Acceptance & Commitment Therapy as a Recovery Technology

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A Journey through Recovery
• The stigma of mental health problems is (slowly) reducing in many countries, including the UK
• Service users/patients are becoming more influential on MH services
• As consumers of MH services people are expecting more: individualized care, talking therapies, social inclusion
• Recovery is a central MH policy for delivery of services in many countries
Recovery principles

“Recovery is about building a meaningful and satisfying life, as defined by the person themselves, whether or not there are ongoing or recurring symptoms or problems.”

Shepherd, Boardman and Slade 2008
Personal recovery

Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one’s life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness.

Recovery Concepts: CHIME

- Connectedness
- Hope & optimism about the future
- Identity
- Meaning in Life
- Empowerment

Recovery & Social Inclusion

• A strong link
• Growing body of evidence demonstrates that participation in a variety of contexts can support recovery (social, education, work, training, volunteering)
• Key role for services to support people to take part in mainstream activities and opportunities.
The tasks of recovery

1. Developing a positive identity
2. Framing and self-managing the ‘mental illness’
3. Developing valued social roles

Promoting recovery: evidence based principles?

• A focus on social environments
• Continuum models of unusual experiences
• Learning from experience / Relapse prevention
• Behavioural activation to enhance well-being
• Values-based goal setting
• Self-acceptance and compassion
• Considering treatments pragmatically / workability as yardstick
Acceptance & Commitment Therapy
ACT

A “3rd wave” therapy in the CBT tradition

1st wave: BT - focus on direct behaviour change

2nd wave: CT - focus on changing content and frequency of cognitions

3rd wave - contextual CBT: focus on changing relationship with thoughts and feelings. Includes: DBT, mindfulness, BA, meta-cognitive therapy & ACT

Over 60 RCTs demonstrating efficacy with depression, substance use, chronic pain, work stress, OCD, epilepsy, smoking cessation, obesity, prejudice (Hayes et al. 2011)

Including 4 RCTs with psychosis
Self as Context

Contact with the Present Moment

Be here now

Acceptance
Open up

Open

Defusion
Watch your thinking

Psychological Flexibility
Aware

Active

Values
Know what matters

Committed Action
Do what works

Pure awareness
ACT in a Nutshell

• What really matters to you in life?

• What stands in the way of you doing what matters?
MINDFULNESS

Present moment awareness training

Untangling from difficult thoughts and emotion

Finding your resilient sense of self

VALUES-BASED ACTION

Clarifying your most valued life directions

Using values as a guide to goals and daily behaviour

From: Flaxman, 2011
A Psychological View of Psychosis

• Dimensional rather than categorical: Normalising
• Work with symptoms rather than diagnoses
• Diagnoses lack scientific validity – “schizophrenia” is less useful than understanding behaviour in context
• Biological vulnerabilities undoubtedly contribute, however symptoms/behaviour are heavily influenced by the environment
• We work with whole human beings whose behaviour is influenced by context
ACT, mindfulness and psychosis

Changing the *relationship* to private events (rather than directly changing content) to increase behavioural flexibility (e.g., Pérez-Álvarez et al., 2008)

Psychotic symptoms as an one *experience* of self, not *the* self (Chadwick, 2006)

We are focused on this *whole person acting in context*, rather than a set of symptoms.
Private Event

Escaping & Avoiding

Valuing

Clinging & Craving

Based on: Dahl, 2009
In a typical ACT session...

We do exercises to:

• notice what is happening in the here and now
• Practice willingness toward experiences
• Clarify chosen life directions (values) & encourage action guided by these
• Encourage a “stepped back” approach toward thinking in general
• Validate the client being a human being
These people are working hard... really.
ACT Made Even Easier

1. Explore unworkable coping strategies (struggle, avoidance)
2. Suggest acceptance (and other underused coping strategies) as an alternative stance
3. Place acceptance in the context of a valued life domain
4. Identify a valued goal and formulate specific action plan (however small to be accomplished today)

Gaudiano, 2005
OK, so how about ACT & Recovery?
ACT for Life Study

• To evaluate an ACT group intervention for psychosis, focused on recovery.
  – Do clients find the intervention acceptable?
  – Do they show improvements in daily functioning, mood, and relationship with symptoms?
  – What processes mediate any change?

• Community based, naturalistic setting

• Participants from across the spectrum of psychosis
Protocol

- Four, 2-hour weekly sessions
- 6-8 participants in each group, 2-3 facilitators
- Protocol based around Passengers on the Bus metaphor
- Use of actor-video to allow participants to approach content at their own pace

- Main components include:
  - Values clarification
  - Mindfulness/ noticing exercises
  - Willingness
  - Defusion
  - Committed action – out of session planning
Passengers on the Bus
My Values and Goals

My goals are to:

My actions to move me closer to my goals:

My values guiding these goals and actions:
ACT & Recovery

• ACT provides an evidence-based technology for doing therapy consistent with Recovery Principles

• ACT uses personal values to guide therapeutic focus, emphasis on functioning and life meaning.

• Therapy is defined by what the person wants to be doing with their lives.
Suffering and Values

Two sides of the one coin

If we didn’t value something we wouldn’t worry about it.
What values sit beneath our worries?
Advantages of a values focus

• Provides constructive and consistent direction
• Enhances response flexibility and motivation
• Encourages persistence in the face of unwanted private experiences (especially in values-related situations)
• Views responses to unwanted internal experiences in the context of personal values - this helps to focus on usefulness of responses / coping methods

• “It’s good to go over and remember what’s important rather than get wrapped up in worries or thoughts that go on”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recovery Principle</th>
<th>The ACT approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding and maintaining <strong>hope</strong></td>
<td>Hope is an <strong>active stance</strong> we can take. Feelings may come and go; our hopeful actions are a way we can change our world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraging <strong>self management</strong></td>
<td>Our actions and choices can be judged by whether they are taking us in <strong>the direction of our values</strong>, rather than whether they are “right”, “make sense” or “look cool”. Learning from experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The re-establishment of a positive <strong>identity</strong></td>
<td>Encourages contact with <strong>self as awareness</strong>, noticing the process of how our minds create stories about us. Instead of being entangled in the mind’s judgements, we observe whether they are useful for our chosen life directions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding <strong>meaning</strong> in life</td>
<td>Life’s pain can be dignified if it is a part of doing the things that are important to us. Through <strong>acting on personal values</strong>, contact with meaning is increased.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking <strong>responsibility</strong> for one’s life</td>
<td>We help people to be “response-able”: to <strong>act on their values rather than their fear</strong>, through developing an <strong>open, compassionate stance</strong> toward their own experiences &amp; themselves.</td>
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ACT & Recovery 2

• Assumes that people are capable of living meaningful lives with the verbal abilities that they have, that normative processes contribute to distress and disability (language)

• Focuses on increasing personal control over the environment, through the balance of acceptance and change
Instead of prescribing more drugs, why don't you help me discover what my values are and how to live my life in accordance with them?

Whatever he's smoking, I want some!