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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION: FUNCTIONAL CONTEXTUALISM

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is an experiential therapy that is based in clinical behavior analysis. Philosophically, ACT (as with clinical behavior analysis more generally) is based on the pragmatic world view of functional contextualism. In all forms of pragmatism, truth is measured by how well something works in the accomplishment of a particular goal. Functional contextualism (as compared to social constructionism or other forms of contextualistic thinking) seeks as its goal the prediction and influence of psychological events with precision, scope across phenomena, and depth across scientific domains and levels of analysis. Psychological events are treated as actions of the whole organism, interacting in and with a context. According to the contextual philosophy underlying ACT, the environment, behavior, history, and outcome of the behavior are all part of the context and need to be considered while proceeding through the therapy. The underlying philosophy especially can be seen in ACT's focus on the function of behavior, in its ontological approach to language

(both of clients and of scientists), and in its holistic approach.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: RELATIONAL FRAME THEORY

Relational frame theory (RFT), a behavioral theory of language and cognition, is the theoretical foundation of ACT. ACT views language as the primary root of human suffering, particularly due to its creation of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion. RFT offers an explanation of how this may happen and elucidates the processes by which ACT techniques work. RFT has a growing amount of empirical support, both its basic and applied aspects.

Framing events relationally has three features: mutual entailment, combinatorial entailment, and the transformation of function. Mutual entailment refers to the derived bidirectionality of stimulus relations. For example, if A is specified to be the same as B, it can be derived that B is the same as A. Combinatorial entailment refers to the ability to derive relations among two or more relations of this kind. For example, if A is smaller than B, and B is smaller than C, it can be derived that A is smaller than C and C is larger than A. Finally, functions can transform through relations of this kind. If in the previous example shock is paired with B, for example, a person may then respond more emotionally to C than to A. Entailment and transformation of functions are all regulated by context. A verbal event is any event that participates in a relational frame.

Relational frames explain the cognitive source of a great deal of human pain. For example, the bidirectionality of language means that a person's description of an aversive event may have some of the functions of that event. Thus, when a trauma survivor describes the traumatic event,

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through the transformation of function, the feelings that were present during the trauma may again be present during the description.

The root of several maladaptive behaviors according to an ACT model can be expressed with the acronym FEAR (fusion, evaluation, avoidance, reasons). Cognitive fusion refers to the domination of verbally derived behavioral functions over other, more directly acquired functions. People become fused with their verbal depictions, evaluations, and reasons. They no longer see them as their behavior, but as objective situations and thus, if they are aversive, as events to be avoided. For example, if a person is fused with the thought, “there is something deeply wrong with me,” he or she will want to avoid situations that bring up that thought. Unfortunately, such experiential avoidance often paradoxically strengthens the avoided events because they strengthen the verbal/evaluative processes that give rise to such events. For example, a person avoiding the thought “there is something deeply wrong with me” strengthens the apparent literal truth of that thought since it confirms that something needs to change before one is acceptable—the very essence of the originating thought.

The source of cognitive fusion, and thus experiential avoidance, is thought to be the bidirectionality of verbal processes and their general utility in many domains. Because this process is thought to be under contextual control, the behavioral impact of thoughts and feelings is dependent on context. Therefore, ACT holds that thoughts and feelings are not mechanical causes of behavior, and that the impact of thoughts and feelings can be most readily influenced through a change in the context of verbal behavior. ACT has several techniques for doing so.

ACT COMPONENTS

ACT uses metaphors, logical paradox, and experiential exercises throughout its different components. The main reason for their use is that they are ways of undermining excessive literal language, basing action instead on experience.

The components in ACT are not a fixed or rigid set of techniques that occur in a definite order. In accordance with functional contextualism, they are a functional set of components that can be changed and rearranged to meet the client’s needs. Nevertheless, what is present below is a typical sequence.

An ACT therapist first gathers information about all the different ways a client has tried to change his or her suffering and how these attempts have worked or not worked. The domination and workability of experiential avoidance is a primary focus. In this phase of treatment clients are asked to examine directly how successful their efforts to avoid have

been, and if (as is most common) they have not been successful to consider the possibility that it is that agenda itself, not the technique or method, that might be the source of their difficulty.

What has not been working is gradually brought out: the deliberate control of private events. Many people struggle with their unwanted thoughts and feelings by trying to control them or get rid of them. In their experience, most clients have found that this ultimately leads to more unwanted thoughts and feelings. Conscious, deliberate control usually works when applied to the world outside the skin. When applied to private experiences, however, control usually works only temporarily. Exercises and metaphors are used as examples of how control does not work long term, of how language engrains unworkable control strategies.

Instead of avoidance, ACT clients are taught willingness and defusion as methods of coping with difficult psychological context. Willingness is the deliberate embrace of difficult thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the like. Exposure exercises are used to contact troublesome private experiences. Cognitive defusion techniques are used to reduce the dominance of the literal meaning of thoughts and instead to experience them willingly as an ongoing process occurring in the present. In this phase, clients may be taught to watch their thoughts float by without trying to alter them; they may be asked to repeat thoughts until they lose all meaning; or they may be asked to think of thoughts as external objects and will be asked a variety of perceptual/sensory questions about them (e.g., What color are they?). Cognitive defusion undermines evaluation and teaches healthy distancing and nonjudgmental awareness. When this phase is successful the client will seem to notice reactions from the level of an observer and will take a more willing stance toward unwanted thoughts.

Much of the time people identify themselves by psychological content. They are the content of their thoughts. As cognitive content is defused, more emphasis is placed in ACT on self as context. The self as context is the observing self. It is the experience of an “I” that does not change or judge, but just experiences. Meditation and mindfulness exercises are used to help the client experience consciousness itself as the context for private experiences, not as the content of those experiences. Self as context work provides a safe psychological place from which acceptance, willingness, and defusion are possible.

When clients are no longer running from experience, direction in life is supplied by the client’s values. Values are desired qualities of ongoing behavioral events that can only be instantiated, never obtained as an object. For example, a person who values being loving toward others can work to maintain those qualities in his or her human interactions, but