

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY IN COUPLES THERAPY

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, better known as ACT (Hayes & Strosahl, 1999), is a new and burgeoning form of therapy, and it has been gaining wider significance and use throughout the psychological community recently. It's an intriguing idea, based on some fascinating and counter-intuitive premises, and has been shown to, when used skillfully, lead to significant and positive change in people. As a result, its concepts and techniques are now being applied to couples therapy, as well as other interpersonal problems.

Western psychology is currently undergoing what's known as the "third wave" of behavioral therapies. Strict behaviorism, that of B.F. Skinner and his colleagues, came about in the mid-twentieth century, and proved useful on some levels. Its techniques of classical and operant conditioning, pairing conditioned stimulus with desired response, have their uses. However, theorists and clinicians were discovering that this didn't seem to get at the totality of human experience, as thoughts and feelings were not privileged in this work. Thus, about 35 years ago Beck's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy evolved, which explored the inter-connected relationships between one's thoughts, emotions and behaviors. This second generation of behavioral therapies provided a more comprehensive view of one's challenges, and was proven to be effective for a number of psychological troubles. Since that time, behavioral theorists have begun integrating eastern ideals such as mindfulness and "radical acceptance" into their behavioral work, and have spawned the third wave of behavioral therapies. This subset includes Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT, Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2001), and ACT, as well as several others.

ACT, as its moniker implies, is based on the notion that one must come to a level of acceptance of one's psychological troubles, rather than engaging in battle with them. Thus, it asks for a seismic shift in our very relationship to our troubles and asks that we utilize a different skill set for our internal problems than our external challenges. For example, we have learned from pre-historic days that we have two options when confronted with a challenge: fight or flight. If a predator attacks, we either counter-attack it, or run away, and these strategies are effective. However, when transferred to our internal world, ACT's authors believe they're not as useful, and in fact harmful. For example, if faced with a normal amount of sadness that any human encounters, any attempt to attack (through self-denigration) or flee (behaviors designed to avoid hurtful feelings rather than feel them) will actually result in increased pathology. Thus, according to ACT, our attempts to control our negative emotions are what enable sadness to evolve into depression, and fear to progress towards anxiety. The ACT solution, then, is to come to a gentle acceptance of the entire spectrum of human emotions, not identify with a negative mental state, and confront one's avoidance behaviors. Some skills utilized include mindfulness, which enables one to notice, yet not be overwhelmed by negative emotions as they occur, learning to "accept the unacceptable," and exploring what values are personally important. Through the cultivation of these skills and others, ACT enables one to see previously distressing feelings as merely temporary mental events, and as a result disempower them. Additionally, ACT explores what self-schemas, or deeply held beliefs about the self, are

triggered through interactions with the world, and suggests de-identifying with maladaptive beliefs.

How, then, does this view of personal challenges apply to interpersonal problems? To begin, one identifies what core self-schemas exist which inform one's relationships with others. For example, if one has an underlying feeling of worthlessness from a childhood trauma, that belief will likely be triggered in intimate relationships. ACT suggests labeling that schema as it is manifesting ("Here comes that old familiar feeling again"), and using mindfulness skills to de-identify with it ("I am not this feeling"), and choosing how to respond rather than react from it ("I do not have to let this old, irrelevant feeling dictate the way I am with my partner"). Another key point is the notion of diffusion from the thoughts and feelings which can result in either aggressive or avoidant behavior towards a spouse. For example, realizing in the moment that a thought is merely a thought, and it doesn't define you or your relationship, enables one to have some a wider perspective in arguments. Additionally, the notion of acceptance of challenges is applicable to interpersonal problems. Couples theorists say there will be a rotating cast of five topics that even the healthiest of couples will disagree on. Coming to a place of acceptance about this, and not falling into habitual responses that turn disagreements into arguments can be helpful. Finally, the notion of values, so integral to working with individuals under the ACT methodology, should be applied to relationships. Exploring together how you define a nurturing relationship, and having those as intentions throughout your day, can provide a sense of togetherness.

References

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