Mindfulness without meditation

Acceptance and commitment therapy teaches mindfulness skills within the context of values and committed action. **Russ Harris** gives a brief introduction



Imagine a therapy so hard to classify that it has been described as an 'existential humanistic cognitive behaviour therapy'. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, is an innovative and creative mindfulness-based therapy, firmly based in the tradition of empirical science, yet with a major emphasis on values, acceptance, compassion and living in the present moment.

Created in the early 1980s by US psychologist Steven C Hayes, ACT utilises an eclectic mix of metaphor, paradox, and mindfulness skills, along with a wide range of experiential exercises and values-guided behavioural interventions. It has proven effective with a wide range of conditions including social anxiety[1,2], depression[3], obsessive-compulsive disorder[4], schizophrenia[5,6], borderline personality disorder[7], workplace stress[8], chronic pain[9], drug-refractory epilepsy[10], weight control[11], smoking cessation[12,13], and self-management of diabetes[14].

ACT is officially said as the word 'act' and not the initials A-C-T. There is good reason for this. At its core, ACT is a behavioural therapy: it is about taking action – but not just any action. There is a big existential component to the model: ACT puts us in touch with what really matters in the big picture: our heart's deepest desires for who we want to be and what we want to do during our brief time on this planet. We can then use these core values to guide, motivate, and inspire behavioural change. Besides values-guided action, this approach is about 'mindful' action: action that we take consciously, with full awareness – open to experience and fully engaged in whatever we are doing.

ACT gets its name from one of its core messages: accept what is outside your personal control and commit to taking action that enriches your life. The aim of ACT is to help us create a rich, full and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that life inevitably brings. ACT achieves this by:

- helping us to clarify what is truly important and meaningful to us – i.e. our values – and to use that knowledge to guide, inspire, and motivate us to set goals and take action that enriches our life.
- teaching us psychological skills – known as mindfulness skills – for handling painful thoughts and feelings effectively, in such a way that they have much less impact and influence.

What is mindfulness?

'Mindfulness' is an ancient concept, found in a wide range of spiritual and religious traditions, including most martial arts, yoga, tai chi, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Gradually, over the last 30 years, Western psychology has started to recognise the many benefits of mindfulness training, and it has now become an empirically supported intervention in a wide range of clinical disorders.

'Mindfulness' can be defined in a variety of different ways, but they all basically come down to this: paying attention with flexibility, openness, and curiosity.

This simple definition tells us three important things. First, mindfulness is a process of awareness, not thinking. It involves paying attention to experience in the moment as opposed to being caught up in thoughts. Second, mindfulness involves a particular attitude: one of openness and curiosity. Even if our experience in the moment is difficult, painful, or unpleasant, we can be open to and curious about it instead of running from or fighting with it. Third, mindfulness involves flexibility of attention: the ability to consciously direct, broaden, or focus attention on different aspects of experience.

We can use mindfulness to 'wake up,' connect with ourselves and appreciate the fullness of each moment of life. We can use it to improve our self-knowledge – to learn more about how we feel, think and react. We can use it to connect deeply and intimately with the people we care about, including ourselves. And we can use it to consciously influence our own behaviour and increase our range of responses to the world we inhabit. It is the action of living consciously – a profound way to enhance psychological resilience and increase life satisfaction. This may explain why ACT has been proven to increase therapist effectiveness[15] and reduce therapist burnout[16].

Do we need to meditate to learn mindfulness?

While most mindfulness-based models of therapy place a major emphasis on meditation, ACT regards it as merely one method among literally hundreds for developing practical mindfulness skills. This is fortunate, because meditating is a bit like going to the gym: we all know it is good for us, but few people sustain it on a regular long-term basis.

ACT breaks mindfulness down into four psychological skills:



Exercise: 'The hands as thoughts' metaphor

Imagine for a moment that your hands are your thoughts. When you reach the end of this paragraph, put this journal down and hold your hands together side by side, palms open, as if they are the pages of an open book. Then slowly and steadily raise your hands towards your face. Keep going until they are covering your eyes. Take a few seconds to look at the world around you through the gaps between your fingers, and notice how this affects your view of the world. Please do this exercise now, before reading further.

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Now imagine what it would be like to go around all day with your hands covering your eyes in this manner. How much would it limit you? How much would you miss out on? How would it reduce your ability to respond to the world around you? This is approximately how restricted we are in cognitive fusion. We become so caught up in our thoughts that we lose contact with many aspects of our here-and-now experience, and our thoughts have such a huge influence over our behaviour that our ability to act effectively is significantly reduced.

When you reach the end of this paragraph, once again cover your eyes with your hands, but this time lower them from your face very, very slowly. As the distance between your hands and your face increases, notice how much easier it is to connect with the world around you. Please do this now before reading further.

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This exercise provides a metaphor for cognitive defusion. Notice how much easier it is to take effective action without your hands covering your eyes; how much more information you can take in; how much more connected you are with the world around you.

1. Defusion: distancing from and letting go of unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, memories and other cognitions
2. Acceptance: making room for painful feelings, urges and sensations, and allowing them to come and go without a struggle
3. Contact with the present moment: engaging fully with our here-and-now experience, with an attitude of openness and curiosity
4. Spacious awareness: accessing a spacious sense of self – the observing self: a transcendent aspect that is conscious of thoughts and feelings as passing experiences, but not identified with them.

These psychological skills can be extremely helpful for common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorders. For example, defusion skills enable people to let their depressing or worrying thoughts come and go like passing cars, instead of getting entangled in them (via ruminating, worrying, catastrophising, etc.). Similarly, acceptance skills enable people to drop their struggle with feelings and sensations of anxiety and allow them to be present despite the discomfort. This undermines the avoidance of anxiety that lies at the core of panic attacks, phobias, and anxiety disorders.

ACT textbooks include literally hundreds of techniques to develop these mindfulness skills, often very rapidly, without the need for formal meditation. Due to limitations of space we will look at just one of these four processes: defusion.

Fusion and defusion

In a state of cognitive fusion we are 'caught up in' or preoccupied with thoughts. Our thoughts seem to be the literal truth: rules that must be obeyed; important events that require our full attention; threatening events that we must eliminate. When we fuse with our thoughts, in other words, they have enormous influence over our behaviour.

Cognitive defusion enables us to step back psychologically and observe thoughts without being caught up in them. We can then recognise that our thoughts are nothing more or less than transient private events – an ever-changing stream of words, sounds and pictures. As we defuse from thoughts, they have much less impact and influence over us. The exercise given below shows a simple way to demonstrate this to clients.

Myriad techniques

A wide variety of writings on ACT describe over 100 different defusion techniques. For example, to deal with an unpleasant thought we can simply observe it with detachment; or repeat it over and over, aloud, until it becomes a meaningless sound; or imagine it in the voice of a cartoon character; or sing it to the tune of 'Happy Birthday'; or silently say 'Thanks, mind' in gratitude for such an interesting thought. There is endless room for creativity.

In contrast with CBT, not one of these defusion techniques involves

Cognitive defusion exercises

Pull out a scrap of paper and write down two or three negative, self-judgmental thoughts. (If you need any help coming up with some, consider: What does your mind say about your body when you see yourself naked in the mirror? What does your mind tell you about your abilities as a therapist when you have just had a really challenging session in which nothing went right?) Pick the thought that bothers you the most and use it to work through the following exercises. In each exercise we first fuse with the thought, then defuse from it.

I'm having the thought that ...

Put your negative self-judgment into a short sentence of the form, 'I'm X.' For example, 'I'm boring' or 'I'm stupid'.
Fuse with this thought for 10 seconds – get caught up in it, give it your full attention and believe it as much as you possibly can.

Now silently replay the thought with this phrase in front of it: 'I'm having the thought that ...' For example, 'I'm having the thought that I'm a loser'.

Now replay it one more time, but this time add this phrase 'I notice I'm having the thought that ...' For example, 'I notice I'm having the thought that I'm a loser'.

What happened? Did you notice a sense of separation or distance from the thought? If not, run through the exercise again with a different thought. This is a nice simple exercise that gives an experience of defusion to almost everyone.

Singing and silly voices

For these two exercises, use the same negative self-judgment as you used before, or try a new one if the old one has lost its impact. Whichever you choose, put your negative self-judgment into a short sentence of the form 'I'm X' – and fuse with it for 10 seconds.

Now, inside your head, silently sing the thought to the tune 'Happy Birthday'.

Now, inside your head, hear it in the voice of a cartoon character, movie character, or sports commentator.

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What happened this time? Did you notice a sense of separation or distance from the thought?

If not, run through the exercise again with a different thought. Variations on the theme include singing the thoughts out loud, saying them out loud in a silly voice, or saying them in exaggerated slow motion. (Keep in mind that in the right context, zany techniques like these can be very powerful, but in the wrong context, they can be invalidating or demeaning. For example, you would not ask a client with terminal cancer to sing their thoughts about dying to the tune of 'Happy Birthday'.)

> ‘Mindfulness is a process of awareness. It involves paying attention to experience in the moment as opposed to being caught up in thoughts’

evaluating or disputing unwanted thoughts. In ACT we are not generally interested in whether thoughts are true or false: we are far more interested in whether it is helpful to hold on to or get caught up in them. The whole ACT model rests on a concept called ‘workability’. Workability is determined by the question: ‘Is what you are doing working to make your life rich, full and meaningful?’ If the answer is yes, then in ACT we say it is ‘workable’ and it makes sense to keep doing it. If the answer is no, it is ‘unworkable’ and we need to consider doing something different.

Rather than trying to invalidate or challenge unhelpful thoughts on the grounds of their being ‘true or false’, in ACT we might ask: ‘If you hold tightly to this thought and let it dictate what you do, in which direction will it take your life: ‘richer and fuller’, or ‘stuck and struggling’?’ If the answer is ‘stuck and struggling’, then we might ask, ‘So would you like to learn how to let the thought come and go without getting pushed around by it?’

The exercises above present some defusion techniques so that readers can get a taste of them.

More than mindfulness

Mindfulness in ACT is not enough for a rich, full and meaningful life. As mentioned earlier, ACT teaches mindfulness skills within the context of values and committed action. In other words, clients learn to identify, clarify and connect deeply with their core values, and then to use these values to set goals and guide the changes they make in their lives. Mindfulness not only helps clients to overcome the psychological barriers to change, but also to engage fully in the ongoing journey of values-based living. If I had to summarise ACT on a t-shirt, it would read: ‘Embrace your demons. Follow your heart’. ■

Dr Russ Harris, a GP turned psychotherapist, is the best-selling author of The Happiness Trap (Constable Robinson, 2008), an ACT-based self-help book now translated into 15 languages. His introductory textbook, ACT Made Simple, will be published in November 2009 (by New Harbinger).

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