

Acceptance-Commitment Therapy (ACT) in Addiction Treatment

Joseph A. Troncale, MD
Retreat

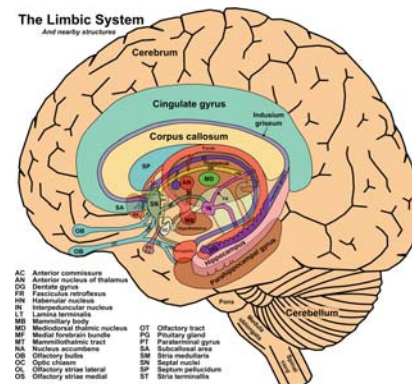
What is ACT?

- ▶ Third wave of cognitive behavioral therapy
- ▶ Operates on very simple principles
- ▶ Is not a substitute for 12-Step Recovery
- ▶ Can be taught in increments to staff and patients at any level
- ▶ Better explanation can be found on www.actmindfully.com.au or reading “The Happiness Trap.”
- ▶ This is public material, but Russ Harris has the copyright just to be clear for this presentation.

What are the ACT principles

- ▶ In a nutshell, ACT states that life is generally polarized by individuals into two choices:
 - Escape Feelings and Move Toward Suffering
 - Accept Feelings and Move Toward Values

ACT and the Limbic System



Limbic System and the 6 “Fs”

- ▶ Fight
- ▶ Flight
- ▶ Feeding
- ▶ Fear
- ▶ Freezing
- ▶ Reproduction

“Flight” and the Escape Not Just From Danger

- ▶ We escape our feelings with the same abandon we use to escape physical danger.
- ▶ Certain thoughts, feelings or emotions are just as frightening for individuals as would an overt physical threat. The difference is that an overt threat generally is time limited. Emotional threats have no boundaries or time limitations. Therefore many individuals are in chronic fight or flight AND their attempts to escape only make things worse and worse.

According to Harris, This Is How We Do the “Escape:”

- ▶ We get ourselves into:
- ▶ 1. Unworkable Actions and Avoiding Solutions (doing the same thing expecting a different outcome.
- ▶ 2. What Harris Calls “Fusion” – Projection of one’s thoughts that become judgements or rules that have no basis in fact or are an exaggeration of reality.
- ▶ 3. Experiential Avoidance – essentially an attempt to “erase” or “run away” from feelings or urges that are painful, traumatic or unacceptable.

The Amygdala

- ▶ The center of fight and flight within the limbic system
- ▶ If one takes an animal model and tortures an animal and looks at the amygdala, it becomes enlarged.
- ▶ The amygdala has a lot to do with rage and sexual behaviors.

Treating Trauma and Dual-Diagnosis Issues

- ▶ So what happens to many, and probably most, individuals we see in treatment is a history of some type of maladaptive coping mechanisms leading to unacceptable or painful feelings that demand to be avoided.
- ▶ Our patients turn to drugs and alcohol to avoid the feelings.
- ▶ If we do not get to the root cause of the avoidance, we get relapse behavior and then the patient tends to be blamed for “doing something wrong” and relapsing.

So How Do We Best Help People?

- ▶ I believe that if ACT principles are correct, then we have to help people get to a place where they are able to learn how to experience what is fearful.
- ▶ Who wants to do that? (No one, unfortunately)
- ▶ The other problem is that this avoiding behavior is limbic and hard-wired.
- ▶ We as therapists or treatment professionals have to be unified in our commitment to avoid rescuing people but still be compassionate.

My Belief Based on ACT Principles:

- ▶ I am personally convinced that the lowest common denominator of addiction is self-hatred and a lack of self-compassion.
- ▶ There are obviously hundreds of other variables, so I don't want to oversimplify this, but I believe that relapse and use of chemicals at the deepest level is self- invalidation or self-hatred leading to this powerful need to escape which leads to use.

The ACT “Triflex”

- ▶ Do What Matters
 - What are your values?
 - What do you want to do?
- Be Present
 - Mindfulness
 - Be Aware of Shame (past) and Anxiety (future)
- Open Up
 - What are you “stuck to?” (ideas, people, drugs)

The End Result of Practicing the Triflex

- ▶ Psychological Flexibility
 - Getting unstuck from self-invalidation
 - Staying in the present moment
 - Moving toward one's values



Escape as the Basis for Addiction

- ▶ Self-invalidation leads to emptiness which leads to a need to escape the emptiness which leads to addictive behavior which leads to suffering.



Acceptance as the Basis of Sobriety

- ▶ Self-validation leads to acceptance of feelings which leads to self-empowerment which leads to the ability to move toward one's values and in turn fulfill one's destiny



Why "Why" is not Important

- ▶ In ACT analysis is not the most important thing. The important data have to do with recognizing the triggers that lead to pain and escape behaviors and have the person move into the direction of personal values.



Practical Ways of Using the Clinician's Guide by Russ Harris

- ▶ This information is free on the internet.
- ▶ I have no other relationship with Russ Harris other than I buy his books from Amazon.



What I Do

- ▶ 1. Interview the person
- ▶ 2. Attempt to have the person identify their most bothersome feelings that he or she experiences regularly
- ▶ 3. Have the individual identify where in their body they actually feel the feeling.
- ▶ 4. Have the individual state what they normally do with the feeling.
- ▶ 5. Explain the “beach ball” construct regarding dealing with feelings.



Beach Balls

- ▶ If you push down a beach ball it uses your energy to push itself back up. On the other hand, one has the choice of letting the ball float around without adding any energy.
- ▶ If you don't struggle or try to push, you don't have to give the beach ball energy.



The Three Chair Exercise

- ▶ I will demonstrate



Which One is the Adult?
Which One(s) are Addicts?

Values Exercise



Tobias Lundgren's Bull's Eye

Problem Solving Exercise

- ▶ Discern your values
- ▶ Graph how close your behavior actually matches your values
- ▶ The discrepancy between your behavior and your values is roughly how much you are suffering and what it is you are trying to escape



The Lion King Story and ACT



In conclusion:

- ▶ Relapse is a fear driven behavior aimed at escaping the feeling that is most uncomfortable.
- ▶ I see 12-step programs as the “gym” for relapse prevention exercises
- ▶ Beyond 12-step recovery comes methods for dealing with the deep issues of self-hatred, self-invalidation, and making movement toward self-acceptance, self-compassion and one’s values.



In my experience:

- ▶ ACT fills a role in relapse prevention by providing a framework for individuals who are able to see that escape of one’s feelings leads to suffering and substance use.



Questions or Comments?

- ▶ Joseph A. Troncale, MD
- ▶ josephtr@retreatmail.com
- ▶ www.retreatlc.co
- ▶ 1170 South State Street
- ▶ Ephrata, PA 17522

