change strategies*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

