

Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT)

An Innovative Approach to Patient
Self-Management and Behavior Change





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About this report

This report is the first in a three-part series introducing an innovative approach to behavior change - Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT).

ACT is gathering increasing interest, both with clinicians and in the academic research field, as an effective, versatile and innovative therapy for supporting patients to manage a wide range of health conditions.

Up until recently in the field of behavior change and self-management, interventions aimed at changing people's self-management behaviors have primarily been based on a type of psychological therapy known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The central idea behind CBT is to change people's thoughts about themselves and their illness and, in turn, how these thoughts influence their behaviors.¹ There is a huge wealth of evidence showing the effectiveness of CBT-based interventions in changing people's thoughts, feelings and behaviors and improving health outcomes in a wide range of contexts, including chronic disease self-management.¹

While there is an abundance of evidence to show the effectiveness of CBT-based interventions to support meaningful behavior change in some areas, CBT may be less suitable for certain patient groups. It is becoming increasingly evident that there is a need for additional methods for behavior change to be considered.



Introducing a 'new wave' of behavior change

Several newer third wave CBT therapies, that incorporate mindfulness-based techniques, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and ACT, have begun to emerge and these are gathering a growing amount of interest in the world of psychology and behavior change.^{2,3} While there is some overlap between traditional CBT and these newer third wave therapies, each is thought to target and change behaviors in fundamentally different ways.³

Whereas CBT attempts to *change* thoughts and behaviors, mindfulness-based practices consider unpleasant thoughts and feelings a normal part of human experience, recognising that for some people (for example, those in palliative care), change is not always possible or appropriate. Mindfulness-based therapies encourage people to accept unpleasant thoughts and feelings, allow them to come and go without attaching to them, and in turn, reduce the influence they can have on behavior.³

Key learnings

- ▶ CBT has traditionally been used to promote behavior change but newer, mindfulness-based therapies are showing validity for promoting meaningful behavior change in healthcare
- ▶ ACT is one particularly promising mindfulness-based therapy, that offers a unique, non-manualised approach that extends beyond formal meditation practice
- ▶ ACT teaches six core skills to help people achieve mental flexibility
- ▶ Evidence from both clinical and empirical research shows ACT is effective in promoting a range of positive health outcomes including improved adherence and reduced health-related distress
- ▶ ACT is gaining validity as an accessible, versatile, flexible and acceptable behavior change therapy, that is increasingly being applied in innovative and unique ways

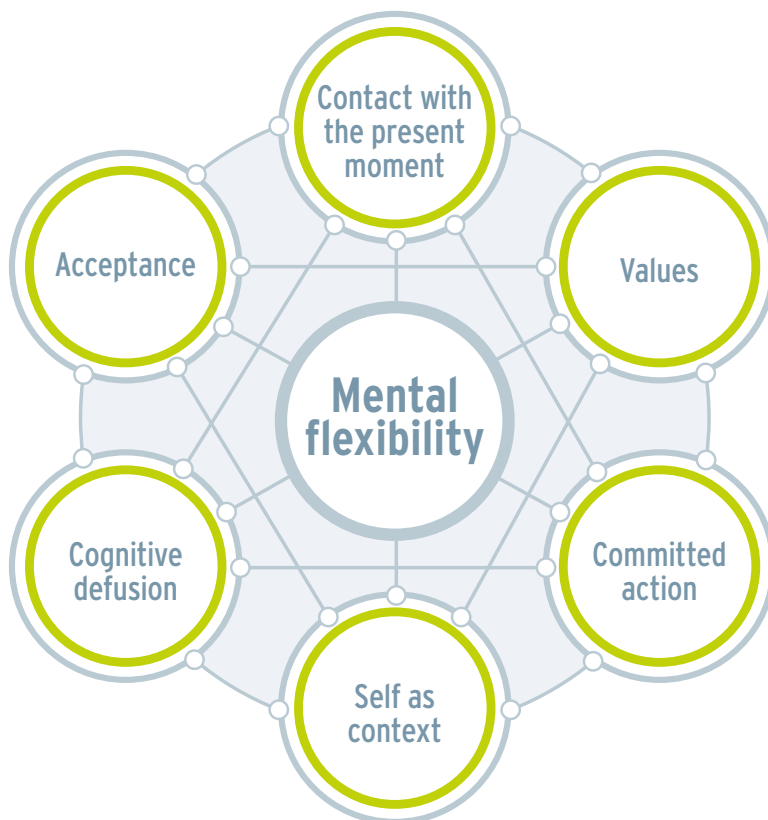
How Acceptance Commitment Therapy works

ACT is a mindfulness-based behavior change therapy that is increasingly becoming recognised as unique and highly effective, and set apart from other mindfulness-based approaches.^{2,3}

Unlike MBCT and MBSR, ACT is not a manualised therapy that teaches skills in a prescribed order. ACT also differs from these approaches as it teaches mindfulness skills beyond formal meditation practice, by breaking down mindfulness into the following four skills: acceptance, cognitive defusion, contact with the present moment, and self as context.^{4,5}

In addition to teaching these skills, ACT places an emphasis on living towards values by committing to meaningful actions and goal setting.^{4,5} ACT also encourages forgiveness, compassion, and accessing a transcendent sense of self.^{4,5} The ultimate goal of ACT is for people to achieve mental flexibility. These core skills of ACT are both overlapping and interrelated, with each supporting the others.⁴

The key goal of ACT, and the skills necessary to reach that goal, are outlined in the figure below.



- Cd Cognitive defusion**
The process of observing thoughts objectively as ever-changing, private events that are separate from oneself.
- Ac Acceptance**
The process of opening up and making space for difficult emotions, thoughts or feelings, and allowing them to come and go without struggling with them.
- Sc Self as context**
The process of taking the stance of an observer, and understanding that thoughts, emotions and feelings are separate from who one really is.
- Va Values**
The process of identifying what is most important; what is significant, and meaningful; what one wants to stand for in life and what sort of person one wants to be.
- Ca Committed action**
The process of setting value-based goals, and taking meaningful actions to meet these.
- Cm Contact with the present moment**
The process of bringing full awareness to 'the here-and-now', focussing on and engaging fully in the moment.

Why ACT works so well for Atlantis Healthcare



Sylvia Barnes is a health psychology specialist at Atlantis Healthcare UK with over 5 years' experience using ACT, both clinically in her work as a health psychologist and in designing ACT-based interventions at Atlantis Healthcare.

Why do you think ACT is so effective for supporting patients?

One major reason is that it normalises the common human struggles we all have, whether we have a chronic health condition or not. For example, many of us at some point will experience intrusive or distressing thoughts, painful emotions and at times, a lack of clear direction in our lives. I've noticed patients from all walks of life latching onto at least some, if not all, of the six ACT components and using them effectively in their own lives.

How might ACT be useful for patients struggling with chronic health issues?

There's a lot of uncertainty that comes with having a chronic condition, and often many questions that are difficult to answer. Things like 'how much worse are my symptoms going to get?' or 'will my condition ever get better?' ACT can help people to

tolerate distress and thoughts like these, by giving them space to just be there. Patients are encouraged to not give their thoughts much attention if they're unhelpful, and instead focus on the things that matter here in the present moment.

Do you think ACT has applicability outside of the therapy setting too?

What's interesting about ACT is that it translates easily into all sorts of different mediums. In my clinical work, I've delivered ACT in a traditional one-to-one therapy context. But at Atlantis Healthcare, we're seeing ACT skills being applied in all sorts of new and interesting ways - for example through interventional text-messages, nurse-led phone calls, and interactive online modules. We're also seeing it being used in a wide range of health populations, which is a real testament to how accessible and relatable it is for different groups of people.

1. ACT can improve adherence

One of the main focuses for support in our programs is to improve patient adherence to treatments. Within the framework of ACT, nonadherence can be viewed as avoidance of negative, condition-related thoughts.^{3,6,7} For example, believing that a treatment won't help their condition might cause a patient to not take that treatment. ACT is believed to promote healthy behaviors in patients by encouraging acceptance of these negative illness beliefs and viewing adherence to treatments and self-management behaviors as meaningful, value-directed behaviors.^{3,6,7}

2. ACT is accepted by patients

Above all, it is important to note that personal clinical experience, Atlantis Healthcare research, and empirical research has shown that ACT-based interventions are perceived to be acceptable by a wide range of patients.^{3,16}

3. ACT supports coping with health-related distress

Experiencing high levels of distress is a realistic and understandable consequence of living with a chronic condition, and is something that is frequently cited across the chronic condition literature.^{8,9} A purely CBT approach - which tries to remove or minimise distress - can be effective, however for some patients an approach that teaches skills to tolerate and accept such distress may be more effective.^{3,10}

4. ACT is versatile

There is rationale to use an ACT approach within our patient support solutions as it is extremely versatile. It has previously been applied via a number of different channels (including smartphone applications, email, telephone calls, and web-based interactive activities¹¹⁻¹⁴) and can be effectively delivered by a wide range of healthcare professionals including nurses, doctors, counsellors and therapists.¹⁵

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Abbreviations

ACT: Acceptance Commitment Therapy

CBT: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

MBCT: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

MBSR: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction