

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY, APPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

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Abstract

Acceptance and commitment therapy is a third wave cognitive – behavioral psychotherapy. It is based on the concept of psychological flexibility which in turn relies on six psychological processes as its core concepts (acceptance, defusion, contact with the present moment, values, committed action, self as context). ACT is based on several philosophical theories such as contextual behaviorism, relational framework theory, existential philosophy and pragmatism. ACT benefits from a large number of scientific research studies that show its efficiency in reducing psychological disorders and increasing wellbeing. In this article the use of ACT in school settings is presented. Several studies showing the benefits of ACT in these settings are cited. ACT has been found to be effective in treating a wide range of conditions and promoting mental health and wellbeing in diverse populations. It has also been applied in school settings to reduce anxiety, stress, hyperactivity, and a different manifestation of emotional distress. It has also been suggested as a model to support school staff wellbeing.

Keywords: acceptance and commitment therapy; school psychology; mental health; wellbeing

What is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a form of psychotherapy that falls under the category of third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapies. It was developed by Steven C. Hayes, Kelly G. Wilson, and Kirk D. Strosahl in the late 1980s. There are six key components (or processes) of ACT which collectively are called the ACT hexaflex model. They underline the concept of psychological flexibility which is considered to be the main component of mental health. The six ACT processes are:

1. **Acceptance:** In ACT, acceptance involves acknowledging and embracing one's thoughts, emotions, sensations, and memories without trying to avoid or control them. Instead of struggling against unwanted

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internal experiences, individuals learn to make room for them and allow them to exist without judgment.

2. **Defusion:** This is a made-up word that describe strategies and techniques used to help individuals distance themselves from their thoughts and see them as passing mental events rather than literal truths. By defusing from their thoughts, individuals can reduce the impact that negative or distressing thoughts have on their behavior.
3. **Contact with the present moment:** This is sometimes called *Mindfulness* and it involves being present in the moment, fully aware of one's thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment without judgment. According to ACT theory mindfulness exercises and practices help individuals develop greater awareness and acceptance of their internal experiences.
4. **Values:** ACT encourages individuals to identify their core values, which are the guiding principles and qualities that they want to embody in their lives. Through values clarification exercises, individuals gain clarity about what is truly important to them and can use this awareness to guide their actions and decisions.
5. **Committed Action:** This refers to taking purposeful and meaningful steps toward living a valued life, even in the presence of difficult thoughts and emotions. It involves setting goals that align with one's values and consistently taking actions that move them closer to those goals, despite any obstacles or discomfort that may arise along the way.
6. **Self as context:** In ACT, the self is not seen as a fixed entity but rather as a dynamic process of awareness and ongoing development. It is defined as the ongoing stream of conscious experiences, thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, and perceptions that an individual identifies with as "me" or "I". The self in ACT is not limited to cognitive aspects but also includes emotional and behavioral dimensions.

Thus, ACT aims to help individuals develop psychological flexibility by teaching them acceptance, cognitive defusion, contacting the present moment, clarifying values, move towards committed action, and viewing the self as context. By accepting their thoughts and feelings, rather than trying to control or avoid them, and by committing to actions that are in line with their values clients can address a wide range of psychological issues and challenges (Luoma et al., 2017; Harris, 2019).

The philosophical foundations of ACT

As mentioned above ACT emphasizes acceptance, mindfulness, and values-driven action as key components of psychological well-being and personal growth. By cultivating psychological flexibility, individuals can learn to live more fully in the present moment and pursue lives that are rich, meaningful, and fulfilling. Thus, ACT draws upon several philosophical traditions and principles that provide a conceptual framework for its

approach to psychological suffering and the promotion of psychological flexibility.

Some of the key philosophical foundations of ACT are derived from Functional Contextualism. This is a philosophical perspective that emphasizes understanding behavior and cognition in the context of their functional relations to the environment. In ACT, this perspective guides therapists and clients to focus on the function of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors rather than their form. This means exploring how thoughts and behaviors influence one's actions and well-being in specific contexts. Other ideas stem from Relational Frame Theory (RFT). This theory was developed by Steven C. Hayes and colleagues and provides the theoretical framework for understanding language and cognition. RFT posits that human language and thought processes are relational in nature, meaning that we derive meaning from the relationships between words, ideas, and experiences. In ACT, RFT informs interventions designed to modify the functions of language and cognition to promote psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2001).

ACT incorporates principles from Eastern philosophical traditions, particularly mindfulness practices derived from Buddhist teachings. Mindfulness involves non-judgmental awareness of the present moment and acceptance of one's internal experiences. By integrating mindfulness techniques into therapy, ACT helps individuals develop greater awareness of their thoughts and emotions while cultivating a stance of acceptance and compassion toward themselves (Bennett & Oliver, 2019).

ACT shares common ground with existential and humanistic approaches to psychology, which emphasize the importance of personal meaning, authenticity, and responsibility. Like existential therapy, ACT encourages individuals to confront the existential realities of human existence, including suffering, impermanence, and the search for meaning. Through values clarification and committed action, ACT helps individuals align their behavior with their deeply held values and pursue lives that are personally meaningful and fulfilling.

In ACT, the emphasis on functional change and value-driven action reflects a pragmatic stance toward psychological intervention. Pragmatism is a philosophical orientation that emphasizes practical consequences and real-world outcomes as criteria for evaluating beliefs and actions. Thus rather than focusing solely on symptom reduction, ACT aims to help individuals lead richer, more meaningful lives by cultivating psychological flexibility and engaging in actions that are consistent with their values (Bennett & Oliver, 2019).

The scientific foundation of ACT

ACT is grounded in a scientific framework that draws from several psychological theories and principles. These provide a robust theoretical framework for understanding human suffering and promoting psychological flexibility and resilience. ACT integrates insights from behavioral science, cognitive psychology, mindfulness research, and values-based approaches.

ACT is rooted in the principles of behaviorism, which emphasize the functional analysis of behavior in specific contexts. Behavioral analysis involves examining the antecedents and consequences of behavior to understand the functional relationships that maintain problematic patterns of thoughts, emotions, and actions. ACT interventions target underlying processes such as experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, and values misalignment to promote adaptive behavior change. Also, as mentioned above ACT utilizes principles from RFT to understand how language influences behavior and to develop interventions aimed at modifying the functions of language to promote psychological flexibility (Bennett & Oliver, 2019; Johnson & Bennett, 2023).

ACT incorporates principles from acceptance and mindfulness-based approaches, which have been extensively studied and validated in empirical studies. Research on acceptance-based interventions has shown that acceptance of internal experiences, such as thoughts and emotions, is associated with improved psychological well-being and reduced symptom severity across a variety of clinical conditions. Similarly, mindfulness practices have been found to enhance attentional control, emotional regulation, and stress resilience (Harris, 2019).

ACT emphasizes the importance of clarifying personal values and committing to values-driven action as a means of promoting psychological health and well-being. Research on values clarification and goal pursuit suggests that individuals who are able to identify and pursue goals that are congruent with their deeply held values experience greater life satisfaction, meaning, and fulfillment (Harris, 2019).

ACT has been supported by a growing body of empirical research demonstrating its effectiveness in treating a wide range of psychological disorders and promoting psychological well-being. Randomized controlled trials, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews have consistently shown that ACT is associated with significant improvements in symptoms of depression, anxiety, chronic pain, substance abuse, and other psychological problems. Also, research has shown that psychological inflexibility, characterized by cognitive fusion, experiential avoidance, and values inconsistency, is associated with increased psychological distress and impairment (A-Tjak et al., 2014; Gloster et al., 2020).

Areas of use of ACT

Overall, ACT offers a flexible and holistic approach to addressing a wide range of psychological issues and challenges, empowering individuals from different populations to live more fully and authentically in accordance with their values and aspirations. ACT has been shown to be effective in treating various anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias. By promoting acceptance of anxious thoughts and emotions while encouraging individuals to take values-based action, ACT helps reduce the impact of anxiety on daily functioning (Hayes & Twohig, 2008).

ACT has demonstrated efficacy in treating depression by targeting processes such as cognitive fusion, experiential avoidance, and values misalignment that contribute to depressive symptoms. By fostering acceptance of difficult emotions and promoting values-driven action, ACT helps individuals build resilience and find meaning and purpose in their lives. Also, ACT can be beneficial for individuals who have experienced trauma by helping them develop acceptance and mindfulness skills to cope with distressing memories and emotions. By fostering values clarification and promoting committed action, ACT empowers individuals to move beyond trauma and rebuild their lives in alignment with their values and aspirations (Hayes & Twohig, 2008).

ACT is particularly well-suited for addressing chronic pain conditions by helping individuals develop acceptance and mindfulness skills to cope with pain-related thoughts and sensations. By encouraging individuals to focus on valued living and engage in meaningful activities despite pain, ACT can improve functioning and quality of life for people living with chronic pain (Smout, 2012).

ACT has been used effectively in the treatment of substance abuse and addiction by targeting underlying psychological processes such as experiential avoidance, impulsivity, and values misalignment. By promoting acceptance of cravings and urges while encouraging individuals to commit to values-based actions that support recovery, ACT helps individuals overcome addictive behaviors and build a meaningful life free from substance use. ACT interventions have also been adapted for use in workplace settings to help employees cope with stress, burnout, and work-related challenges. By teaching mindfulness and values-based strategies for managing stress and enhancing work-life balance, ACT can improve employee well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity (Wilson & DuFrene, 2012).

ACT in school setting

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy can be a valuable resource in a school setting for addressing various challenges that students, teachers, and staff may encounter. By integrating ACT principles and techniques into various aspects of school life, educators can promote the social, emotional,

and academic development of students while fostering a positive and inclusive school culture.

Many students experience stress related to academic pressures, social relationships, and personal challenges. ACT can help students develop mindfulness skills to manage stress more effectively and cope with difficult emotions. By teaching acceptance of thoughts and feelings while promoting values-based action, ACT equips students with practical strategies for navigating stressful situations and maintaining emotional well-being (Gregoire et al., 2018; Gillard, 2018).

ACT interventions can be used to promote empathy, compassion, and effective communication skills among students, fostering a positive school climate and reducing incidents of bullying and conflict. By encouraging students to cultivate acceptance and understanding of their own and others' experiences, ACT promotes respectful interactions and helps build supportive relationships within the school community. ACT aligns well with the goals of social and emotional learning programs by promoting self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Thus, schools can help students develop essential life skills that contribute to their overall well-being and academic success (Guch et al., 2017; Samuel & Harris, 2021).

ACT encourages individuals to clarify their core values and identify meaningful goals that align with those values. Schools can facilitate values exploration activities and goal-setting exercises to help students connect with their intrinsic motivations and aspirations. By encouraging students to pursue goals that are personally meaningful and fulfilling, ACT promotes a sense of purpose and engagement in learning. ACT offers an alternative approach to traditional behavior management and discipline strategies by emphasizing compassionate understanding and values-driven action. Instead of focusing solely on compliance and punishment, schools can use ACT principles to help students understand the consequences of their actions, take responsibility for their behavior, and make constructive choices that reflect their values (Gillard, 2018).

ACT can benefit teachers and school staff by providing tools for managing job-related stress, enhancing resilience, and fostering a sense of purpose and fulfillment in their work. Professional development workshops and support groups focused on ACT principles can help educators cultivate self-care practices, improve interpersonal relationships, and create a supportive work environment conducive to teaching and learning. Also, mindfulness exercises derived from ACT can be incorporated into daily routines and classroom activities to promote present-moment awareness and concentration among students. Mindful breathing, body scans, and other mindfulness techniques can help students cultivate attentional control, emotional regulation, and stress resilience, enhancing their ability to focus and learn effectively (Ghasemi et al., 2023).

Several studies have showed the efficiency of ACT procedures and techniques for a large variety of school related issues. According to Grégoire et al. (2018) ACT-based interventions offer a valuable way to promote mental health and school engagement. In their study they showed that the ACT-based intervention led to greater psychological flexibility, well-being, and school engagement in university students. It also resulted in lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms. Gillard (2018) emphasizes that Acceptance and commitment therapy has potential to support schools in developing effective and sustainable practices to promote psychological wellbeing.

Acceptance and commitment therapy helps students manage their experience with their medical condition through changing their relationship with unpleasant thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges, and memories in the service of engaging in values-based actions. In a study by Sloman & Selbst (2019) ACT was shown to be an effective therapy-based intervention for students with chronic health conditions, helping them manage their experience with their medical condition and reduce their suffering. The authors conclude that ACT is a practical method for school-based professionals to assist children and adolescents with chronic health conditions in engaging in life-affirming, values-based actions.

ACT has been demonstrated to be effective with young people, preventing or reducing mental health difficulties or promoting wellbeing. A systematic review of studies indicated that there are some promising results to show support for the use of ACT as a school-based intervention (Knight & Samuel, 2022). Also, according to Samuel & Harris (2021) acceptance and commitment therapy may be appropriate as a framework for preventing and reducing mental health difficulties in schools. They further point out that school-based programs are effective in providing support for young people and can increase equity of access, facilitate resilience, and reduce stigma. ACT has extensive evidence for improving well-being amongst adults and has been found to be more effective than treatment as usual or no treatment for anxiety, depression, and other mental and behavioral difficulties in children.

Further evidence for the efficiency of ACT strategies to reduce stress and depressive symptoms among young adolescents in school is shown in a study by Livheim et al. (2015). In this study the ACT group format showed greater improvement in reducing depression and stress among adolescents in both Australian and Swedish studies, with large effect sizes. In another study participants receiving ACT improved on various psychological measures including overall distress, general anxiety, social anxiety, depression, academic concerns, and positive mental health. ACT participants also showed improvement in mindful acceptance and obstruction to valued living, which mediated treatment outcomes (Levin et al., 2017).

Takahashi et al. (2020) showed that ACT delivered in a low dose reduced avoidance and hyperactivity/inattention in adolescents. For participants with sub-clinical emotional/behavioral problems, ACT reduced avoidance but not hyperactivity/inattention. Also, in the mentioned study there were correlations between ACT core processes and emotional/behavioral problems. Chapman & Evans (2020) indicates that third-wave approaches for young people with autism spectrum condition can result in improvements in well-being and quality of life.

O'Driscoll et al. (2020) explored an ACT-based intervention for adolescents with anger difficulties. The authors reported improvement in psychological flexibility and reduction in feelings of anger following the intervention, and the observation of more constructive patterns of behavior by school staff. Thus, the authors concluded that acceptance and commitment therapy may provide an effective therapeutic approach for young people experiencing difficulties in school.

In a study by Viskovich & Pakenham (2020) a web-based ACT mental health promotion intervention for university students was evaluated. The web-based ACT intervention led to significant improvements in primary outcomes and ACT processes, which were maintained at the 12-week follow-up. The improvements on primary outcomes were mediated by three or more ACT processes in both samples, indicating the intervention's effectiveness in promoting mental health among university students. Levin et al. (2014) also suggests that a Web-based acceptance and commitment therapy prevention program is feasible for college students. Chen et al. (2022) advocates for the use of e-ACT mental health education to promote psychological wellbeing among university students. In their study the authors showed the effectiveness of e-ACT in improving psychological flexibility and mental wellbeing, as well as reducing depression, anxiety, and stress among university students. The study supports the use of e-ACT mental health education to promote psychological wellbeing among this population. In another study by Ghasemi et al. (2023) a self-guided online ACT-based treatment program improved teachers' psychological well-being. In yet another study an unguided internet-based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (iACT) program significantly improved depressive symptoms and positive mental health compared to the waiting-list group (Zhao et al., 2022). The study also identified three classes of participants, with the treatment being particularly suitable for the Sensitive-to-Relationship class.

Gucht et al. (2017) pointed out that an abbreviated, classroom-based, teacher-taught Acceptance and Commitment Therapy program did not show significant improvements in mental health measures compared to the control group. No substantive effect sizes for ACT were observed. The study failed to support the efficacy of ACT in this format, suggesting the need for professionally trained therapists for ACT to be efficacious.

In conclusion, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has been found to be effective in treating a wide range of conditions, including anxiety, depression, substance use, pain, and transdiagnostic groups (Gloster et al., 2020). It has been shown to outperform control conditions, including waitlist, psychological placebo, and treatment as usual, and is as effective as established psychological interventions (A-Tjak et al., 2014). Furthermore, ACT has shown promise in promoting mental health and wellbeing in a diverse population of students. Specifically, ACT has been used to help students with chronic health conditions manage their experiences and engage in values-based actions. It has also been applied in school settings to reduce anxiety, stress, hyperactivity, and different manifestations of emotional distress. It has also been suggested as a model to support school staff wellbeing. All these considered ACT methods and strategies could greatly improve the toolkit of any practicing school psychologist.

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