

## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Shame and Self-Criticism

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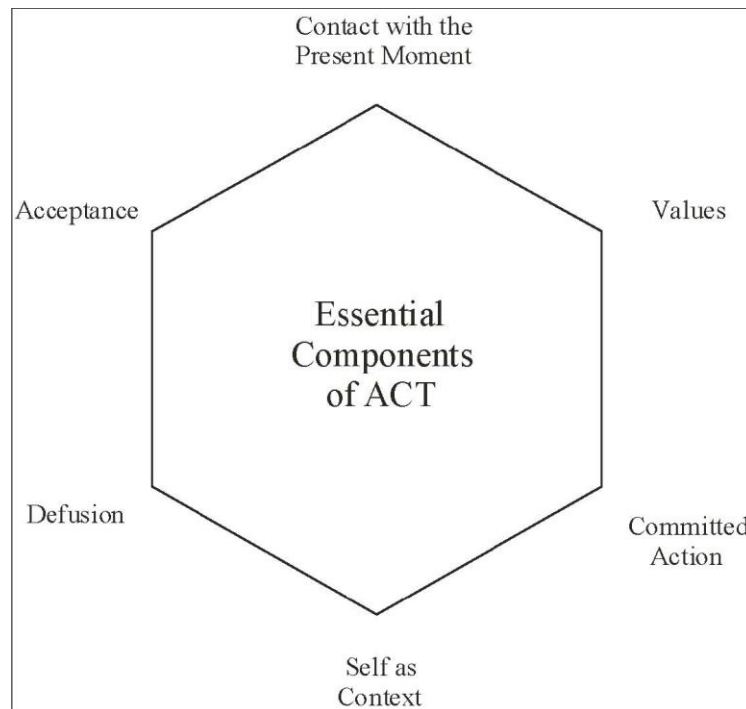
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### What is ACT?

- A type of cognitive behavioral therapy that comes from a theory about how the human mind works.
- This theory and the research that supports it suggests that many of our normal, human attempts at problem solving can backfire and create needless suffering and distract us from our more important life paths and goals.

### The ACT Hexagon Model



### The goal of ACT, put simply:

- The aim of ACT is to create a rich, full and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it.

### The goal of ACT, more technically:

- The goal of ACT is to increase **psychological flexibility**.
- Psychological flexibility has two components: 1) the ability to be psychologically present (i.e. aware, attentive, open to, and engaged in your experience); 2) the ability to control your behavior (e.g., what you do with your hands, your feet, and your mouth) to serve valued ends
- Official ACT definition: Psychological flexibility is the process of contacting the present moment fully as a conscious human being and, depending on what the situation affords, persisting or changing behavior in the service of chosen values.

### Left side of Hexagon (acceptance/defusion)

- Aimed primarily at disrupting narrow, inflexible patterns of behavior which interfere with valued action
- About undermining language where it tends to be unhelpful (in controlling private experience)
- Undermining avoidance
- About getting people untangled from useless or ineffective avoidance goals

### Right Side of Hexagon (values/committed action)

- Aimed primarily at building broad, flexible patterns of behavior that allow persistence or change in the service of in valued directions
- About building language where it tends to be more useful (guiding physical action toward values)
- Building approach (appetitive)
- Constructive: About building patterns of action in the service of valued directions

## The Six core processes of ACT

### 1. Acceptance/Willingness

- Actively contacting psychological experiences directly, fully, and without needless defense
- Definition: defused, open, undefended contact with the present moment, as a fully conscious human being.
- Colloquial: 'Opening yourself fully to experience, as it is, not as your mind says it is'

### 2. Defusion

- Looking *at* thoughts, rather than *from* thoughts
- Noticing thoughts, rather than being caught up in thoughts
- Seeing thoughts as what they are, not as what they seem to be
- Aim of Defusion is **NOT** to feel better, nor to get rid of unwanted thoughts
- Aim of Defusion **IS** to reduce influence of unhelpful cognitive processes upon behavior; to facilitate being psychologically present & engaged in experience; to facilitate awareness of language processes, in order to enhance psychological flexibility

### 3. Contact with the Present Moment

- Gives you important information about whether to change or persist in behavior
- Enables you to 'catch' cognitive fusion 'in flight'
- Allows you to engage fully in what you are doing

### 4. Perspective Taking Self (self-as-context)

- Contact with a sense of self as a transcendent, consistent observer facilitates a healthy distance from fused thinking and a sense of space to experience whatever is there to experience. (Often called The Observing Self)
- It is a process, not a thing: an awareness of awareness itself: 'pure awareness'

### 5. Values

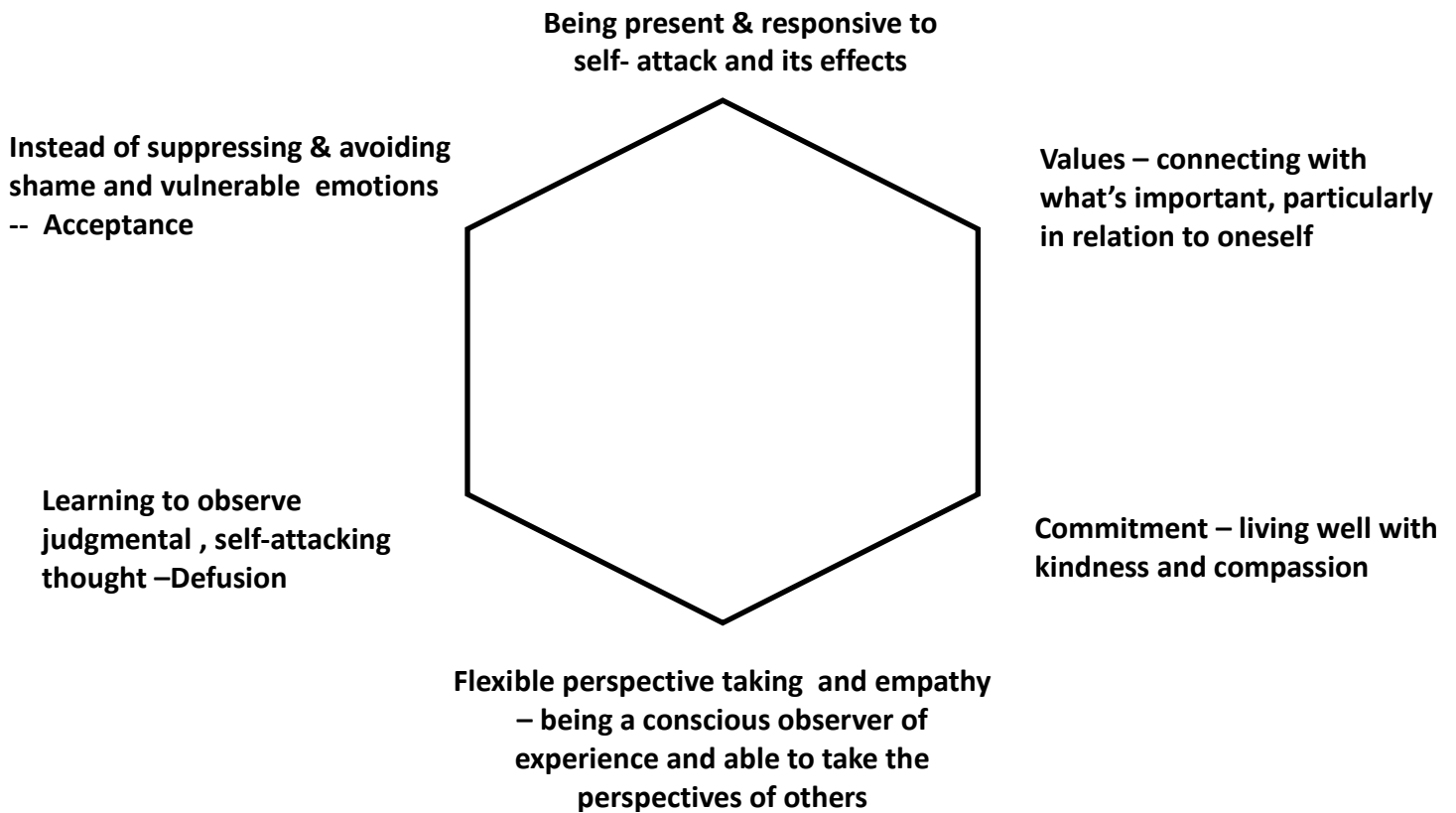
- Chosen life directions
- Not really a thing at all, but valuing is a quality of action, part of any purposive or intentional act
- *'Your heart's deepest desires for the sort of person you want to be and the things you want to do in your time on this planet; in other words, what you want to stand for in life'*
- Provide motivation & inspiration
- Provide guidance for your actions
- Give life meaning
- Give a sense of abundance
- Are different from goals

### 6. Committed Action

- Overt behavior in the service of values
- May require skills training
- Committed action is: values-guided, effective & mindful
- Taking responsibility for patterns of action, building them into larger and larger units.

ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.

### The ACT Hexagon Model Focused on Shame/Self-Compassion



### ACT as applied to shame and self-criticism

#### Acceptance - Develop willingness to acknowledge and embrace shame and vulnerable emotions in and out of session

- There is typically an aspect of self that feels damaged, broken, unlovable, not-good-enough, and/or rejected
- People develop many ways to avoid contact with this aspect of themselves --anger, shutting down, addictive behavior, etc.
- Examine workability of behaviors aimed at avoiding shame.
  - How do they avoid feeling bad about themselves or feeling rejected? What happens in shame producing situations?
- Bring process of shame and self-attacking into the room and improve ability to sit with it and with reaction to self-attack
- Practice willingness in relating shameful experiences and secrets (i.e., self as content) to trustworthy others (e.g., the therapist)

### **Present Moment – Build awareness of self-criticism and its effects**

- Teach client to notice evaluation/judgment as it occurs in session (noticing thoughts)
- Help clients to notice avoidance of shame as it occurs in session (noticing behavior)
- Bring costs of self attack into the room (noticing consequences):
  - Act out self-attack in chair work
  - Read aloud self-attacking thoughts, but imagine she were saying them to a friend or child in the same position
  - Use a mirror when reading self-attacking thoughts to self

### **Defusion - Develop distance, distinction from self-attacking thoughts. Develop ability to observe self-critical thoughts as thoughts.**

- Clients typically see critical view of self as normal, earned, or needed for motivation.
- Naming the critic– develop a name for the critical side of the self that has some endearing qualities
- Physicalize “critic” through chair exercises or imagery (include tone, size, facial expression, etc.).
- Many common defusion exercises can be helpful here

### **Perspective taking self - Develop connection a sense of self that transcends our self concept and the flexible ability to take multiple perspectives on the self (including compassionate others)**

- Distinguish self as context from self as content
- Work on letting go of attachment to self as content, including self evaluations
- Practice perspective taking (loving kindness meditation, taking perspective of shamers, taking perspective of therapist, and caring others)
- In chair exercises, add a third chair, perhaps a compassion chair or observer chair for experiencing the ongoing dialogue. Have client be the compassionate therapist or compassionate friend in the third chair. What would that person say?
- Use hierarchical framing to build sense of common humanity in suffering and normality of shame and fears

### **Values - Help person acknowledge and take a stand for their values, particularly those related to self-kindness and self-growth**

- Most people value empathy and connection, but fusion with self-concept impedes applying that to themselves
- Simply discussing the possibility of self-kindness and self-compassion can be eye-opening for many clients
- You can find values in the reaction to self-attack, if client is able to stay with the attack and their emotional reaction to it
- Empathy and compassion for self can emerge when the harm done by fusion with self-criticism is fully contacted
- Explore regrets and how past behavior has not aligned with values - e.g., acting out funeral exercise
- Can be found in perspective taking exercises by viewing hurting or struggling self from non-critical perspective
- Values provide context for acceptance and are what makes acceptance different than wallowing or yet another way to control pain.
- Build connection with positive agenda of human connection and empathy

### **Committed action - Help client take steps to act on values while practicing kindness and compassion**

- Self-attacking can function as a way to coerce the self to act in line with self-standards and values (e.g., “buck up” and “push through it”). Committed action needs to be tied to values, not self-coercion
- Self-criticism makes it harder to take risks and learn, which inevitably involves failure and mistakes
- Increasing self-compassion can make it easier to take risks, it’s like you have a friend who “has your back.”
- When exploring valued actions related to others or achievement, explore what kind of relationship person wants to have toward self as they do this--“and how do you want to be with yourself as you take these actions?” (before, during, and after the commitment)
- Practice intentional self-kindness through self-care or compassion practices (e.g., loving-kindness meditation or compassion-focused meditation)
- Practice reflecting on intention before taking difficult action

### **These six processes can be organized into 3 core strategies:**

1. Stop feeding shame through defusing from self-critical thinking that serves to maintain avoidance and sustain shame
  - Build awareness of self-criticism/self-attack (contact with the present moment and perspective taking)
  - Develop distance, distinction from self-attacking thoughts, observing self-critical thoughts as thoughts (defusion and perspective taking)
2. Reduce dominance of shame in organizing behavior through exposure to shame in learning context
  - Help clients compassionately enter shame-inducing situations while adding elements that allow learning to occur (i.e., the six ACT processes)
3. Increase caring and nurturing repertoires (e.g., kindness and compassion)
  - Develop and activate caretaking response on part of client
  - Discuss and explore chosen values toward self
  - Practice various compassion-focused on loving-kindness meditations
  - Make sure that intention of kindness and compassion toward self is part of homeworks and committed actions
  - Writing compassionate letters to self
  - Developing plans for how to respond to self-criticism and shame when taking committed action

### **Self-report measures to track therapy progress**

A number of standardized assessments exist that may be useful in working with highly self-critical and shame prone clients. These measures can be used for obtaining baseline assessments as well as tracking change in therapy over time. Some of these measures may even have predictive utility. For example, the hated self subscale from the Forms of Self-Criticism and Reassuring Scale seems to respond more slowly to interventions aimed at reducing self-criticism, suggesting that highly self-loathing and self hating clients may need more time in therapy to develop self compassion. In my practice, I give three measures to every client at intake and periodically throughout therapy. We typically discuss the results in some detail as part of their ongoing conceptualization. These are the three I give to all clients:

- Forms of Self-Criticism and Reassuring Scale (FSCRS) – last week version
- Internalized Shame Scale (ISS) – last week version
- Self-Compassion Scale (SCS-short form)

Several other measures can help with obtaining useful assessment information or be used to track progress:

- Functions of Self-Criticism/Attacking Scale
- Early Memories of Warmth Scale
- Rizvi's (2010) Shame Inventory
- Compass of Shame Scale

Other relevant measures can be found here: [http://www.actwithcompassion.com/therapist\\_resources](http://www.actwithcompassion.com/therapist_resources)