Acceptance & Commitment Therapy for persisting auditory hallucinations: case formulation

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Psychological Flexibility

The ability to contact the present moment fully as a conscious human being, and based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behaviour in the service of chosen values.
Self as Context

Defusion
Watch your thinking

Acceptance
Open up

Open

Contact with the Present Moment
Be here now

Psychological Flexibility
Aware

Active

Values
Know what matters

Committed Action
Do what works

Hayes et al. (2011)
MINDFULNESS

Present moment awareness training

Untangling from difficult thought 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
Why ACT for Psychosis?

• Symptoms lend themselves to ACT approach:
  • Anomalous experiences – primary experiences that are not easily changed
  • Unusual nature of experience either:
    – Encourage focus (search for meaning, understanding, personally salient)
    – Leads to suppression / avoidance (scary, unwanted, socially inappropriate)
  • Thinking style (jumping to conclusions, inflexibility)
  • Recovery focus
Experiential acceptance & psychosis

- **People who cope poorly with voices** use more distraction and thought-suppression strategies (Romme and Escher, 1993).

- Acceptance & mindfulness in voice hearers associated with less distress, voices appraised as less powerful (Morris et al., submitted)

- **accepting voices associated with less compliance** with harmful commands (Shawyer et al., 2007)
Experiential Acceptance & Schizophrenia

- People with schizophrenia use less acceptance compared to suppression and reappraisal strategies. Acceptance is related to better psychosocial outcomes (Perry et al, 2010).

- Over time, experiential acceptance shows positive associations with quality of life and affect (Vilardaga, et al, 2013).
Loss of attentional flexibility as the salience of voices as sentient beings captures attention. Perceived interpersonal dynamics activate automatic engagement or resistance reactions, impeding connection with the current context within the external world.

**Experiential avoidance**
Investment in struggle, escape and avoidance (resistance) prevents positive action.

**Cognitive fusion**
Beliefs about voices and voice content are responded to as if literally true, triggering engagement or resistance and negatively impacting on functional activity.

**Domination of self as content**, defined by self-referential voices and other beliefs (e.g. powerless, inferior, flawed, mad), interferes with the ability to make useful life changes. Lack of decentred awareness (diminution of ‘I/here/now’ perspective) leads to being lost in habitual reactions and engulfment with voices.

**Connection with values overridden** by preoccupation with voices. Involvement with voices displaces valued living. Resignation/entrapment puts committed action on hold. Actions driven by voices or resistance to voices rather than values.
Formulating in ACT for voices

Is there struggle? With what?
- Sensory experience?
- Content?
- Meaning?

Looking for choice:
“given this difficult experience, how do you want to act?”

Defusion around content and beliefs about voices

Willingness as alternative to struggle

Values as life direction, rather than voices
A Case Example

Thomas, Morris, Shawyer, Farhall, 2013
Hazel

• 33 year old, white British woman

• persistently hearing voices for 9 years

• referred for psychological therapy in a recovery-oriented mental health team.

• “I just want to live my life, not the life my voices want me to have...”
Mental Health & Circumstances

- diagnosed with schizophrenia
- stable dose of clozapine
- living in supported accommodation
- attending day centre, has not worked since diagnosis
- Risk: past deliberate self harm, periods of hopelessness, acting on commands?
Experience of Voices

• “like a crowd at a football pitch”, occurring 3-5 times/day
• lasting up to an hour and as loud as her own voice.
• heard outside of the head, male and female, and unidentified.
• content as 90% unpleasant and negative.

Unsure of what is causing the voices:

• Real people contacting her  80%
• Created by own mind  50%

Voices appraised as powerful and knowledgeable
Experiences of Voices 2

• Voices frequently criticize & give advice

• Voices are “evil” – trying to make her do bad things, in order to destroy her

• Believes that voices interfere with her experiencing happiness, in that she can’t have trusting relationships

• Afraid ++ of acting on commands to hurt others

• Ashamed about times she has acting on commands, ruminates about this frequently
Coping Strategies

tries to suppress voices through distraction

- listening to music

- thinking of other things

- keeping busy

Tries not to upset voices

- avoiding social contact in general & particularly involving trust and closeness
# Outcome & Process Measures

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tr>
<td>Beck Depression Inventory</td>
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<td>Beck Anxiety Inventory</td>
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<td>PSYRATS</td>
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<td>Voices Action (VAAS)</td>
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<td>Non-judgemental Awareness (KIMS)</td>
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Formulation of Processes

1. Limited Present Moment Awareness
2. Values Overridden By Voice Preoccupation
3. Limited Committed Action
4. Psychological Inflexibility
5. Fusion
6. Experiential Avoidance
7. Self-as-Content

- Defusion
- Acceptance
- Committed Action
Frequent rumination & worry vigilance of voices

Values:
- Caring, Loving in R’ships
- Sacrifice of Values

Actions are focused on resisting, avoiding voice activity, busyness

Limited Committed Action

Self-as-Content

Dominance of self as weak, schizo, freak

Fusion

Responds as though voices are powerful, dangerous

Experiential Avoidance

Efforts to suppress voices

Avoids triggers for voice comments

DSH

Psychological Inflexibility
ACTp

10 sessions (treatment study)
• building willingness through defusion and acceptance
• with a valued action focus

Each session:
• Present moment exercise
• Valued actions this week
• Practice of acceptance/defusion toward barriers
• Planning of next valued actions
• Review of main points (summary sheet)
Central ACT Exercises

Noticing exercises / mindfulness

Values: work – love – play
• Lifetime Achievement Award

Building Acceptance
• Tug of War with Your Voices (the Monster)
• River of Experiences (paper version)
• Taking Your Voice for a Walk
River of Experiences

- Sound
- Thought
- Urge
- Emotion
- Voice Comments
Conclusion

• The Psychological Flexibility model can be used to formulate the processes contributing to distress and disability in the context of voice hearing

• ACT provides one way to strengthen flexibility in response to voices & private experiences in general

• A focus on values-driven action provides motivation and a recovery orientation