Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Treat Chronic Pain

**Acceptance**
Acceptance is the ability to become an objective observer of thoughts with the ability to accept, but not control, thoughts. Behaving and focusing on behavior towards valued living is the goal. Unhelpful thoughts (such as “It hurts too much to move today”) are accepted and focus is returned to valued living (Foote, 2013; Hayes et al., 1999; Luoma et al., 2007).

**Valued Living**
In ACT, an assessment is usually done to determine what is important in a person’s life. Therapy is then aimed toward behavior consistent with things which are valued in a person’s life (Hayes et al., 1999). For example, a person might have chronic pain which keeps them in bed, but this individual might value their grandchildren enough to spend a few hours a day with them, which potentially improves his chronic pain outcomes.

**Act therapists use cognitive defusion to provide a perspective of thought. A thought is not a plan written in stone but objectively viewed as a thought which is coming up.**

**PAIN STIMULUS AND PATHWAY**
The term nociception describes the unconscious path of the stimulus signal through the CNS (including the spine) to the cerebral cortex. There can be errors in nociception (sometimes related to emotional or environmental factors), which can cause the cerebral cortex to perceive pain stimuli in error (Tul, 2009).

**NOCICEPTIVE ERRORS**
Pain, at initial onset, can often be traced to a physical cause. Sometimes the nociceptive (CNS stimulus and pathway) process can start to unravel, however, sending erroneous pain signals to the cerebral cortex. Since the nociceptive process can be affected by environmental and psychological factors (in addition to chemical, neurological and physical factors), the depressed, discouraged chronic pain client can experience exacerbated psychological and nociceptive errors leading to increased, long term pain without explanation (Tul, 2009; Valtchev, 2009).

**ACT pain researchers saw the potential of ACT as a treatment for chronic pain, since trying to make pain go away often makes the pain experience more powerful (McCracken & Vowles, 2014). Pain experience is the paradoxic elucidated in ACT research: The harder an individual tries to ignore or change a thought, the more intense the thought becomes (Hayes et al., 1999). Accepting pain and acting towards valued living despite pain does not make pain go away, but reduces functional impact. This concept is the linchpin of ACT treatment of chronic pain. Patients who accept their pain and still be committed to life goals can improve psychological and physical functioning.**

**Pain is a signal to the body that something is wrong. Chronic pain is pain which lasts more than three months. This type of pain is no longer considered a useful signal from the body to the brain because the body is asking for relief from a problem which cannot be resolved (Gauntlett-Gilbert et al., 2013).**

**CHRONIC PAIN**
Chronic pain suffering impacts an estimated 7% of Americans (Bailey et al., 2010). Researchers have documented many effects of chronic pain, including increased pain intensity, mood changes (depression), suffering, distress, negative thoughts and beliefs, social problems, anxiety, catastrophic thinking, increased medication and health care usage, and a reduction in physical activity (Gauntlett-Gilbert et al., 2013; McCracken & Vowles, 2014; Mo’tamedi et al., 2012).

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**The patient explores values, and actions they can take towards valued living, even while living in pain, rather than avoiding valued experiences because of pain.**

**ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**
ACT is a form of behavior therapy that helps people with chronic pain. It is based on the idea that chronic pain can cause emotional suffering and can interfere with people’s ability to live their lives as fully as they would like.

- **Acting with values** is the cornerstone of ACT. This means taking actions that are consistent with one’s core values, even in the face of discomfort or distress. It’s about doing what matters, even when it’s tough.
- **Mindfulness** is another key component of ACT. It’s about being present and aware of the moment without judgment.
- **Committed action** is another core concept. This means taking actions that are in line with one’s values, even when they’re not easy.

ACT often involves techniques such as defusion (separating thoughts from reality), deep muscle relaxation, and values-based activities. The goal is to help people find a way to live a full and meaningful life despite their pain.

**ACT Treatment Intervention Research Findings**
Research on ACT has shown promising results. For example:

- A randomized controlled trial found that ACT reduced pain intensity and disability more than a control group (Mo’tamedi et al., 2012).
- A study involving 419 chronic pain clients found that ACT improved psychological flexibility, acceptance, and valued living more than a control group (Maestre, 2013).

- Other studies have found that ACT can improve quality of life, reduce depression, and increase psychological flexibility.

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**ACT**
American Psychological Association

**References**


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