

What Is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)?

By Deborah R. Glasofer, PhD | Updated on September 26, 2021

✓ Medically reviewed by Daniel B. Block, MD

What Is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a type of psychotherapy that emphasizes acceptance as a way to deal with negative thoughts, feelings, symptoms, or circumstances. It also encourages increased commitment to healthy, constructive activities that uphold your values or goals.

ACT therapists operate under a theory that suggests that increasing acceptance can lead to increased psychological flexibility. This approach carries a host of benefits, and it may help people stop habitually avoiding certain thoughts or emotional experiences, which can lead to further problems.

Techniques

Unlike cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), the goal of ACT is not to reduce the frequency or severity of unpleasant internal experiences like upsetting cognitive distortions, emotions, or urges. Rather, the goal is to reduce your struggle to control or eliminate these experiences while simultaneously increasing your involvement in meaningful life activities (i.e., those activities that are consistent with your personal values).

This process involves six components:

- **Acceptance:** This means allowing your inner thoughts and feelings to occur without trying to change them or ignore them. Acceptance is an active process.
- **Cognitive defusion:** Cognitive defusion is the process of separating yourself from your inner experiences. This allows you to see thoughts simply as thoughts, stripped of the importance that your mind adds to them.

- **Self as context:** This involves learning to see your thoughts about yourself as separate from your actions.
- **Being present:** ACT encourages you to stay mindful of your surroundings and learn to shift your attention away from internal thoughts and feelings.
- **Values:** These are the areas of your life that are important enough to you to motivate action.
- **Commitment:** This process involves changing your behavior based on principles covered in therapy.

During ACT, your therapist will help you learn how to apply these concepts to your life. They may teach you how to practice acceptance and cognitive defusion, or they may help you develop a different sense of yourself that's distinct from your thoughts and feelings.

Sessions can also include mindfulness exercises designed to foster nonjudgmental, healthy awareness of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories that you have otherwise avoided. Your therapist may also help highlight moments when your actions didn't fit your values while helping you understand which behaviors would fit.

Your therapist may assign homework to practice between sessions, such as mindfulness, cognitive, or values clarification exercises. The homework is agreed upon between you and your therapist and can be modified to make it as personal and useful as possible.

Press Play for Advice On Radical Acceptance

Hosted by Editor-in-Chief and therapist Amy Morin, LCSW, this episode of The Verywell Mind Podcast shares how to practice radical acceptance to reduce suffering. Click below to listen now.

Follow Now: [Apple Podcasts](#) / [Spotify](#) / [Google Podcasts](#)

What ACT Can Help With

ACT may be effective in treating:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating disorders

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Stress
- Substance use
- Psychosis

Research has shown that ACT can improve symptoms for people with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and it may also be a particularly good fit for older adults with the condition.

Benefits of ACT

One core benefit of ACT is the impact it has on psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is the ability to embrace your thoughts and feelings when they are useful and to set them aside when they are not. This allows you to thoughtfully respond to your inner experience and avoid short-term, impulsive actions, focusing instead on living a meaningful life.

Psychological flexibility can improve your ability to accept and function with symptoms of conditions like anxiety or depression. Often, those symptoms may lessen significantly as a result of this increase in psychological flexibility.

Effectiveness

ACT is sometimes referred to as a "third wave" or "new wave" psychotherapy. The term "third wave" treatment refers to a broad spectrum of psychotherapies that also includes:

- Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT)
- Schema therapy
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)

Historically, third-wave treatments were seen as particularly appropriate for people who were not benefiting from pre-existing treatments like classical CBT. However, it is now believed that for some individuals, a third-wave therapy option may make sense as a first-line treatment.

Research shows ACT to be effective at treating a wide range of conditions, including some that span several diagnoses. ACT also appears to improve quality of life, and it

may help people deal with physical conditions and chronic pain.

Things to Consider

While ACT is an effective treatment for a variety of conditions, research shows that it may be about as helpful as other available forms of therapy, such as CBT. These findings suggest that someone who benefits from ACT may have also benefited from another treatment.

ACT has also faced criticism for its similarity to other forms of therapy. Some proponents of CBT claim that ACT, like other third-wave therapies, doesn't represent a significantly different approach.

How to Get Started

Several types of mental health professionals may offer ACT, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or mental health counselors. If you are interested in learning more about this approach, you might ask about your treatment provider's training background with it or seek out an experienced ACT practitioner.

You may also try referral sources such as the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS) or the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT). The ACBS also provides free resources about ACT in the form of videos, audio clips, and mindfulness exercises.

A therapist specifically trained in ACT will be both an active, empathic listener and an active guide, encouraging deeper exploration and non-judgmental awareness during the sessions.

ACT sessions tend to be hands-on, often including psychological exercises or mindfulness training, as well as homework after the session is done. Completing these exercises is an important part of ACT, as this is the way you can learn new skills and improve your psychological flexibility.

Your therapist will also want to discuss your values and goals during therapy. This is another crucial part of treatment, as these values will inform your actions moving forward.

7 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

1. Wetherell JL, Afari N, Ayers CR, et al. Acceptance and commitment therapy for generalized anxiety disorder in older adults: A preliminary report. *Behav Ther.* 2011;42(1):127-34. doi:10.1016/j.beth.2010.07.002
2. Twohig MP, Levin ME. Acceptance and commitment therapy as a treatment for anxiety and depression: A review. *Psychiatr Clin N Am.* 2017;40(4):751-770. doi:10.1016/j.psc.2017.08.009
3. Gloster AT, Walder N, Levin ME, Twohig MP, Karekla M. The empirical status of acceptance and commitment therapy: A review of meta-analyses. *J Contextual Behav Sci.* 2020;18:181-192. doi:10.1016/j.jcbs.2020.09.009
4. Öst LG. The efficacy of acceptance and commitment therapy: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis. *Behav Res Ther.* 2014;61:105-121. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2014.07.018
5. Kahl KG, Winter L, Schweiger U. The third wave of cognitive behavioural therapies: What is new and what is effective?. *Curr Opin Psychiatry.* 2012;25(6):522-8. doi:10.1097/ycp.0b013e328358e531
6. A-Tjak JGL, Davis ML, Morina N, Powers MB, Smits JAJ, Emmelkamp PMG. A meta-analysis of the efficacy of acceptance and commitment therapy for clinically relevant mental and physical health problems. *Psychother Psychosom.* 2015;84(1):30-36. doi:10.1159/000365764
7. Gaudiano BA. Evaluating acceptance and commitment therapy: An analysis of a recent critique. *Int J Behav Consult Ther.* 2011;7(1), 54-65. doi:10.1037/h0100927