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Using ACT to Improve Psychological Flexibility & Mindfulness in Parenting

2 Case Studies



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Disclosures

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Introductory Remarks

ACT interventions are an essential part of my practice.

I selected the 5 most recently completed treatments that focused on parenting, and will be summarizing them for you through the lens of mindfulness and PF.

In a systematic review of studies addressing **ACT consistent parenting interventions**, the preponderance noted improvements “on a number of ACT mechanisms of change outcomes, including **mindfulness, acceptance, and cognitive fusing**” (Byrne et al., 2021, p.378).

Turpyn et al. (2021) in a RCT looking at neural mechanisms, comparing a parenting mindfulness intervention vs control, results suggested “mindfulness interventions may affect maternal emotional awareness at a **neurobiological level**, which in turn may reduce emotional reactivity and allow for more mindful parenting behaviors in challenging parenting interactions.” (p.403).

ACT & PARENTING

In my therapeutic work, there were exercises that addressed:

- Values
- Acceptance-Willingness
- Defusion
- Self as Context
- Contact with the Present Moment-Mindfulness
- Committed Action

Powerful in all areas of life, Acceptance-Willingness is an essential ingredient in the move towards flexibility in parenting.

Contact with the Present

Moment-Mindfulness is the tool that allows us to put our intentions into action now

There is pleasure in relationships

In all of Life



Case Study 1

The use of ACT to facilitate values clarification, present moment awareness, psychological flexibility, and values driven behavioral choices in parenting children with significant psychological issues.



Case Study 1

Consists of 4 different adult clients, all of whom had at least 1 child with significant psychological issues (OCD, ADHD, Depression, PTSD, Autism Spectrum Disorder).

All were married, 3 worked outside of the home.

Their children ranged in age from 5 to 25.

With regard to their parenting, they reported difficulties such as:

- persisting in parenting behaviors that were not working/ineffective
- experiencing themselves as ineffective, incompetent, inconsistent
- being over controlling/overprotective

- avoiding/ignoring or not addressing their child's problematic behaviors

- problems in the parent-child relationship

- problems in co-parenting

Case Study 1

In addition, the parents reported problems including:

depression (1 mild, 1 moderate)

anxiety, social isolation/avoidance

marital conflict related to parenting

insomnia, burnout, poor functioning at work

excessive use of alcohol, binge eating

Living Mindfully & Parenting Mindfully

In addition to therapeutic work in all of the 6 core processes of ACT, when working with parents there was intensified focus on:

1. Identifying a clear set of values specific to their role as parent and towards moves in the service of these values.
2. Defusion techniques
3. Committed action in the development of a consistent mindfulness practice to create strong mindfulness muscles.



Tracking of **Values Based Living in the Parenting Domain**

In addition to numerous ACT exercises, we utilized a

Parenting Compass – Log completed for *at least 1 interaction/day*.

1. How important was this situation in the life of your child. 0-10
2. How important was this situation in the life of your family. 0-10
3. How important was this situation to you? 0-10
4. To what degree did you honor your parenting values in this situation? 0-10
5. How did your behavioral choices work in this situation.
6. What did you notice/learn that could be put to use in future situations.
7. What would support your incorporation of this learning into future situations.

Mindfulness Practice

In working with clients within the ACT frame, mindfulness is always an essential element.

In order to learn to live mindfully, we need to develop mindfulness skills.

This takes **regular** practice.

The focus is on:

- ~bringing your attention to the present moment
- ~cultivating an attitude of non-judgment, curiosity, and kindness
- ~willingness to experience what shows up

Clients were asked to commit to practicing mindfulness 10 minutes a day for a minimum of 5/7 days each week.

Course in Treatment

All 4 remained for a full course of treatment.

Values Based Living in the Parenting Domain, and tracking the workability of the behavioral choices was positively received overall.

Clients noted this work to be “a BIG help”, “a very eye opening exercise”, as well as “easy to plan but not so easy to do” and “frustrating”.

When a situation was rated **higher on importance, but lower on values based responding/workability**, this became a focus in the session.

How important was this situation in the life of your child. 0-10

or How important was this situation in the life of your family. 0-10

or How important was this situation to you? 0-10 **AND**

To what degree did you honor your parenting values in this situation? 0-10

Interestingly, the more mindfulness practice a client had under their belt, the greater the concordance between importance and valued based responding/workability.

Course in Treatment

The consistent mindfulness practice was a challenging element for 3 of the 4 clients.

Here, making and then following up on the plan for committed action was very important.

Once engaged in regular practice, 3 of the 4 clients reported that the mindfulness practice increased their ability to

be in the moment with their child, really listen to their child, look for the goal of their child's behavior, be compassionate, more often, let go of trying to control situations.

The 4th client had difficulty practicing mindfulness regularly, and they were one of 2 clients referred for Koru Mindfulness Training.

Overall Outcomes

At termination, clients reported improvements in parenting satisfaction, co-parenting, quality of parent-child relationship, fun, willingness to address problematic behaviors, acknowledging/celebrating child's positive qualities/successes, doing what works, and life satisfaction.

3 of the 4 reported decreases in their own symptoms (depression, anxiety, excessive use of food/substances).

Interestingly, 2 of the 4 reported that they had higher levels of social support and social engagement.

All 4 had clarified values and were using these to guide behavioral choices, 3 of the 4 were practicing mindfulness regularly.



Case Study 2: illustrates the use of a structured mindfulness training program and supported mindfulness practice (utilizing the KORU Mindfulness app) as well as ACT to increase present moment awareness, psychological flexibility and values driven behavioral choices in parenting.



Case Study 2

There are 2 clients in Case Study 2:

-the Case Study 1 client who needed more structure in order to develop a mindfulness practice.

-a parenting client who had heard of Koru and wanted to try mindfulness via this route.

Both sought out Koru classes and enrolled.

Koru Mindfulness is a structured beginner mindfulness training developed by 2 physicians at Duke University's Health Center to teach mindfulness to Duke students and faculty.

It has since been used at educational institutions around the world, and has been taught to older and younger people with busy lives who want the benefits of a mindfulness practice.



Case Study 2

Koru Mindfulness consists of four 75 minute classes conducted once a week. Classes are designed to be small, with a maximum of 12 students.

Each class includes:

- short opening meditation

- check-in

- mind-body skill

- mindfulness meditation skill and practice

Attendance at all 4 classes is required. 10 minutes of mindfulness practice each day is recommended. Via an app, participants complete and then submit a log or reflection daily after their mindfulness practice, with *individualized* responses that come from the instructor privately to that person.



Case Study 2

Both clients in the Koru Training completed the course and practiced their mindfulness skills a minimum of 10 minutes a day for at least 5 out of 7 days.

The more structured mindfulness training seemed to support the regular practice needed to develop a consistent mindfulness practice for these two individuals.

In both cases, along with the in-session ACT work, clients described notable improvements in the connection with values or “what’s really important” to them in their daily lives as parents.

Both clients reported a notable shift in their ability to pause before responding, and then either not respond or choose responses that fit with their values.

They both described qualitative improvements in their relationships with their children, in their co-parenting, in the relationship with their spouse, and satisfaction in family life.



Concluding Remarks

The results of my interventions, while largely qualitative in nature, are consistent with the literature on ACT informed parenting interventions.

My clients noted improvements in their ability to be in the present moment, non-judgmentally, accepting what shows up, and striving to make behavioral choices that honor their values.

There was very specific focus placed in treatment on the fidelity of their mindfulness practices, as this practice develops a skill/ability that is essential to the implementation of their values based behavioral intentions-

being in the present moment

aware that you are in that moment

consciously making choices

Going Forward

In my practice currently, I quantitatively monitor progress in a number of areas.

In future, I want to add **quantitative** progress monitoring of psychological flexibility and mindfulness.

I have identified measures to facilitate the tracking of these elements pre and post treatment.

The **Personalized Psychological Flexibility Index-PPFI** (Kashdan et al., 2020), with factors of Avoidance, Acceptance, and Harnessing (using challenges and negative emotions to motivate moves toward goals and values).

The **Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire** (Baer et al., 2006).

Heeren et al. (2021) conducted a network analysis of the five-facet model of mindfulness (Observing, Describing, Nonjudging, Nonreactivity, and Acting with Awareness) using the FFMQ. Their analysis supports the conception of mindfulness as comprised of these 5, interconnected and interacting elements, with **Acting With Awareness** emerging as the “**driving force**” of mindfulness.

I think it will be fascinating to compare data from these two intersecting measures, as there is overlap but also they access unique elements of functioning that should be clinically useful to track.

Please feel free to email me if you have any other thoughts about useful measures.

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Thank you. Wish I was there.

Links

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center

<https://www.uclahealth.org/marc/>

The Center for Koru Mindfulness

<https://korumindfulness.org/>



References-Related Reading



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