

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for the Neurodivergent Brain

Ginny Nikiforos, LCSW, BCBA, ADHD-CCSP, ASDCS



Learning Goals

- Introduce 6 core processes of ACT Hexaflex and application of model to ADHD
- Apply one concrete client-centered skill for each of the six core processes of ACT that is neurodivergent-informed
- Include considerations for the neurodivergent brain within each ACT core process

The Six Core ACT Processes

- Defusion
- Acceptance
- Contact with the Present Moment
- Self-as-context
- Values
- Committed Action

AIMs of ACT

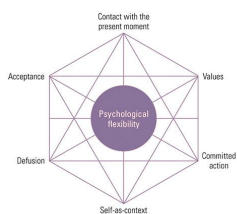
- Create a rich and meaningful life: life led by your values
- Accept pain and suffering is part of living a meaningful life
 - Unpleasant and unwanted thoughts, images, sensations, memories, and urges will be encountered
- Cultivate psychological flexibility
 - Symptom reduction is not the goal- attempts to eliminate symptoms often cause an increase in symptoms and more harm

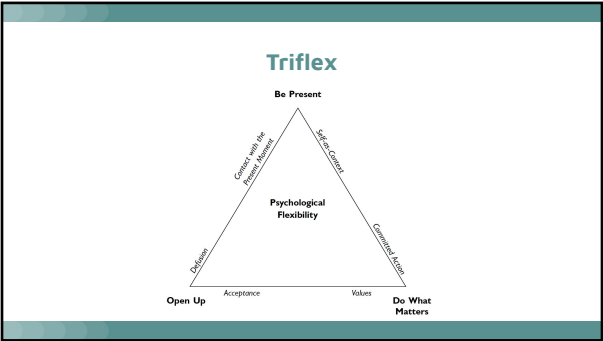
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Another way to define it...

"Taking effective action guided by our deepest values and in which we are fully present and engaged."

Harris 2006 p 2

The Hexaflex





ACT diagnostic system

- Problem: 'the human condition'
- Symptoms:
 - Cognitive Fusion
 - Experiential Avoidance
 - Inflexible Contact with the Present Moment
 - Remoteness from Values
 - Unworkable Action
 - This area may include a lot of time spent on in session skill building and role play!

ACT supports all areas of Executive Functioning impacted by ADHD

Executive functioning makes up the ability for self control: They help us stop ourselves, think things over, and guide eventual behavior:

- Inhibition
- Nonverbal Working Memory
- Verbal Working Memory
- Self-Regulation
- Planning and Problem Solving

Barkley, R. & Benton, C. (2021)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Research in ADHD

- Demonstrates improvement in behaviors related to impulsivity, inattention, hyperactivity, inflexibility, mood, anxiety, and psychosocial adjustment
- Demonstrates improvement in measurements related to quality of life, academic procrastination, depression and anxiety symptoms, and psychological maladjustment in group or individual formats

Fullen, T., Galab, N., Abbott, K.A., Adamou, M. (2020)

Munawar, Khadeeja & Choudhry, Fahad & Lee, Sook & Siau, Ching Sin & Kadri, Nursyuhaidah & Sulong, Rose & Noor Mohamed, Adam. (2021).

Core Process: Contact with the Present Moment

Core Process: Contact with the Present Moment

- **Definition:** flexibly notice your experience here and now, more traditional/widely understood definition of "mindfulness"



Core Process: Contact with the Present Moment

- **Used for:** underpins every other skill; when clients are distracted, disengaged, dissociating, struggling to understand their own thoughts and emotions, need grounding, have low self-awareness, are missing out on important aspects of their life, etc., deepening pleasant/important experiences

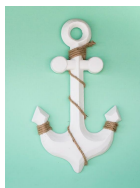


Contact with the Present Moment Exercises

- Dropping Anchor
- Mindfulness of experiences (eating, nature, more physical experiences, etc.)
- Mindfulness meditation (Leaves on a Stream, observing thoughts)
- Emotions Wheel
- Somatic awareness (body scans, naming where emotions show up physiologically, etc.)

Dropping Anchor

- **ACE**
 - **Acknowledge** your inner experience (thoughts, emotions, etc.)
 - **Connect** with your body (physical action)
 - **Engage** with your environment and/or what you're doing
- Be flexible!
 - How you introduce/practice each step
 - Length of exercise



Harris, R. <https://www.actmindfully.com.au/>

Dropping Anchor: ADHD specifics

- **Acknowledge** your inner experience (thoughts, emotions, etc.)
 - Inhibition!
- **Connect** with your body (physical action)
 - Self-Control!
- **Engage** with your environment and/or what you're doing
 - Executive Functioning!



Harris, R. <https://www.actmindfully.com.au/>

Contact with the Present Moment: Considerations for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Helpful in improving all five areas of executive functioning
- **Mindfulness based** visualization exercises may be harder or not helpful/not possible (i.e. Leaves on a Stream, Emotions as Objects, etc.)
- **Tangible** visuals may be extremely helpful for processing (handouts, slides, videos, etc.)

Contact with the Present Moment: Considerations for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Sometimes helpful to start with sensation/body based work, then label emotions
- Noticing judgment and attention distractions are part of this core process



Contact with the Present Moment: Considerations for the Neurodivergent Brain Continued

- Meditation or mindfulness of breathing exercises not critical/necessary
 - Many people find these exercises challenging, not just neurodivergent folks
 - Lots of other ways to practice, including external/outside experiences
 - Especially true if dissociation is high



Contact with the Present Moment: Considerations for the Neurodivergent Brain Continued

- May need less abstract and more concrete/practical questions:
 - What is your mind telling you right now?
 - What is happening in (begin going through isolated body parts)?
- Self-compassion: a client acknowledging their problems and pain



Core Process: Self-as-Context

Core Process: Self-as-Context

- **Definition:** awareness, the noticing self, separation between awareness and private experiences, metacognition, the psychological space where you experience your experiences, the continuous you, the observing self
- **Used for:** facilitating acceptance, defusion, and being present, particularly around struggles with identity, experiences, and our sense of self



You are the Sky not the Clouds

Self-as-Context Exercises

- Talking and Listening
- Stage Show Metaphor
- Sky and weather metaphor-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12kq0baUj8U>
- Continuous You exercise-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12kq0baUj8U>

Talking and Listening Experiential Exercise

- Talking and Listening
 - Example: *For the next thirty seconds, silently listen to what your mind is saying. And if your thoughts stop, just keep listening until they start again. (Pause for thirty seconds). So there you have it: there's a part of your mind that talks-the thinking self-and a part of your mind that listens-the observing self.*

Stage Show Metaphor Exercise

- [Stage show metaphor](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBPPr1hsbMM)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBPPr1hsbMM>
 - What did you notice your "spotlight" was focused upon?
 - What did you expand out to include?
 - Where did you notice you wanted your attention to shift to?
 - What was your experience in shifting your attention to where you wanted it to go?
 - How did you keep the initial 'spotlight' in the background?

Self-as-Context: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Bowl Metaphor
 - Bowl is continuous self; we fill it w/different experiences throughout life
- If a client has a late diagnosis of ADHD, continuous self exercises might be important to reframe experiences from neurodivergent lens
 - Ex: You didn't choose to suffer then; you coped then in the best way you knew how in that moment and now you have a different understanding of what is happening and how you are responding to what is happening
- If visualization is challenging, utilize language:
 - Notice there is a part of you observing while there is another part talking

Core Process: Defusion

Core Process: Defusion

- **Definition:** separating private experiences from sense of self, "unhooking" from private experiences; seeing experiences in larger context

Thoughts ≠ **Truth**

Core Process: Defusion

- **Used for:** when cognitions (private experiences) get in the way of values-driven behavior



Defusion Experiential Exercise: Pre-empting/Writing Distractions

- Pick an activity you believe you will get distracted from (work task, chore, homework, etc.)
- Write down what internal distractions you believe will show up
 - Other things you need to do
 - Other things you'd prefer to do
 - Worries about how well you're doing
 - Other concerns, problems, worries
- Once it's written down in black and white: "I'll review that later. Right now, I've doing this and I need to focus"
- If the same things come up again, give it a checkmark, then go back to the activity at hand
- Start this in session and the have them continue outside of session





Defusion: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Particularly useful for clients who struggle with the inhibition, self-regulation, and planning/problem solving areas of executive functioning
- These clients tend to get "hooked" more quickly and easily than other clients
- Can work well in conjunction with medication (if client is taking that route!)



Defusion: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Make it concrete! Some concrete Defusion exercises:
 - I am having the thought...I am having the image...I am having the memory...my brain is trying to protect me...
 - Put the thoughts on a computer screen and play around with the fonts
 - Download and record using a voice record changer
 - Naming the Story
 - Pre-empting/writing down distractions
- Lots and lots and lots of Dropping Anchor! Very concrete!



Core Process: Acceptance

Core Process: Acceptance

- **Definition:** dropping the struggle, curiosity, openness, acknowledgement
 - NOT the same thing as "tolerating"
 - The word Acceptance: lots of baggage
- **Used for:** when experiential avoidance is disconnecting client from values



Building motivation for acceptance process

1. Find the target inner experience
2. How long has the client struggled with this inner experience?
3. What has the client done to control this inner experience?
4. How well has it been controlled short term?
5. How well has it been controlled long term?
6. How is this working for the client, based on their lived experience?

Building motivation for acceptance examples

1. What have you tried so far to (reduce, control, eliminate) ____? How has (control effort) worked for you (short vs long-term)?
2. Have there been any costs to your efforts (health, relationships, finances, work, education, recreation, time, neglected values)?
3. Has your (target of elimination) improved, worsened, or stayed the same? Have new painful thoughts/feelings emerged?
4. Given these costs, are you open to a different approach?





Acceptance Experiential Example Exercise

- Compassion-Robyn Walser Exercise
 - Exercise for acceptance and willingness
 - Questions to ponder:
 - What did compassion look like for you?
 - What did it feel like?
 - What shifts for you when compassion is present?
 - What were your reactions when receiving it?
 - How did it shift over time?
 - How difficult was it to access?



Additional Acceptance Exercises

- Leaves on a stream
- Loads of compassion work
- Sushi Train-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzUoXJVl0wo>



Acceptance: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Most common reason for lack of task initiation is experiential avoidance (avoiding unpleasant feelings and thoughts)
- Use choice point visualization exercises
- Changing the problem to one we can solve-see committed action slides
 - We can't eliminate challenging thoughts and feelings; we can choose how to respond to them

Acceptance: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain Con't

- Loads and loads of self compassion work (which can be done at any point in the ACT hexaflex; example slide within committed action!)
 - Holding a memory of when used one's hands for kindness and extending that same kindness to oneself (see kind bowl exercise below)
 - Making room and space for challenging feelings; find neutral or safe places in the body in addition to points of tension
 - Am I willing to make room for these difficult feelings in order to do this task?
 - Can make this routine exercise- Noticing/Naming, Breathing, Expanding, Allowing, Objectifying, and Normalizing, Compassion, Expanding Awareness
 - Integrating kindness, connection to humanity, and mindfulness in moments of mistakes and challenges!

Core Process: Values

Core Process: Values

- **Definition:** words that define how you want to act, the future you want, the kind of person you want to become, the qualities you want to exhibit with your actions



Core Process: Values

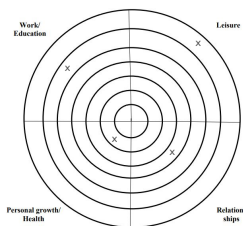
- Used for: motivation, meaning, guidance for actions, goal-setting, fulfillment



Values Experiential Exercise: Bullseye

- Identify values in four areas: Work/Education, Leisure, Personal Growth/Health, and Relationships
- Map them into Bullseye
- Identify barriers
- Create Valued Action Plan

Values Experiential Exercise: Bullseye





Additional Values Exercises

- Values checklist
- Values card sort
- 80th birthday exercise



Values: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Helpful for improving all five areas of executive functioning
- Values are abstract by design! Make them more concrete!
 - Discuss important values, immediately engage in committed action
 - Tie to direct action more quickly



Values: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Help clients connect actions to purpose
 - How will this impact me in 1 minute, 1 hour, 1 day, 1 week, 1 month, and 1 year from now?
- Help clients engage in values-oriented language
 - Given the situation, how do I want to treat myself? How do I want to treat others?

Core Process: Committed Action

Core Process: Committed Action

- **Definition:** values in action, application of mindfulness skills with values
- **Used for:** translating values into a fulfilling life through actions, skills training, problem solving, exposures, behavioral activation, goal setting, action planning



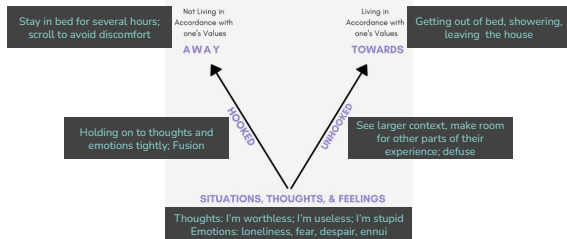
Committed Action Exercises

- Choice Point
- The Challenge Formula
- SMART Goal sheet planning
- Russell Barkley's Tips to Support ADHD
- The 7 R's for Lasting Change
- Miracle Question (small steps/solutions!)
 - What is the smallest step you can take?
 - What's an action that is readily available to you and in line with your values?
 - What would you like to be doing differently?
 - If a miracle happened tomorrow and everything was different in your circumstances, what would be different?

Choice Point

- Importance to determining function of behavior
 - Functional Analysis with The Choice Point
 - What maintains the behavior? What reinforces the behavior? What are the costs to the behavior?
 - Explore both immediate and long-term consequences
 - We're offering an alternative to emotional control agenda

TOWARD vs AWAY



The Challenge Formula

- Three core options:
 - Leave
 - Stay and live by your values; try to change what you can to improve situation and make room for discomfort
 - Stay and give up acting effectively; do things that probably won't make a difference or will make things worse

Dr. Russ Harris SMART Goals Planning

- Specific: behavioral, implicit (internal) or explicit (external)
- Motivated by values: check with your values
- Adaptive: will it improve your life?
- Realistic: given your resources?
- Time-framed: define a specific day/time
- Assess the goal!
 - Plan B?

Russell Barkley's Tips to Support ADHD

- Externalize information held in the mind
- Make time physical
- Use external incentives
- Replace distractions with reinforcers to focus on task at hand
- Externalize your rules
- Break down large tasks into smaller time chunks
- Be prepared to change your plan

Barkley, R. & Benton, C. (2021)

Committed Action: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Skills such as:
 - Asking for what one wants may need to be taught
 - Assertiveness training
 - Negotiation/compromise
 - Making requests
 - Declining requests



Committed Action: Applications for the Neurodivergent Brain

- Ensure client knows their actions when engaged in authentic values and how they engage via masking (potential trauma response)
 - Authentic values and ways of acting can be important for the value of safety
 - Assess a client's current safety—who are they around at home/workplace/etc? How safe is it to engage in certain meaningful actions? What impact will these actions have on a client? How can a client increase safety within their situation?



The 7 R's for Lasting Change

- Reminders
- Records
- Rewards
- Routines
- Relationships
- Reflecting
- Restructuring

Russ Harris, 2018 <https://psychwire.com/harris>



Summary

- Be thoughtful on neurodivergent approaches for each area of the hexaflex
 - Ensure neurodivergent strengths are noticed throughout the therapy such as spontaneity, courage, energy, hyperfocus, sociability, resilience, and creativity!
- Build psychological flexibility using mindfulness concepts
 - Defusion
 - Acceptance
 - Being present
 - Self-as-context
- Use psychological flexibility to fulfill values through actions
 - Values
 - Committed Action

Other Considerations for the Neurodivergent Brain:

- Guilt/shame/fears of rejection
 - Great news! Already directly addressed in this presentation-) Just apply for these specific emotions
- Developmental trauma
 - Check out ACT for Trauma by Russ Harris
- People pleasing
- Perfectionism
- Giftedness
- Learning differences (dyslexia, aphasia, etc)

**Each area might need specific skills building such as assertiveness training, planning/organization/prioritization skills, and/or accommodations in learning (such as increased visuals, less visualizations, session follow-up summaries, etc)

Q&A

- Ask me stuff!
- Also great additional ACT trainings through Contextual Consulting, Praxis, PsychWire, ACBS WorldCon in July
- Jennifer Kemp has many free resources around applying ACT for those that are neurodivergent: <https://jenniferkemp.com.au/>
- Resources available at:



Source List

- Barkley, R. & Benton, C. (2010). Taking Charge of Adult ADHD. The Guilford Press.
- Barkley, R. & Benton, C. (2021). Taking Charge of Adult ADHD: Proven Strategies to Succeed at Work, at Home, and in Relationships Second Edition. The Guilford Press.
- Byrne, G., & O'Mahony, T. (2020). *Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for adults with intellectual disabilities and/or autism spectrum conditions (ASC): A systematic review*. Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science, 18, 247-255.
- Fullen, T., Galab, N., Abbott, K.A., Adamou, M. (2020). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Adults with ADHD during COVID-19: An Open Trial*. Open Journal of Psychiatry, 10(4).
- Harris, R., 2006. *Embracing your demons: An overview of acceptance and commitment therapy*. Psychotherapy in Australia, 12(4).

Source List Con't

- Harris, R. (2019). *ACT Made Simple: An easy-to-read primer on acceptance and commitment therapy* (2nd ed.). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Harris, R. (2021). *Trauma-focused ACT: a practitioner's guide to working with mind, body, and emotion using acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.
- Harris, R. (2023). *ACT for Adult ADHD*. [PowerPoint Slides].
- Harris, R. <https://www.actmindfully.com.au/>
- Harris, R. <https://psychwire.com/harris>
- Hayes, S. C., & Hofmann, S. G. (2017). *The third wave of cognitive behavioral therapy and the rise of process-based care*. *World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 16(3), 245-246.

Source List Con't

- Hayes, S.C., 2004. *Acceptance and commitment therapy, relational frame theory, and the third wave of behavioral and cognitive therapies*. *Behavior Therapy*, 35(4), pp.639-665.
- Lawson, L.P., Richdale, A.L., Denney, K., and Morris, E.M., (2022). *ACT-i, an insomnia intervention for autistic adults: a pilot study*. Cambridge University Press.
- Meharg, S. (2023). *Neurodivergent Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* [PowerPoint Slides].
- McLoughlin J., & Roche, BT. (2002) *ACT: A Process-Based Therapy in search of a process*. *Behavior Therapy*.

Source List Con't

- Munawar, Khadeeja & Choudhry, Fahad & Lee, Sook & Siau, Ching Sin & Kadri, Nursyuhaidah & Sulong, Rose & Noor Mohamed, Adam. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Individuals Having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): A Scoping Review*. *Heliyon*. 7.10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07842.
- Stoddard, J., Afari, N. (2014). *The Big Book of ACT Metaphors*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Twohig, M., Levin, M., Ong, C. (2020). *ACT in Steps: A Transdiagnostic Manual for Learning Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. New York, NY. Oxford University Press.