Living well after trauma using Acceptance & Commitment Therapy

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UKPTS Annual Conference,
Edinburgh, March 2012
Overview

• What is Acceptance & Commitment Therapy?
• How ACT is relevant to trauma
• Give a little flavour of ACT work
What is ACT?

A detailed system of psychotherapy

Rooted in empirical science and drawing its history from radical behaviourism

Uses Acceptance & Mindfulness processes and Commitment and Behaviour Change processes to produce greater psychological flexibility

Part of the “Third Wave” of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
The Three Waves in CBT

Wave 1:
Committed to treatments based on well established basic learning principles

Instead of unconscious concepts, focus on overt problem behaviours: “First Order Change
The Three Waves in CBT

Wave 2:

The Integration of Cognitive Psychology with Behaviourism…

It was a simple sort of cognitive psychology

Didn’t really account for lots of phenomena
The Three Waves in CBT

Wave 3:

A focus on the function rather than form of cognitive events…
What do we mean by function not form?

In traditional CBT: FORM

The Environment

Emotions

Physiology

Thoughts & Beliefs

Behaviour
What do we mean by function not form?

In traditional CBT: FORM

- Emotions
- Behaviour
- Thoughts & Beliefs
- The Environment
- Physiology

Anxiety symptoms

Fear

Avoid reminders

I’m really losing control!!!

This is distorted, catastrophic: change it and all will be well

Change those two and these will change

This is a safety behaviour, change it and the thought will change
Problems with this Mechanistic Philosophy of science

It has difficulty explaining the actual effects of cognitive therapy:

People often don’t stop having negative thoughts, but they buy into them less: decentering

We can have emotional reactions without thoughts

We can have thoughts about distressing things without having strong emotions

How is it that thoughts cause actions?

The dependant vs independent variable problem
“Taken together, these findings reveal a worrying lack of empirical support for some of the fundamental tenets of CBT. There is a paucity of evidence that cognitive interventions forming the core procedural aspects of CBT are differentially effective in reducing distress. Further, there is a lack of evidence that their effectiveness, such as it is, is mediated cognitively.”


Features of the Third Wave

1. Emphasis on context & function rather than content, form, frequency, intensity etc.
2. Constructive rather than eliminative
3. Applies to clinicians not just clients
4. Builds on other cognitive and behavioural traditions
5. Addresses complex issues not typically associated with behavioural therapy
Other Third Wave Therapies

1. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
2. Functional Analytic Psychotherapy
3. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy
4. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy
5. Integrative Behavioural Couples Therapy
6. Behavioural Activation
7. Cognitive Behavioural Analysis System of Psychotherapy
What do we mean by function not form?

In Acceptance & Commitment Therapy: FUNCTION

The Environment

This link is a target

These are not targets for change in content

Emotions

Physiology

Thoughts & Beliefs

Behaviour

This link is a target

This link is a target
ACT in a nutshell

• Unhooking private events from the control of behaviour

• Getting behaviour under reliable, flexible control by either direct contingencies or values

• Taking a constructive not eliminative approach
What do people normally do with distressing private experiences?

Think of a client you know well

What do they do with their emotional pain, unpleasant physiological sensations, trauma memories, unwanted urges, negative self evaluations?

Control them
What happens if we try to control private experiences?

Do these things lead them to more vitality, a greater sense of fulfilment, meaning and purpose in life?

So from the ACT perspective maybe: Control is part of the problem, not the solution
Living with pain or the pain of not living?

Having unpleasant or trauma-related private experiences is hard.

It's normal (and healthy) to get upset:

- Making sense / Emotional processing
- Loss of former security / living with threat

But in your efforts to avoid having that, life shrinks
How does ACT approach this?

Stopping fruitless attempts to control: Creative Hopelessness

Helping the person to make contact with what values are important to them

Defining values as more concrete achievable goals

Promoting acceptance and contact with whatever private experiences are aversive or difficult
How does ACT approach this?

Taking committed action towards valued goals, even in the presence of aversive private events

Experiential exercises that lead to defusing and decentraling from thoughts

Reconceptualising the sense of self: more self awareness, self compassion, less evaluative approach to the self through mindfulness and here and now awareness
The ACT Model of Psychopathology

Psychological inflexibility

Dominance of Conceptualised Past & Future

Attachment to the conceptualised self

Lack of Values Clarity, dominance of pliance and avoidant tracking

Inaction, impulsivity or avoidant persistence

Experiential avoidance

Cognitive Fusion
The Positive Psychological Processes ACT Seeks to Strengthen

- Being in the present moment
- Acceptance / Willingness
- Values
- Defusion
- Committed Action
- Self as Context

Psychological Flexibility
Key Concepts in ACT

Components of ACT

- Acceptance & Mindfulness Processes
- Acceptance / Willingness
- Defusion

Values
Committed Action

Being in the present moment
Self as Context

Acceptance & Mindfulness Processes
Acceptance / Willingness
Defusion
Key Concepts in ACT

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Key Concepts in ACT

Psychological Flexibility

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ACT & Trauma

• The unworkability of the control agenda

• The mind’s natural function is to protect you

• The paradoxical effects of the mind trying to keep you safe
Trauma and language

• The over extension of verbal problem solving into the inner world

• Putting language onto the experience after the fact

• Asking questions that have no answers
Trauma & Language

• What happens we come to a question that is hard to answer?

• The need for reasons and coherence as a generalised well reinforced behaviour
Trauma & Language

• Control of private events is a double edged sword

• The examples of many forms of control behaviour

• Traumatic events fuse us with our stories, limiting what is possible
How ACT approaches thinking

• Noticing and observing

• Stepping back

• Unhooking thinking and feeling as reasons for action

• Using metaphor to see thoughts as they are
How ACT approaches thinking

• Holding our stories more lightly

• Noticing the pull of the story / of needing the reasons

• Of course, a coherent and integrated story is less pulling than a fragmented and disjointed one!
ACT and Exposure

• ACT is about exposure but not exposure linked to fear reduction

• The analogy of a snake phobic

• The pattern and quality of behaviour in the presence of the feared stimulus
ACT and Exposure

- Can be to internal stimuli as well as external

- What does ‘running’ look like in our clients?

- Slowing them down…
Values in the ACT model

• Values as directions versus destinations

• Freely chosen, verbally constructed patterns of on-going action

• In which the reinforcer for the behaviour is intrinsic to the performance of the behaviour rather than contingent upon the behaviour
Values simplified

• What do you really care about?

• What matters to you and to your clients?

• If you really got to choose, what would you have your life be about?

• What would you choose to stand for?
When might you consider an ACT approach?

• Stuckness – life on hold

• Why why why why why why why??????

• Not willing to engage in prolonged exposure

• Living ‘inside the story’
How ACT might fit with other approaches

• Considering more carefully the overall strategy you are following

• How workable is it in your clients experience?

• Moving from emotion reduction to behavioural flexibility in the presence of
How ACT might fit with other approaches

• Using your strategies in a more functionally informed way:

• Verbal reattribution as stepping back

• Constructing narrative as generating a coherent and flexible story that can be held more lightly
How ACT might fit with other approaches

• Behavioural experiments as willingness exercises, rather than for testing beliefs.

• Socratic dialogue as willingness, exposure and stepping back.

• All in the service of valued living.
ACT & Experiential training

- Metaphor of learning to play the guitar
- An invitation to the therapist
- 2 mountains metaphor
- Can be challenging in training
ACT & Experiential training

• Invites a reconsideration of boundaries in psychotherapy
Evidence in Trauma Populations


Evidence in Trauma Populations


Evidence in Trauma Populations

Next steps

• Join ACBS:
  www.contextualpsychology.org

Materials, tools, protocols:

Dr. Kevin Polk: The Togus Veterans Administration 1 week protocol

BABCP ACT SIG, Listserves
Next steps

• Find local groups of therapists

• In Scotland: Lothian and Glasgow

• Ross White

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