



# Why do Clinical Psychology Graduate Students Choose ACT?

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## Introduction

Throughout their education and training, graduate students in clinical psychology are tasked with finding their therapeutic voices. In doing so, they are exposed to a wide variety of therapeutic approaches to psychotherapy, rooted in varying empirically supported theories and perspectives to practice from. Such approaches include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Psychodynamic Therapy, Person-Centered Therapy, and many more. The focus of this study was on the identification of reasons why Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has become the preferential approach for graduate students in clinical psychology who identified ACT as their preferred approach. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is a behavior therapy that emphasizes improving psychological flexibility, which targets acceptance of experiences and values-directed actions (Fledderus et al., 2013). ACT emphasizes its six core processes to help clients lead meaningful lives: acceptance, cognitive defusion, being present, self as context, values, and committed action (Hayes et al., 2006). No research has been done on graduate students in clinical psychology who prefer to implement ACT as their preferred approach.

## Methods

- This study involved ten clinical psychology students in a graduate program who identified ACT as their preferred approach.
- They completed a brief survey and their responses were subsequently coded to determine common themes and connections.
- Each participant was asked to anonymously record responses to the following 3 questions:
  - 1) Is ACT your current preferred approach?
  - 2) Rank order your preferred approaches
  - 3) In rank order, please describe reasons that you've chosen ACT as your preferred approach (with 3 spaces to record responses)

## Results

15 themes determined through the development of the following qualitative codes that stem from ACT principles, philosophy, processes, and theory:

Reasons ACT has become your preferred approach	Number of responses
Non-pathologizing	4
Values and strength based	4
Common humanity (we're all in the same soup)	3
Therapeutic flexibility (ACT can incorporate other approaches)	2
Connects Western and Eastern philosophies (can be more culturally attuned)	2
Metaphors make approach accessible	2
Resonates with positive psychology movement	1
Philosophy (functional contextualism)	1
The past can't be unlearned, but must be subsumed	1
It is trans-diagnostic (which is a closer fit to reality and comorbidities)	1
It's a behavior therapy but not manualized, so it can be adapted to individual clients	1
Changing relationship to thoughts rather than changing thoughts	1
It equalizes therapist-client relationship	1
Interactions amongst ACBS members and organizations' values epitomize common humanity	1
Mindfulness fits within the approach	1

## Discussion

Due to the lack of research regarding *why* graduate students in clinical psychology choose Acceptance and Commitment Therapy as their preferred approach, this study allowed for a preliminary understanding of what draws students in. Within a small group of participants (n=10), the two most common themes amongst responses were that ACT is seen as non-pathologizing and that it is values and strength based. Another area of overlap amongst three students was the common humanity aspect of ACT, or the "we're all in the same soup" mentality. Smaller areas of overlap include therapeutic flexibility, the connection between Western and Eastern philosophies, and the use of metaphors in making this an accessible approach. While there were also several themes that were each only coded once, this highlights the range of qualities that attracts student clinicians to prefer ACT over other approaches. Overall, there are a variety characteristics that graduate student clinicians attribute their gravitation toward act. Future research should target larger populations of graduate students who identify ACT as their preferred approach. These findings suggest 15 themes that draw these students to ACT, and even overlap with one another.

## References

1. Fledderus, M., Bohlmeijer, E.T., Fox, J.P., Schreurs, K.M.G., Spinhoven, P. (2013) The role of psychological flexibility in a self-help acceptance and commitment therapy intervention for psychological distress in a randomized controlled trial. *Behavior Research Therapy*, 51(3), 142-151. doi: 0.1016/j.brat.2012.11.007
2. Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J. B., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2006). Acceptance and commitment therapy: model, processes and outcomes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44, 1e25.