

Overview of ACT principles and goals

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a form of psychotherapy that aims to help individuals handle difficult thoughts and emotions effectively while creating a rich, vital life. It was developed by Steven C. Hayes, PhD in the 1980s.

The primary goal of ACT is to help individuals develop the skills to handle difficult thoughts and emotions while engaging in behaviors that align with their core values. It encourages individuals to stop avoiding, denying, and struggling with their inner emotions and, instead, accept that these deeper feelings are appropriate responses to certain situations that should not prevent them from moving forward in their lives.

The approach is generally based on the idea that psychological suffering can be caused by avoiding complex thoughts and emotions during or after a time of strain or trauma. In this context, many ACT practitioners believe that the key to reducing suffering might be learning to accept these experiences without self-judgment. ACT can help individuals to develop psychological flexibility, which can involve engaging in actions that are consistent with their values of empathy and self-compassion even in the presence of complex thoughts and emotions.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is based on six core principles:

1. **Cognitive Defusion:** This involves learning to perceive thoughts, images, memories, and other cognitions as they are, rather than what they often appear to be.
2. **Expansion/Acceptance:** This refers to making room for unpleasant feelings, sensations, and urges, instead of trying to suppress them or push them away.
3. **Contact and Connection with the Present Moment:** This principle emphasizes being fully aware and engaged in the current moment.
4. **The Observing Self:** This principle involves looking at your thoughts rather than from your thoughts. It's about observing ourselves thinking a certain way rather than just plain thinking that way. Your Observing Self can be likened to the sky, with your thoughts and feelings being like the weather.
5. **Values Clarification:** In ACT, values are the principles that govern how you want to act. Unlike goals, values are never accomplished. Rather, values involve continuous behavior—they guide your choices and decisions according to the kind of person you strive to be.
6. **Committed Action:** Committed action is about taking effective action and behaving in ways that are guided by your values. This allows you to create a fulfilling and satisfying quality of life.

How does ACT differ from other forms of therapy?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) differs from other forms of therapy in several ways:

1. **Perspective on Thoughts:** While Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) works by helping you identify and change negative or destructive thoughts; ACT holds that pain and discomfort are a fact of life. ACT teaches you to accept these feelings as a part of life and learn to live with them.
2. **Focus on Acceptance:** ACT emphasizes acceptance and mindfulness. It is based on the idea that you do not have to change your emotions, but you can change how you perceive them.
3. **Therapeutic Approach:** ACT adopts an experiential approach, focusing on the individual's experience and how they relate to their thoughts and feelings. In contrast, therapies like Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) adopt a more educative approach.
4. **Ongoing Process:** Unlike CBT, which is goal-oriented and typically focused on a specific, short-term problem, ACT is ongoing and is meant to be integrated into your daily life.
5. **Psychological Flexibility:** ACT aims to increase psychological flexibility by using mindfulness and various behavior-changing strategies. This is a unique aspect of ACT that sets it apart from other therapies.