

Family Voice Bulletin – Issue 17 (May 4th) Acceptance & Commitment Therapy

Summarized by KJ (Krystal-Jyl) Thomas, MSW, RSW

In this week's session, KJ Thomas and Jillian Crabbe facilitated with guest speaker; Dr. Hans DeGroot presenting on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a form of talk therapy that incorporates mindfulness, commitment, and behaviour change processes to help create psychological flexibility. It comes from an assumption that humans by nature are psychologically healthy, and at times this state can be disturbed by distress or illness.

Often in today's culture, we are called to be in a state of perpetual happiness. Happiness is often considered the "normal" way to be, or feeling "good" to be a reflection of living well. This can lead to avoiding aspects of life that are difficult, or reinforcing behaviours that are perceived to help block negative feelings (alcohol use can be an example of this). Anxiety, sadness, fear, self-doubt are also normal feelings. Due to beliefs that undesirable feelings are bad, we are prone to want to get rid of them, or wait to move forward until happiness returns. Some call this the "feel good agenda". ACT challenges these concepts and explores ways to continue through life towards our goals *with* the varying emotional states we experience. ACT does not change the content of thought, but rather the function of it. It assists in achieving the things we want in life while moving with the feelings we are experiencing.

Feelings are not something we always have control over. Take for example the feeling of falling in love at first sight; we cannot will ourselves to do this. Or, if we encountered a lion in the wild, fear is likely inevitable. Emotions can have valuable lessons in them, especially some of the tough ones. If we open ourselves up to our varying feelings, we can explore why we may be feeling them. This can teach us about ourselves, and our surroundings. Willingness to feel can become an alternative to avoidance. We don't have a choice over what we feel, but we do have a choice in what we do with how we feel.

In ACT, something called *cognitive fusion* is explored. This is the idea that we can get caught up in how we feel about what is happening, rather than what is happening itself. Our emotions can at times determine how we perceive events. This can be troublesome as our mind is not always our friend. Think of self-critical thoughts you've had in your life. Could you imagine saying similar things to a friend? Likely not. Our minds are a great tool for deducting and problem solving outside ourselves, but inner emotions are not always accurately connected to the reality of our situations.

A helpful tip to remember is *description versus evaluation*, referred to as a diffusion exercise. It goes like this: If your mind gives you the thought, "I am weak", this is an evaluation that is masqueraded as a description. Diffusion exercises remind us that our mind has given us the thought "I am weak"; however, you are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are part of your experience, but your thoughts are not the whole of you. Our emotions often present as barriers so being aware of them can help you identify and further process and evaluate what it is telling you. A helpful visualization can be picturing a chess board. The pieces are your thoughts, they can battle against each other, but you are more than thoughts, you are the board.

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Resources

- 📄 Steven Hayes on You Tube.
- 📄 “Treating Psychosis” by Nicola Wright et al., a psychologist with The Royal’s Schizophrenia Program
<https://www.newharbinger.com/treating-psychosis>
- 📄 Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life by Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D
- 📄 The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris
- 📄 ACT Made Simple by Russ Harris