



Southeast (HHS Region 4)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

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# Introduction to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)



*This infographic serves as an introduction to Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) and highlights how mental health professionals (MHP) can apply ACT into their practice. Although this infographic is designed for MHP who serve individuals who experience psychotic symptoms, ACT can be applied when working with individuals experiencing other mental illnesses.*

## What is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a form of therapy that supports an individual in building motivation and momentum along their recovery journey. Although the ACT approach is not specific to a serious mental illness, ACT can be used for individuals experiencing psychosis. The goal of ACT is to have a curious approach to one's suffering, distress, and negative thoughts while implementing essential components that encourage intentional letting go of control. When applying ACT, a provider works with an individual to foster the idea that one can live a full life while also experiencing psychotic symptoms. The individual's values are prioritized through mindfulness, acceptance, and doing what matters.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## How is ACT different from other forms of therapy?

### **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):**

A form of psychotherapy used to raise an individual's awareness of the inter-connectedness of their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. In treatment, the provider instructs an individual on development of skills to recognize and modify unhelpful thinking patterns and behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

### **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT):**

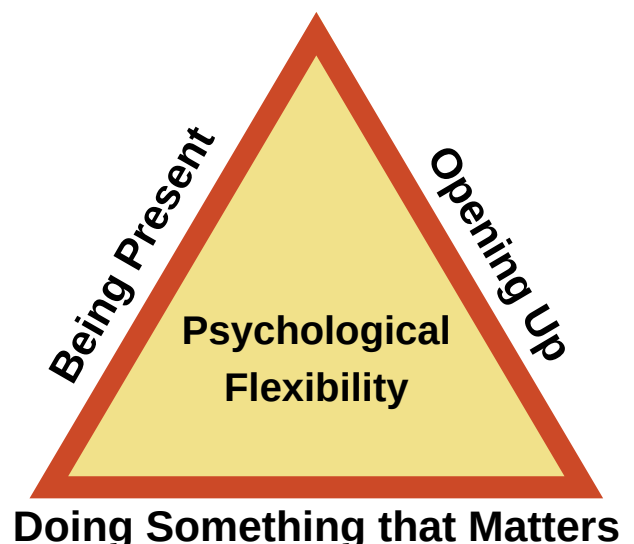
A form of psychotherapy used to emphasize validation and acceptance of an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors instead of struggling with them. In treatment, the provider and individual work together to create a gradual plan for recovery by developing skills and coping methods to overcome unhealthy thoughts, emotions, or behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):**

A form of psychotherapy used to achieve psychological flexibility through the use of mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment of the client's experience. In treatment, clinicians work with an individual to develop a values-driven lifestyle and explore mindfulness practices to learn different ways to relate to their experiences, thoughts, and reactions.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## What is the Psychological Flexibility model?

Psychological Flexibility refers to an individual's ability to welcome and to connect to the present moment fully. This process involves acceptance of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations and working through how one's behaviors and reactions align with their values. The pillars of psychological flexibility include: Being Present, Opening Up, and Doing Something that Matters.<sup>1, 2</sup>



## What are the six essential components of ACT?

Psychological Flexibility practices can be further organized into six essential components of ACT, also known as the Hexaflex. These essential mechanisms are guiding practices for a provider to exercise with an individual. The Hexaflex components are not procedural and they do not need to be applied in a specific order. Depending on where one may be in their recovery journey, some individuals may have difficulty connecting with one ACT component over another. Individuals should be encouraged to start at any place they are willing and able to practice.<sup>1, 2</sup>

### VALUES

Ask the individual to identify what is important, what they value, and what they want to stand for. Create a values checklist with them.<sup>1, 2</sup>

#### **Discussion starters for providers:**

- What kind of person do you want to be at the end of these sessions?
- What do you want to stand for?
- *Practice exercise:* [Bull's Eye worksheet](#)



### COGNITIVE DEFUSION

Encourage the individual to view thoughts, beliefs, and hallucinations as experiences rather than facts or truths. Their experiences can be seen as content to be used or not. Empower the individual to “scroll” through thoughts the way one may scroll through social media.<sup>1, 2</sup>

#### **Discussion starters for providers:**

- Are the thoughts you're having consistent with who you want to be and what you want to do?
- If yes, what you can you do to make them actionable?
- If no, can you choose to focus your attention on something different?



## ACCEPTANCE

Foster openness and curiosity toward uncomfortable experiences as opposed to avoidance. Rather than trying to stop the voices from saying negative things, encourage the individual to try practices that explore the negative experiences.<sup>1, 2</sup>

### **Discussion starters for providers:**

- What can we change here?
- What just “is”?
- Practice exercise: [Unwelcome party guest metaphor](#)



## SELF AS CONTEXT

Ask the individual to imagine stepping outside of themselves and see the world from a different perspective. Encourage them to view their illness and symptoms as part of a larger story and not personally defining characteristics.<sup>1, 2</sup>

### **Discussion starters for providers:**

- If this were to happen to someone else, what would you advise?
- If we could look at your life 6 months from now, what would you like to see?



## PRESENT MOMENT

Ask the individual to deliberately pay attention to the “now.” Instead of making decisions using “what was” or “what might be,” encourage decision-making with “what is.” Connecting with the present moment can include the following exercises: five senses, body scan, or breathing techniques.<sup>1, 2</sup>

### **Discussion starters for providers:**

- Name five things you can see, four you can hear, three you can touch or feel, two you can smell, and one you can taste?



## COMMITTED ACTION

Identify goals and practice exercises to achieve goals. Encourage the individual to start by listing some of their goals, achievements and accomplishments. Additionally, have the individual practice setting small, manageable goals related to daily self-care routines, mindful nutrition, or medication adherence.<sup>1, 2</sup>

### **Discussion starters for providers:**

- What are you willing to do to be that person?
- What specific actions would lead you in that direction?



## How to incorporate ACT into your practice?



Take a few minutes to think about the components of ACT and how they could be incorporated into your therapy practice.

- What aspects of ACT resonate with you?
- What is one ACT practice would like to try?

## References

1. Southeast Mental Health Technology Center [Southeast MHTTC]. 2021. [On-Demand: Introduction to acceptance & commitment therapy \(ACT\)](#). Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) network.
2. Southeast Mental Health Technology Center [Southeast MHTTC]. 2021. [On-Demand: A Case Study in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Individuals Living with Psychosis](#). Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) network.
3. National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI]. n.d. [Psychotherapy](#). <https://nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Treatments/Psychotherapy>