

# Development and Implementation of Group-based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Enhance Graduate Psychological Flexibility

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## Background

Graduate school is a challenging time for students who face many demands they have not encountered before. Graduate students have higher levels of psychological distress than the general population, and recent reports show that universities may not have psychological services that fit their needs, underscoring the importance of interventions specifically tailored to graduate students (Evans et al., 2018; Nature PhD Survey, 2019). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2012), a transdiagnostic third-wave treatment, may be a promising intervention for graduate students.

## Method

**Intervention:** A group-based ACT intervention was developed and implemented in a university psychological services center over the course of several semesters. The 8-week intervention covers the processes of psychological flexibility and guides students in breaking patterns of avoidance, contacting values that led them to their educational pursuits, and engaging meaningfully in fulfilling aspects of their lives despite the challenges of graduate school.

**Implementation:** The intervention has been delivered at a large, public mid-south university each semester between summer 2019-summer 2020. Clients (total  $N = 11$ ; Semester 1  $n = 4$ , Semester 2  $n = 2$ , Semester 3  $n = 5$ ) completed a measure of treatment acceptability which addressed three areas of patient perceptions including (a) acceptability of treatment components (b) proxies of treatment outcomes, and (c) satisfaction with the group.

## Results

As seen in Table 1, preliminary treatment acceptability evaluations were promising. Specifically, clients reported positive perceptions in terms of

Table 1. *Treatment Acceptability Information*

Item	Mean	Median
Acceptability of treatment components		
1. How helpful were the experiential exercises (i.e., clipboard activity, writing thoughts on notecards, etc.)?	4.5	5
2. How helpful were the lessons about processes?	4.8	5
3. How helpful was the mindfulness log?	3.5	4
4. How helpful were the other homework activities?	4.4	5
5. How helpful were the in-session mindfulness exercises?	4.6	5
6. How helpful were the phone call check-ins?	4.6	5
Proxy of treatment outcomes		
7. How much do you think that this group will affect your ability to function?	4.4	5
8. How much do you think that this group will affect your ability to function in graduate school?	4.4	5
11. This group helped me be more willing to do difficult things.	4.7	5
12. This group helped me respond better to my difficult thoughts and feelings.	4.7	5
13. This group helped me to live according to my values.	4.8	5
Satisfaction with the group		
9. How satisfied were you with the ACT group?	4.8	5
10. How satisfied were you with the group facilitators?	4.9	5
14. Given the opportunity, I would participate in this group again.	4.9	5
15. I would recommend this group to a friend.	4.7	5

Note.  $N = 11$ . All items have response options of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Items 1-11 have endpoint labels of *not at all* (1) and *very much* (5). Items 11-15 have endpoint labels of *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (5).

the usefulness of specific components of treatment, improvements in functioning, and overall satisfaction with the intervention. Responses to a free-response question about aspects of the treatment clients disliked suggested that most were logistical (e.g., extending the length of treatment, providing digital materials). Importantly, responses to this item also highlighted a desire from clients to have a therapist of color facilitate the group.

## Implications

Poor graduate student mental health has received increasing attention and the need for interventions specifically tailored to the concerns of graduate students is well-documented. In an effort to address this need, a novel ACT group was developed and delivered at a public mid-south university. Treatment evaluation information showing clients felt satisfied with the group and believed they benefited from it support the social validity and acceptability of the treatment. This assessment provides justification for continued delivery as well as future research efforts to assess effectiveness.

## References

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