

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Maria Karekla, Ph.D.

University of Cyprus

mkarekla@ucy.ac.cy

Why all this recent interest in Mindfulness and Acceptance work?

Why now?

Message:

- **By Their
Nature
Humans are
Meant to
be Like This**



“The single most remarkable fact about human experience is how hard it is for humans to be happy”

- Steven C. Hayes

Why?

Language is the problem

Evolutionary Journey

- The evolution of the human mind
 - Don't get killed devise
- The theory behind ACT: Relational Frame Theory

Verbal Knowledge: Language

- We have knowledge:
 - Relational Frame Theory
 - Theory of human language and cognition
 - What we are doing with our minds: describing categorizing, relating, evaluating, talking about, writing, reading, thinking
 - Based on principles of learning
 - Operant behavior is controlled by relations between certain behavior and its consequences
 - Generalized operant
 - Relating as a class of behavior
- www.contextualpsychology.org/rft & <http://www.contextualpsychology.org/node/2979> (RFT)
 - Can we have the cultural and biological advantages of human language and avoid its psychological cost?

Relational Frame Theory (RFT)

- Through language we find a “work-a-round” to the relation between behavior and consequence
 - We free ourselves from direct stimulus functions and transform these functions by putting things in relation in a particular way
 - A monkey can react to relations like...choosing the longest stick....this is an actual relation
 - Humans can react to relations that are arbitrary and can be established by social context



which one is larger?

What is the impact?

- Our mind's chatter dominates
- Verbally construct:
 - needs, dangers, and futures and take action based on these constructions
- Struggle for no reason
- We live in a derived, verbally regulated reality (illusion) vs. experience the world as it unfolds in the here and now
- Indulgence and suppression dominate
 - We are losing our ability to behave flexibly
- And the impact...

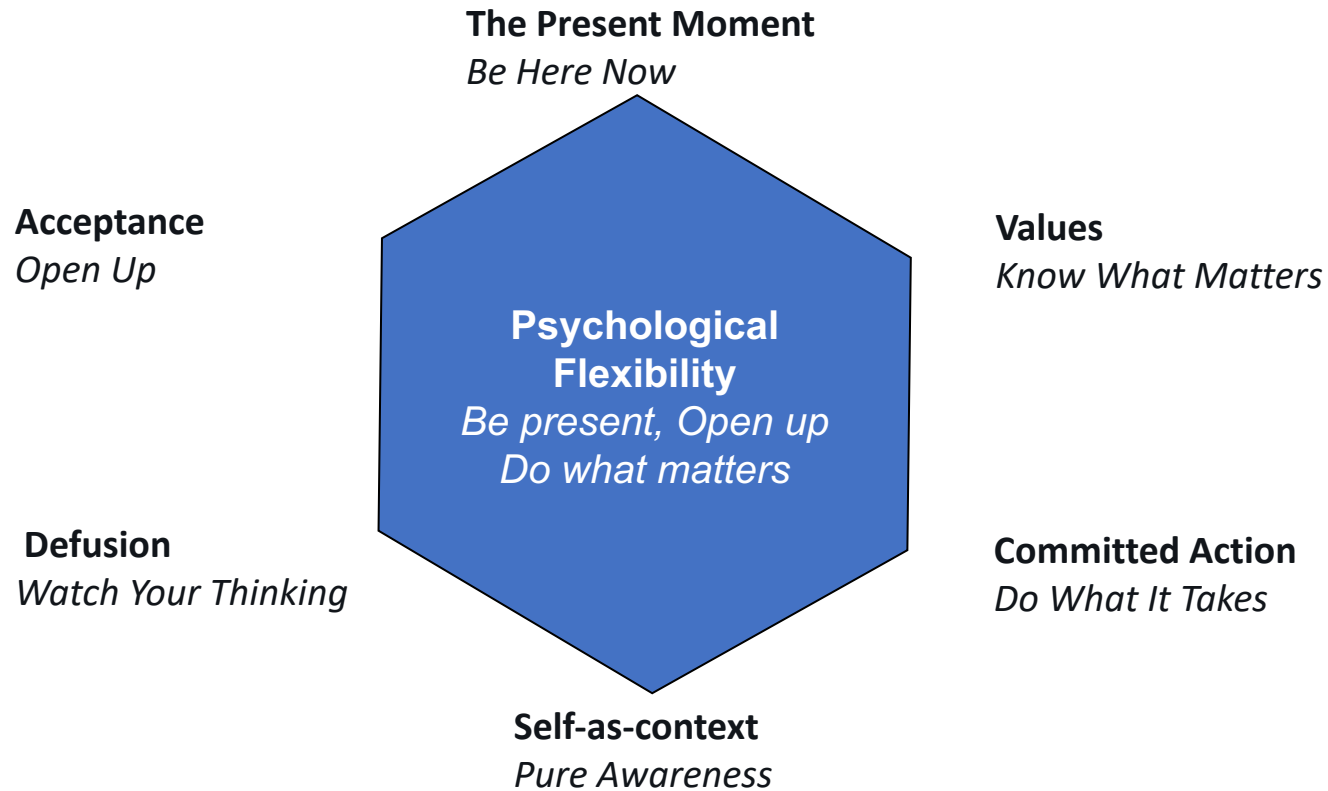
This is NOT Just in the USA

- This is a worldwide trend, and its not just obesity...
- Global burden of disease attributable to mental and substance use disorders (Whiteford et al., 2013- Lancet)
 - 187 countries, 1980-2010
 - Increased 38% between 1990-2010
 - Overall burden heavier than that of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, diabetes, traffic accidents-taken together!
- Main reasons for increases in anxiety, depression, suicide, substance use:
 - Unemployment, individualization, alcohol & drugs, less sleep, stress, unrealistic ideals of body, not being trained for challenges
- So **Language Can Kick You and Hurt**
 - Think of the most shameful thing you have ever done
 - Pain can be brought to mind anytime
 - It can't be avoided

What if:

- Normal to be abnormal
 - Psychological health is a goal, not an automatic possession.
 - We have to earn it.
- Happiness isn't normal
- Suffering is more than just feeling pain
- **Living** well does not follow **feeling** well
- The **struggle** with pain, feelings, thoughts etc. **is** the problem?

ACT In A Nutshell



Experiential Avoidance

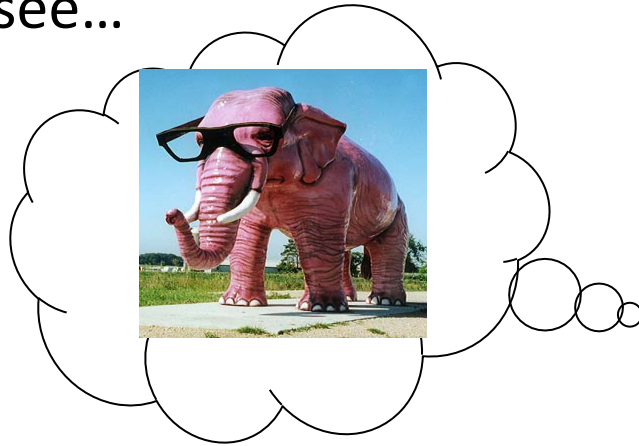
“the tendency to engage in behavior to alter the frequency, duration, or form of unwanted private events (i.e. thoughts, feelings, physiological events, and memories) and the situations that occasion them” (Hayes, 1994).

“It is a behavioral pattern implicated in a wide range of behavioral health problems, such as smoking, in order to avoid difficult thoughts and feelings” (Strosahl, 1996).



Experiential Avoidance

- Control as the problem
 - How much control do we have over our thoughts, memories, emotions, urges?
 - Lets see...



Aims of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

- Main goal
 - **Healthy living in terms of *feeling* good rather than feeling *good***
- **ACT tools**
 - Functional analysis of behavior
 - Undermine excessive literality
 - Difficulty with giving verbal rules to instruct experiential material
 - Use of metaphors, stories, behavioral experiments, experiential exercises
 - Client contacts his/her own experience (experiential knowledge) rather than verbal knowledge (mind)
 - Present-moment living/Mindfulness
 - Values exploration and clarification
 - Supported with behavioral strategies such as exposure, behavior activation, skills training

Steps in ACT

1. Assessment

1. Functional analysis & Case Conceptualizing

2. Workability Analysis – ‘Creative Hopelessness’

3. Suggesting an alternative – willingness

4. Why do that? – Values clarification & goal setting

5. Commitment to valued action

Ongoing work at flexible pursuit of valued living with less struggling via willingness, defusion, mindfulness.

Functional Analysis

Behavior always occurs in a context

- Reinforcement—Life Improves

- Positive Reinforcement (R+)

- In this context, when I do X, something good shows up.



- Negative Reinforcement (R-)

- In this context, when I do X, something bad goes away.

- Punishment—Life Gets Worse

- Positive Punishment (P+)

- In this context, when I do X, something bad shows up.



- Negative Punishment (P-)

- In this context, when I do X, something good goes away.

Case Conceptualizing

- If a behavior shows up regularly (is stable), it must be reinforced.

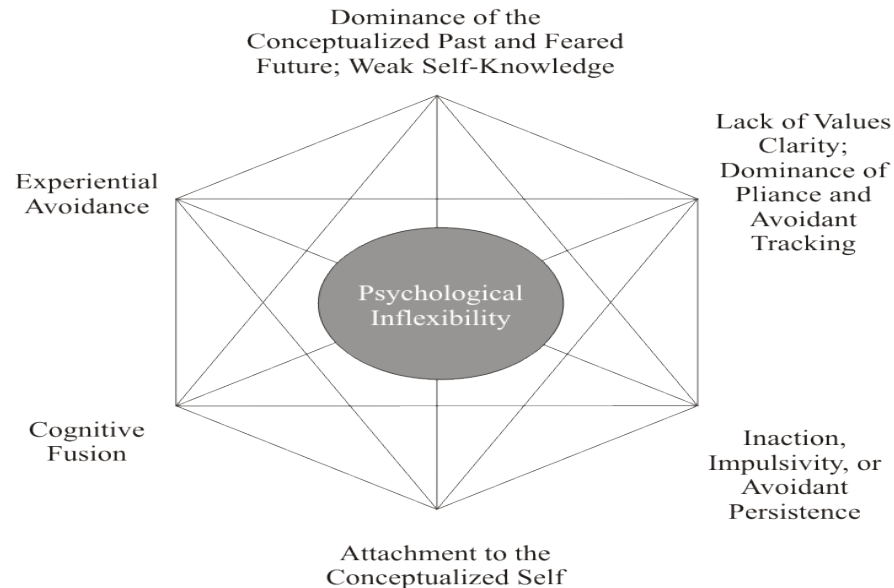


- If behavior is absent or unstable, it must have been punished or it was never learned.



Functional analysis from an ACT perspective

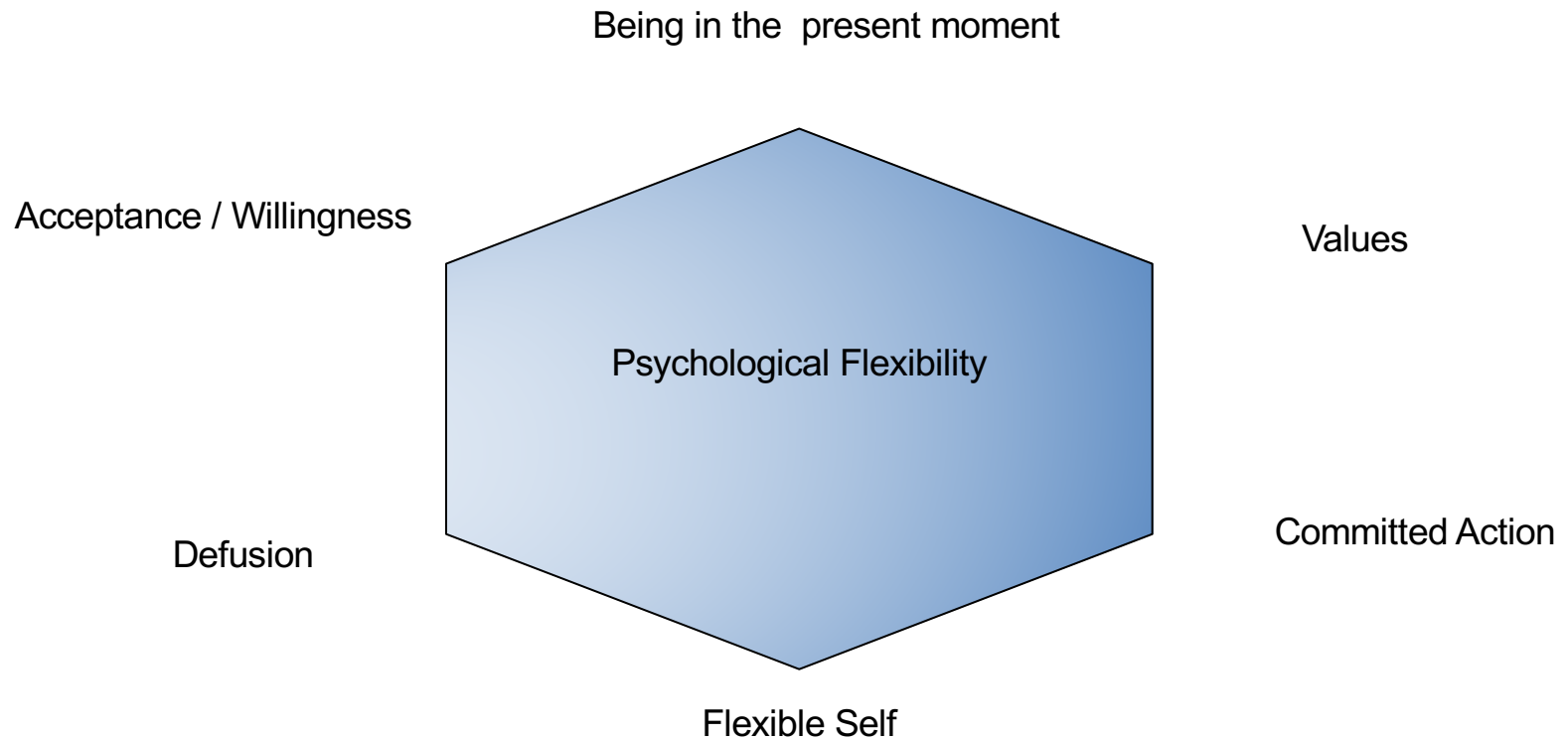
- Utilizing the hexaflex



Cultivating Psychological Flexibility

The 6 treatment processes

The Psychological Processes ACT Seeks to Strengthen



Creative Hopelessness

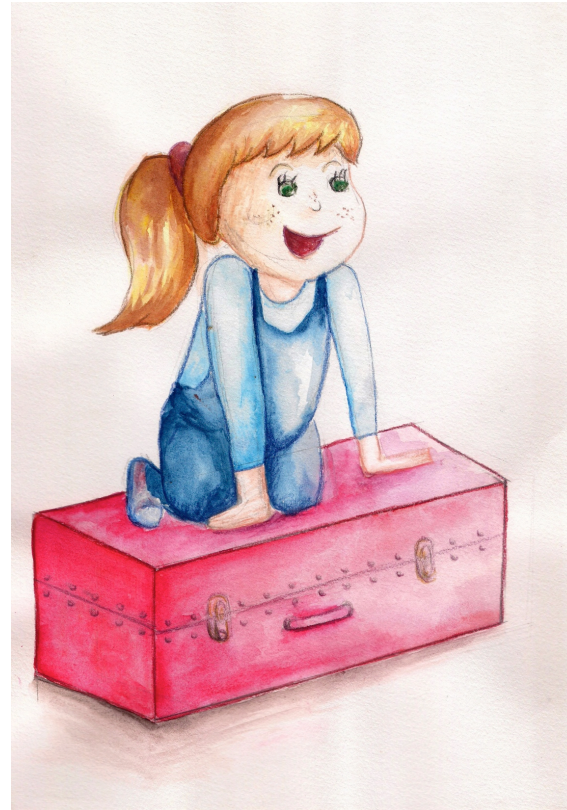
- Aid the individual to come into ***experiential*** contact with the fact that what they have done so far (experiential avoidance) has not worked
- Exercises:
 - Struggles?
 - What have you done to make these go away?
 - E.g. What do you to make the pain go away?
 - How did it work?
- ‘If you always do what you’ve always done..’
 - With heart for their struggle: validating

Defusion

- Humans “fuse” with the content of their minds
- To see thoughts for what they are:
 - Words passing through our heads
- Looking at thoughts rather than from thoughts
- Exercises:
 - Musical thoughts

Kids story book

Anna and the box



If you would like to order the book (in English or Greek)

<https://www.jccsmart.com/e-bill/invoices/2491/pay>

Self as Context

Look who's talking...

- Distinguishing Self from Experiences
 - We can not control our histories
 - Self as context vs self as content
 - **Metaphor**
 - Chessboard metaphor
- Thinking vs. observing self
 - Thinking self- thinks, plans, judges, compares, creates, imagines, analyzes, fantasizes
 - Observing self- responsible for focus, attention, awareness
 - Found in experience not logic

Mindfulness or Expansion

- 4 steps of expansion

- Observe
- Breathe
- Create space
- Allow

5 senses experiencing vs mind

Open and curious

Enjoy positive emotions **without clinging or excessive fear** of loss

Active and flexible in the presence of difficult thoughts, feelings, memories, or bodily sensations

Values

- What would you want your life to stand for?
- What is most important for you?

If _____ was not a problem for me, then I would _____

- Exercises
 - Retirement party

- Distinguish values (process) from goals (outcome)- Moment by moment choosing
 - Skiing metaphor
- Barrier identification (Internal and External)

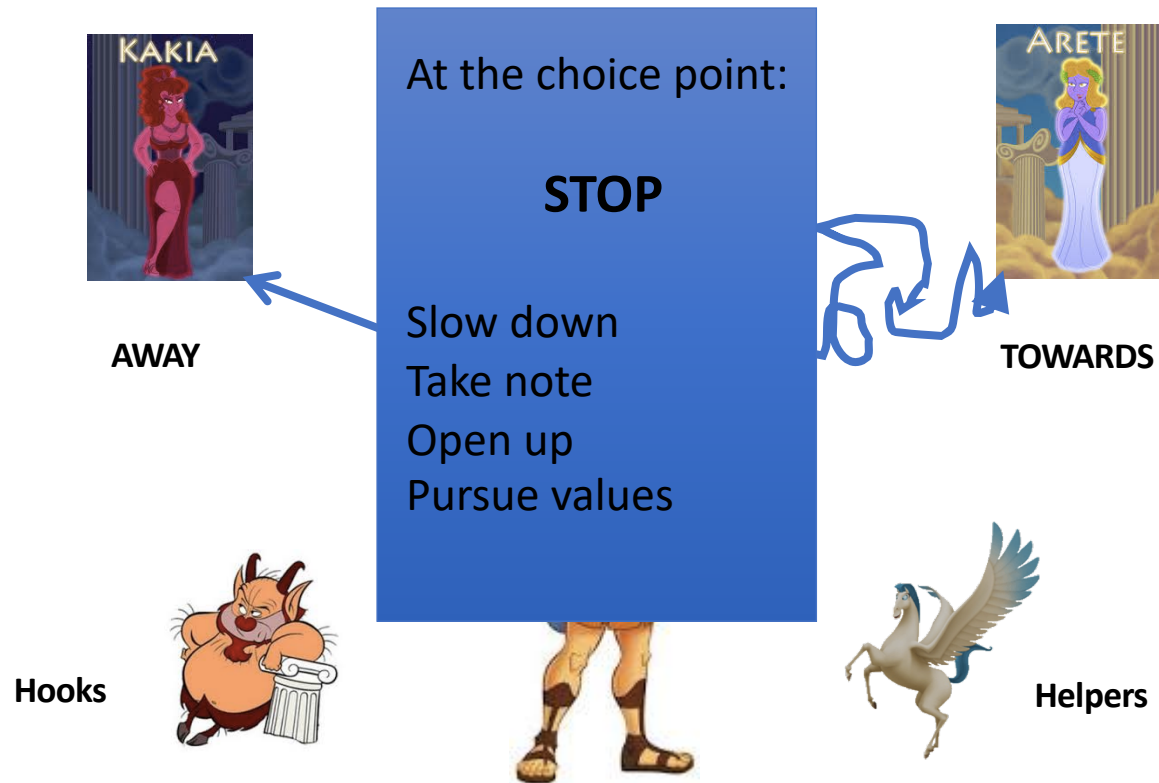
Committed Action

- Do what takes you in the direction of your values
- No such thing as partly willing
- Committed action inevitably invites unwanted experience
- **Aim:** Build larger and larger patterns of values consistent behavior

Exposure in ACT

- Procedure
 - Contacting feared stimuli
 - And engaging in valued activities
 - While practicing ACT concepts
- Process of change
 - Psychological flexibility
- Desired outcome
 - Greater life functioning (Not interested in changes in internal experiences)
- Some misconceptions about exposure
 - Exposure is about fear reduction rather than fear toleration
 - “optimizing learning based on increasing tolerance for fear and anxiety” (Arch & Craske, 2009)
 - Fear reduction is associated with better clinical outcomes
 - Moving through a hierarchy in an orderly fashion is best
 - Can not stop exposures without fear reduction
- From basic science we have learned:
 - Extinction involves new learning and not unlearning

Choice point (Hercules Metaphor of 2 roads)



Becoming a better therapist

- Consider:
 - What are your **therapist values**?
 - If you were ACTing according to your values, what would that look like in the therapy room?
 - What would you do less often?
 - What would you do more often?
 - What would you have to make room for in order to do that?

Track progress & Evaluate outcome

- Unworkable & workable behaviors that happen in session
- Interpersonal behaviors that happen in session
- Reports of behaviors happening outside of session

ACT research evidence

- >300 RCTs
 - ACT as good as or better than tx as usual (more studies under review or under investigation)
- Targeted processes addressed in ACT (experiential avoidance/acceptance mediate outcomes in most studies)
- The United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has now listed ACT as an empirically supported method as part of its National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP):
<http://174.140.153.167/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=191>

APA Division 12 approves ACT as EBP for several disorders

<http://www.div12.org/PsychologicalTreatments/treatments.html>

Learning ACT

1. Join ACBS, the ACT (and maybe the RFT) listserves,
www.contextualpsychology.org
2. Attend workshops and seek supervision
3. Read some books

If you want to learn more about us:

<https://ucy.ac.cy/acthealthy/>

www.algea.com.cy

mkarekla@ucy.ac.cy



Center for
Cognitive
Behavioral
Psychology

acthealthy

Thank you!
Paldies!