

A Handbook for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for Chaplains



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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Common Factors	7
Purpose of the Handbook.	9
Supporting Evidence	10
Metaphors	15
Demographics	16
Summary of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	18
The Six Core Processes of ACT.	18
Values.	19
<i>Values Scriptural Reference</i>	21
<i>Values Metaphor – The Mission</i>	24
<i>Values Case Study</i>	26
Committed Action	27
<i>Committed Action Scriptural</i> 30	
<i>Committed Action Metaphor</i>	31
<i>Committed Action Case Study</i>	31
Acceptance.	32
<i>Acceptance Scriptural Reference</i>	34
<i>Acceptance Metaphor</i>	36
<i>Acceptance Case Study</i>	37
Defusion.	38
<i>Defusion Scriptural Reference</i>	41
<i>Defusion Metaphor</i>	43
<i>Defusion Case Study</i>	44
Living in the Present Moment	45
<i>Live in Present Moment Scriptural Reference</i>	48
<i>Live in the Present Moment Metaphor</i>	50
<i>Live in the Present Moment Case Study</i>	51

Self as Context52

Self as Context Scriptural Reference 55

Self as Context Metaphor 58

Self as Context Case Study 59

Relational Frame Theory60

Additional Resources71

Definition of Terms72

Bibliography76

Introduction

The role of a chaplain differs from that of mental health counselors and even pastors. As a result, many new chaplains find themselves in unfamiliar settings. The structure and wide range of cultures in the chaplaincy (i.e., military, hospital, prison, university etc.) differ from many other ministry settings. Newly appointed chaplains deal with profound human problems, and find themselves wishing they had more training in the field of counseling.¹

This handbook gives you a perspective on how to overcome those challenges. It will give a context how counseling models can work in a chaplaincy environment. I will summarize one particular model, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help you assess if it fits well with your pastoral counseling style and theology.

This booklet is more than just a review of ACT, it is a primer for chaplains who are considering using psychotherapeutic models in their work. The first part will help you to relate to the current state of the relationship between chaplaincy and psychotherapy. After that, I'll go on to summarize ACT. Due to its heavy emphasis on action, ACT is pronounced as the word "act" by practitioners.

This booklet will also be useful to those of you who are more experienced in the arena of pastoral counseling by giving you additional options and language of how to discuss your work with other professionals. This is not meant to take away from the main focus of pastoral care but to enhance it. The meaning of pastoral care is defined as follows:

Holistic pastoral care involves the use of religious resources for the

1. Michael W. Firmin and Mark Tedford, "An Assessment of Pastoral Counseling Courses in Seminaries Serving Evangelical Baptist Students," *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 4 (2007): 420-427.

purpose of empowering people, families, and congregations to heal their brokenness and to grow toward wholeness in their lives. Healing is a journey that transcends curing, to include the transformation of circumstances by awakening the spiritual perspectives of people in crises.²

As chaplains, we provide pastoral care as part of counseling relationships that are different than psychotherapy. The pastoral care paradigm is represented in a type of counseling called pastoral counseling. This is defined as follows:

[A] focused form of pastoral care geared towards enabling individuals, couples, and families to cope more constructively with crises, losses, difficult decisions, and other anxiety laden experiences... Pastoral counselling, in contrast to pastoral care, involves the explicit desire of the recipients to receive help from the counselor.³

As suggested, pastoral care and counseling involves the use of religious spiritual resources such as hope,⁴ spiritual coping strategies,⁵ and community,⁶ in helping individuals become whole.

This spiritual focus; however, should not be used as a rationale for chaplains to reject psychotherapeutic counseling models. We need to give thoughtful consideration in how we can implement them into our pastoral care. Nevertheless, in general, it is important that these counseling models are open to spirituality. They should also be adaptable to the spectrum of beliefs that we encounter in our pastoral counseling efforts.

2. Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growth*, (Nashville: TN, Abingdon Press, 2011), 8.

3. Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growth* (Nashville: TN, Abingdon Press, 2011), 9-10.

4. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 22.

5. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 14.

6. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 15.

The counseling resources in the psychotherapy discipline can be a powerful aid to us. Many skills overlap. Some of these include skills like listening, empathy, and insight.⁷ In this way ACT, and other psychotherapeutic models, can help us more fully integrate emotional functioning and methods for overcoming unworkable behaviors in the people we talk to. Unfortunately, this is not always available in the formal training of pastors and chaplains.

To investigate this, Michael W. Firmin and Mark Tedford performed a study on pastor training. Chaplains and pastors often go to the same seminaries. They guessed that “[because] pastors report feeling inadequate to function as counselors, we expected to find that seminaries require little formal counseling training.”⁸ The study was limited to thirty-one different Baptist Master’s in Divinity (M.Div) programs, including “each of the major Baptist seminaries.”

Among these universities, there was very limited coursework in counseling.⁹ The selection of Baptist M.Div programs was due to suspected Baptists’ negative perceptions of psychotherapy, but they expected that similar results would follow from other denominations.¹⁰ None of the M.Div programs in the study had more than two courses dedicated to counseling. This is significant because many chaplains are trained in similar settings/backgrounds. This supports the claim that chaplains may enter the chaplaincy with insufficient training in counseling. This shortage of counseling coursework has some historical basis. There is an understandable historical reason why psychotherapeutic training may be under- represented in M.Div

7. Clara E. Hill, *Helping Skills: Facilitating, Exploration, Insight and Action* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2014).

8. Michael W. Firmin and Mark Tedford, “An Assessment of Pastoral Counseling Courses in Seminaries Serving Evangelical Baptist Students,” *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 4 (2007): 420.

9. Firmin and Tedford, “An Assessment of Pastoral Counseling Courses in Seminaries Serving Evangelical Baptist Students,” 420.

10. Firmin and Tedford, “An Assessment of Pastoral Counseling Courses in Seminaries Serving Evangelical Baptist Students,” 420.

programs due to past disagreements between religion and psychology.

Unfortunately, some early leaders in the field of psychology espoused horribly biased and derogatory opinions regarding religion. For this reason, some religious leaders, including some chaplains, are hesitant to view psychological methods as appropriate in their work. The work of Sigmund Freud is particularly inflammatory in this way and summarizes this bias. Freud dedicated entire books to try to represent religions as a delusion and a form of neurosis.¹¹ It is easy to see why this would be offensive to religious leaders and create long-standing suspicion.

It is important to note that despite the substantive differences between the approach of chaplains, as pastoral counselors, and psychotherapists there is much in common between the fields. Psychological models often focus on trying to understand the mind. This is done both through psychological, biological, and neurological insights. We are also interested in the mind, but also the spirit. The counseling that chaplains do is not structured around a psychological diagnosis but spiritual wellness. Despite this, the differences between psychology and pastoral counseling are smaller than ever.

Many in the helping professions, including pastoral counselors and psychotherapists, have a desire to understand each other better.¹² It is hoped that with greater education these feuds of the past can be put to rest. One author noted that “The desire for value-centered counseling is particularly acute among evangelical Christians.”¹³ There

11. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).

12. This is evidenced by the success of P. Scott Richards book (listed in this footnote). The statements of the APC regarding the need for chaplains to be familiar with psychotherapeutic models. Footnotes 25 and 30 support this idea. See P. Scott Richards, *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2011).

13. Michael W. Firmin and Mark Tedford, “An Assessment of Pastoral Counseling Courses in Seminaries Serving Evangelical Baptist Students,” *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 4 (2007): 420-427.

is certainly common ground shared. The fields of psychology and pastoral counseling no longer need be at war.

Many in the psychological field have taken a more helpful stance on religion in general, some viewing it as a psychological good or at least very useful for study. William James, who is referred to as the Father of American Psychology, said, “To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution.”¹⁴ His book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was much more complementary to religion compared to Freud’s writings. Fortunately, this view is taking root in mainstream psychology.

Within the chaplaincy there are many people recognizing the value of psychotherapeutic insights. The Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) is a large professional organization that promotes high quality chaplaincy care in professional settings. Their perspective on the integration of the behavioral sciences is instructive. Applicants who wish to become a Board-Certified Chaplain (BCC) through the APC must, among other things, demonstrate proficiency in over thirty competencies among four categories.¹⁵ The second competency of the category called “Integration of Theory and Practice Competencies” (ITP2) states that chaplain applicants must “Incorporate a working knowledge of psychological and sociological disciplines and religious beliefs and practices in the provision of spiritual care.”¹⁶ Their certification guidance goes on to explain:

14. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (1902; repr., Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 2.

15. Association of Professional Chaplains, “BCCI Application Materials” Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc., accessed January 1, 2018, <http://bcciprofessionalchaplains.org/content.asp?admin=Y&pl=16&sl=16&contentid=30>.

16. Association of Professional Chaplains, “Application Materials/Competency Writing Guide” Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc., accessed January 1, 2018, http://bcciprofessionalchaplains.org/files/application_materials/competencies_writing_guide.doc.

Psychology and sociology inform what professional spiritual care providers understand and how they practice. What are the psychological and sociological theories and insights that influence and support what you do within the context of spiritual care? Demonstrate how you integrate these key theories in your spiritual care.¹⁷

Not all chaplains agree with this wording and the strength of the demands required by the APC; however, the underlying premise that psychological familiarity can be instructive is becoming more widely accepted in the chaplaincy. To bridge the deficiency of counseling coursework taken by chaplains, some universities, such as Brigham Young University (BYU) have developed a dedicated graduate program for chaplains.¹⁸ Unfortunately, these programs are still relatively rare. The BYU program has a significant counseling course load.¹⁹ With greater exposure to psychological methodologies, chaplains graduate with more training in pastoral counseling. Chaplains need a mix of theology as well as counseling training.

It is not just the chaplaincy that is demonstrating interest in bridging the gap between psychotherapy and religion. Further evidence of the desire for a firm connection between spirituality and psychology is the success of P. Scott Richards' and Allen Bergin's Book, *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychology*.²⁰ This book has been a best seller of the American Psychological Association publishing company.²¹ This shows how interested psychotherapists

17. Association of Professional Chaplains, "Application Materials/Competency Writing Guide."

18. Religious Education "Religious Studies – Military Chaplain Program Website" Brigham Young University, accessed January 20, 2018 <https://gradstudies.byu.edu/program/religious-studies-military-chaplaincy- ma>.

19. Religious Education "Religious Studies – Military Chaplain Program Website."

20. P. Scott Richards, *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2011).

21. P. Scott Richards, "Syllabus & class requirements; Introduction to course" (class lecture, CPSE656 Spiritual Values and Methods in Counseling and Psychotherapy, Brigham Young University, Provo, January 11, 2017).

are to understand the interplay between spirituality and their psychological counseling practice. Richards presents a “spiritual strategy [that] is a comprehensive orientation that includes a theistic conceptual framework, a body of religious and spiritual therapeutic interventions, and guidelines for implementing theistic perspectives and interventions.”²² Their model has merit and may be another valuable resource for chaplains.

It is important for us to understand that the choice of the “best” counseling model is tempting but it’s probably the wrong question to ask. This helps us not adopt a new form of counseling dogmatism. New counselors who desire to be effective may want the support of research findings to choose what model they should adopt. The interesting thing is that many different models have been shown to be effective, despite their interventions being diametrically opposed.²³ This has led some to suspect that there is something outside of the theory that leads to counselee improvement.

Common Factors

In his seminal work in 1936, Saul Rosenzweig suggested that there are common factors in effective counseling that are responsible for positive change.²⁴ Later research shows that only between one and eight percent of the differences in the outcomes from counseling may be attributed to the therapeutic model.²⁵ Further research supports the idea that there are common factors that are much more important

22. Richards, *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 13.

23. Mark A. Hubble, Barry L. Duncan, Scott D. Miller, and Bruce E. Wampold, “Introduction,” from *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering What Works in Therapy*, ed. Barry L. Duncan, Scott D. Miller, Bruce E. Wampold, and Mark A. Hubble (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 35.

24. Saul Rosenzweig, “Some Implicit Common Factors in Diverse Methods of Psychotherapy,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 6, no. 3 (July 1936): 413.

25. Mark A. Hubble, Barry L. Duncan, Scott D. Miller, and Bruce E. Wampold, “Introduction,” from *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering What Works in Therapy*, ed. Barry L. Duncan, Scott D. Miller, Bruce E.

compared to the effects of the selected counseling theory.²⁶ These common factors include the counselee, extra-therapeutic factors, the human connection between counselor and counselee, and the person of the therapist which include: human warmth, compassion, and openness of the counselors.²⁷ This additional research represents a maturation of Rosenzweig's earlier argument.²⁸

The reason why this information is important here is because there are so many different models which can be intimidating to someone interested in learning from the field of psychotherapy. This takes the pressure off. If chaplains select a model of counseling that is effective, *common factors* research may suggest that the chaplain choose an effective model then work to improve these common factors. Ultimately their choice of a model seems to pale in comparison when compared to other important factors in their counseling work.

We shouldn't misinterpret this information by claiming that psychotherapeutic models are not important. There is a lot of damage that inexperienced counselors can do. The point is that there is not a substantive difference in which counseling model is applied provided that it matches your own theology and style. It is with this idea in mind that ACT has been selected.

Although it cannot be justified as the only good choice, it will be shown that it is effective and that it can be very compatible with spiritual worldviews including Christian, Buddhist, and others.

Continuing with the *common factors* idea, many chaplains have been able to find counseling success without a psychotherapy counseling model. This is totally legitimate. The use of ACT supports the counselor in creating and enhancing the counseling relationship and engaging with what is deeply valuable to the counselee as will be

26. Hubble et al., *The Heart and Soul of Change*, 28.

27. Hubble et al., *The Heart and Soul of Change*, 35-38.

28. Rosenzweig, "Some Implicit Common Factors in Diverse Methods of Psychotherapy," 420.

shown in the explanation of the values core process.

One possible benefit to chaplains receiving training in counseling is that it may reduce the chaplain's anxiety and guide their focus so that they may be open to form a genuine relationship since this relationship is one of the common factors. From a pastoral counseling perspective, it could be argued that this human connection includes a spiritual element. This does not lessen the need for connection in psychotherapeutic counseling or pastoral counseling. Ironically, due to the hypothesis of Saul Rosenzweig as stated earlier, it is very possible that pastors in Freud's day unwittingly adhered to these common factors. This may have resulted in an increased effectiveness of the counseling provided by the pastors, compared to psychoanalysts who applied a cold and distanced approach to counseling that appears to be at odds with some of the common factors. This is ironic due to how Freud strongly denounced religion.

Another aspect that makes ACT a good choice for chaplains is that it does not demand rigorous adherence. In other words, even in the orthodoxy of the model they say that you should only use ACT when it's appropriate and helpful and not get too attached to any part of it. Since, it is designed to help people become more psychologically flexible it allows for you as the counselor to be flexible based on the needs you face.

Purpose of the Handbook

The purpose of this handbook to teach you the basics of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). First though I'll provide an introduction into some supporting information about ACT. After this intro to the context of chaplaincy and psychotherapy, it will include an introduction to the ACT model with a summary of the six core processes of ACT. Also, Bible verses will be included that

can be applied to each of these six core processes. Along with this, a case study and a separate metaphor will be included for each of the core processes on how each of them can apply to a pastoral counseling environment. Finally, the booklet will conclude with a bibliography containing additional resources for you to learn more about ACT, if you like this primer.

The goal of this handbook is not to mandate usage of this model or suggest that chaplains must adopt a psychological model to be considered legitimate. The goal is to provide additional counseling resources to chaplains. I don't suggest that ACT is the only option, but I'll show it to be a very helpful and appropriate model for chaplains that is adaptable and particularly well suited to the unique needs of our calling.

Supporting Evidence

The common factors argument should not be used as support for rejecting psychotherapeutic models. There are clearly things that should not be done in counseling relationships. Counseling models try to provide a list of possibilities. It should be noted that there is substantive evidence that ACT is an effective model. It has been thoughtfully adapted to assist those experiencing common problems for the people that chaplains counsel. These issues include anxiety,²⁹ depression,³⁰ parenting problems,³¹ and relationship problems.³² It has been shown to be effective with people with Post Traumatic Stress

29. G. Georg Eifert and John Forsyth, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Anxiety Disorders* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Inc., 2005).

30. Eifert and Forsyth, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Anxiety Disorders*.

31. Lisa Coyne and Amy Murrell, *The Joy of Parenting: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Guide to Effective Parenting in the Early Years* (Oakland, New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2009).

32. Russ Harris, *ACT with Love: Stop Struggling, Reconcile Differences, and Strengthen Your Relationship with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2009).

Disorder.³³ Significant improvement also occurred when ACT has been applied to veteran populations with depression.³⁴

There are many studies that support the use of ACT. “So why use the ACT approach? Because it works and clients like it. Research suggests that ACT is effective with a wide variety of conditions, including:”³⁵

- Eating disorders^{36, 37}
- Anxiety disorders^{38, 39, 40}

33. Robyn D. Walser and Darrah Westrup, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma-Related Problems: A Practitioner's Guide to Using Mindfulness and*

Acceptance Strategies (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2009), 7.

34. Bradley E. Karlin, Robyn D. Walser, Jerome Yesavage, Aimee Zhang, Mickey Trockel, and C. Barr Taylor, “Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Depression: Comparison Among Older and Younger Veterans,” *Aging and Mental Health* 17, no. 5 (June 2013): 555-563.

35. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 1.

36. Ruth Baer, Sarah Fischer, and Debra Huss. “Mindfulness and acceptance in the treatment of disordered eating,” *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 23, no. 4, (December 2005): 281–300, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1007/s10942-005-0015-9

37. Adrienne Juarascio, Evan Forman, James Herbert, “Acceptance and commitment therapy versus cognitive therapy for the treatment of comorbid eating pathology,” *Behavior Modification* 34, no 2, (March 2010), 175–190, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1177/0145445510363472.

38. Lily Brown, et al., “A randomized controlled trial of acceptance-based behavior therapy and cognitive therapy for test anxiety: A pilot study,” *Behavior Modification* 35, no 1, (December 2011): 31–53, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1177/0145445510390930.

39. Jon Vøllestad, Morten Birkeland Nielsen, and Geir Høstmark Nielsen, “Mindfulness- and acceptance-based interventions for anxiety disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis,” *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 51, no 3, (2012): 239–260, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8260.2011.02024.x.

40. Elizabeth Roemer, Susan Orsillo, and Kristalyn Salters-Pedneault, “Efficacy of an acceptance-based behavior therapy for generalized anxiety disorder: Evaluation in a randomized controlled trial,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76, no 6, (2008): 1083–1089, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1037/a0012720.

- Psychosis⁴¹
- Chronic pain^{42, 43}
- Tinnitus⁴⁴
- Diabetes management⁴⁵
- Skin picking⁴⁶
- Substance use problems⁴⁷
- Depression^{48, 49}

In addition:

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41. Patricia Bach, and Steven C Hayes, "The use of acceptance and commitment therapy to prevent the rehospitalization of psychotic patients: A randomized controlled trial," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 70, no 5, (2002) 1129– 1139, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1037//0022-006X.70.5.1129.
42. Kevin Vowles, & Lance McCracken, "Acceptance and values- based action in chronic pain: A study of treatment effectiveness and process," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76, no 3, (2008): 397– 407 accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.76.3.397.
43. Julie Loebach Wetherell, et al., "A randomized, controlled trial of acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive- behavioral therapy for chronic pain," *Pain* 152, no 9, (September 2011): 2098– 2107, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1016/j.pain.2011.05.016.
44. Vendela Zetterqvist Westin, et al., "Acceptance and commitment therapy versus tinnitus retraining therapy in the treatment of tinnitus distress: A randomized controlled trial," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 49, no 11, (November 2011): 737– 747, accessed March 8, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2011.08.00>.
45. Jennifer Gregg, Glenn Callaghan, Steven C. Hayes, and June L Glenn- Lawson, "Improving diabetes self- management through acceptance, mindfulness, and values: A randomized controlled trial," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 75, no 2, (2007): 336– 343, accessed March 8 2018. doi:10.1037/0022- 006X.75.2.336.
46. Michael Twohig, Steven C. Hayes, and Akihiko Masuda, "A preliminary investigation of acceptance and commitment therapy as a treatment for chronic skin picking," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 44, no 10, (October 2006): 1513– 1522, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2005.10.002.
47. Steven C. Hayes, et al., "A randomized controlled trial of twelve- step facilitation and acceptance and commitment therapy with polysubstance- abusing methadone-maintained opiate addicts," *Behavior Therapy* 35, no 4, (2004): 667– 688, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1016/S0005-7894(04) 80014- 5.
48. Robert Zettle, and Jeanetta Rains, "Group Cognitive and Contextual Therapies in Treatment of Depression," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 45, no 3, (1989): 436– 445.
49. Ernst Bohlmeijer, Martine Fledderus, Marcel Pieterse, T. A. J. J. Rokx, "Efficacy of an Early Intervention Based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Adults with Depressive Symptomatology: Evaluation in a Randomized Controlled Trial," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 49, no 1, (January 2011): 62– 67 accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2010.10.003.

Clients rate ACT with greater satisfaction⁵⁰ and may drop out less frequently than in some other types of therapies⁵¹ In addition, ACT offers a transdiagnostic approach to treatment, allowing it to answer the needs of clients with multiple symptoms, problems, or comorbidities, and making it easier to disseminate to professionals and trainees.⁵²

All of these issues are common for us to see as chaplains. Often overlooked though, is how the counseling affects us as caregivers. There is a study that suggest that counselors who receive ACT training are less likely to experience burnout.⁵³ The positive effects of the model were deeply personal to the founder Steven C. Hayes. It could be argued that he was the first to benefit from ACT.

As the primary author and founder of the ACT, he recounted that he was placed on the road to develop ACT by deep personal suffering. As he experienced crippling anxiety and panic attacks, he felt a deep hunger to discover a new methodology of dealing with stress.

Despite his early attempts to resolve his anxiety, these attacks steadily progressed in severity. At first, they happened only in contexts outside of his home. He experienced an epiphany when he had a panic attack that was so severe he thought it was a heart attack and that he was dying. This desperation gave him a context in dealing with his

50. Julie Loebach Wetherell, et al., "A randomized, controlled trial of acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive- behavioral therapy for chronic pain," *Pain* 152, no 9, (September 2011): 2098– 2107, accessed March 8, 2018. doi:10.1016/j.pain.2011.05.016

51. Julie Loebach Wetherell, et al., "A randomized, controlled trial of acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive- behavioral therapy for chronic pain," 2098– 2107.

52. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 1.

53. Gary Morse, Michelle P. Salyers, Angela L. Rollins, Maria Monroe-DeVita, and Corey Pfahler, "Burnout in Mental Health Services: A Review of the Problem and Its Remediation," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 39, no 5 (September 2012): 341-352.

suffering in a unique way that started him on a journey that eventually resulted in the development of the ACT model.⁵⁴

New Harbinger Publications provided the following statement from an interview with Dr. Steven C. Hayes:

I had a panic disorder. At the height of it, my life shrank until I could not travel, get on an elevator, drive, go to a movie, get on a plane, or even talk on the phone without a tremendous struggle. It was clear to me that I had a choice: I could either lose my life as I knew it or I could learn to step forward into my fear. I went back into my behavioral training, my science training, my eastern training, my human potential training. ACT in some ways is my personal journey—it's how I faced anxiety.⁵⁵

We may also face disruptive experience due to the intense material we frequently encounter. As such, as chaplains we can directly benefit from the effects of burnout relief offered by ACT.⁵⁶ This is of supreme importance for people, like chaplains, who are involved in emotionally intense helping relationships and who may be witness to human disfigurement. If chaplains apply these principles to their own personal struggles, they can receive comfort support and additional coping strategies to deal with the secondary trauma that they may experience.

Even though there are research results demonstrating its effectiveness, it is important to note that ACT has a strong research foundation which places a very high value on emotional flexibility. This is displayed by the following quote:

54. Steven Hayes. 2005. Interview by New Harbinger Publications. Accessed February 26, 2018 https://contextualscience.org/new_harbingers_interview_with_steve_hayes.

55. Steven Hayes. 2005. Interview by New Harbinger Publications. Accessed February 26, 2018 https://contextualscience.org/new_harbingers_interview_with_steve_hayes.

56. Gary Morse, et al., "Burnout in Mental Health Services: A Review of the Problem and Its Remediation," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 39, no 5 (September 2012): 341- 352.

...we don't insist that people must always be in the present moment, always defused, always accepting. Not only would that be ridiculous, it would also be self-defeating. We're all experientially avoidant to some degree. And we all fuse with our thoughts at times. And experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion in and of themselves are not inherently "bad" or "pathological"; we only target them when they get in the way of living a rich, full, and meaningful life.⁵⁷

Metaphors

Metaphors are very important in ACT. They attempt to bridge the gap between arbitrary language and rule-following and direct experience. A well-used metaphor can harness past direct experience. The included metaphors can be used to help chaplains learn how to use experience when working in the six core processes. To harness even more experiential knowledge the counselor is recommended to present the metaphor in experiential terms.

The way a metaphor is delivered is key in helping clients perceive the concrete consequences of their actions through the connection between the metaphor and their own situation. In particular, it's useful to emphasize an experiential presentation of the metaphor, which makes interaction with the elements of the story more concrete, emotionally evocative, and memorable. To do so, the therapist would use the present indicative tense rather than the conditional form, encouraging the client to observe the situation as if it were really happening in the here and now.⁵⁸

To help in this process, an example of ACT metaphors will be given to demonstrate how this concept can be operationalized.

57. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 25.

58. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 21.

Consideration was given about mixing civilian and military examples, but due to the ample availability of civilian examples, military examples were chosen. I created each of these metaphors but I tried to adhere to the same spirit as other available metaphors. For a more detailed listing of metaphors see *The Big Book of Metaphors*.⁵⁹

Demographics

Not all chaplains serve in the military, however, the military is a drastically different population when compared to other chaplain settings. A short review of the context of the military environment will be provided as support for ACT regarding this population. Although the demographics of the US military has some similarities to that of the general population, the military population is much younger than the civilian workforce.⁶⁰ A government study “show[ed] that overall, 69 percent of AC [active duty component] and 49 percent of RC [reserve component] servicemembers are between the ages of 20 and 34, compared to 21 percent of the U.S. population.”⁶¹ This indicates that, since the population of the military is much younger, the average age of those seeking counseling will likely be younger also.⁶²

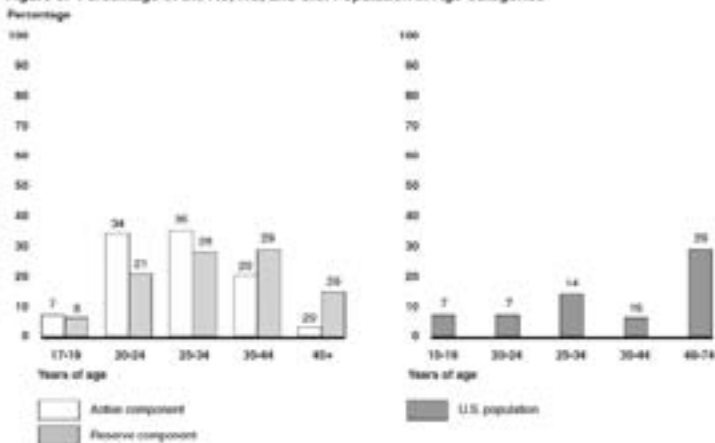
59. Stoddard and Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*.

60. US Government Accounting Office (GAO), Military Personnel: Reporting Additional Servicemember Demographics Could Enhance Congressional Oversight, GAO-05-952 (Washington DC: 2005), page 48, accessed March 1, 2018 <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-952/pdf/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-952.pdf>.

61. US Government Accounting Office (GAO), Military Personnel: Reporting Additional Servicemember Demographics Could Enhance Congressional Oversight, GAO-05-952 (Washington DC: 2005), i, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-952/pdf/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-952.pdf>.

62. US Government Accounting Office (GAO), Military Personnel: Reporting Additional Servicemember Demographics Could Enhance Congressional Oversight, GAO-05-952 (Washington DC: 2005), 49, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-952/pdf/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-952.pdf>.

Figure 3: Percentage of the AC, RC, and U.S. Population in Age Categories



Source: DOD analysis of DOD's annual data collected continuously and as of

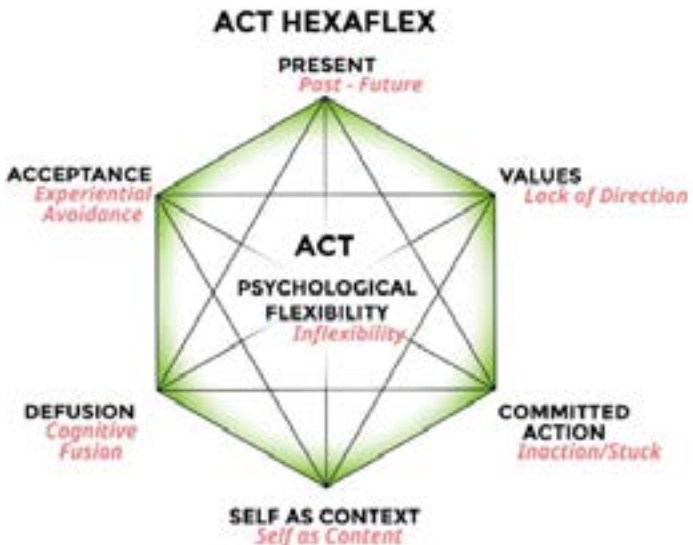
By learning and harnessing the characteristics of different generations, leaders can enhance life satisfaction of their subordinates while also gaining more valuable service from them. Helping the younger cohort of sailors identify and work toward their values, as actions and not just ideals, is a particularly effective way to engage with the younger generation. “Millennials can and do act on their values, and organizations can develop mechanisms to foster values-based decision- making in a way that supports organizational culture and furthers shared goals.”⁶³ Two of the six core processes of ACT explicitly involve defining and living according to personal values. By using ACT, chaplains can help service members to clearly define their values, work to improve the psychological flexibility, and improve workplace morale all at the same time. With this introduction, I will now explain the six core processes of ACT.

63. Jessica McManus Warnell “Giving Voice to Values: Engaging Millennials and Managing Multigenerational Cultures,” in *Managing Human Resources for the Millennial Generation*, ed. by William I. Sauser Jr. and Ronald R. Sims, (Charlotte NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 118.

Summary of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

The Six Core Processes of ACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can best be summarized by looking at its six core processes. These can be graphically represented as shown below. This is known as the hexaflex.⁶⁴ This graphic shows how each of the six core processes directly connects with the others. Similarly, in counseling situations, you can move from one to the another as needed while searching for the area that is most problematic for the person you're talking with. The central focus of all six core processes is psychological flexibility.⁶⁵



64. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 9.

65. Copyright Steven C. Hayes. Used by permission.

Some things we do help us reach toward our goals and other things distract from our goals. The things that prevent us from moving toward our values are referred to as unworkable in ACT. Workability is the measure of what needs to change.⁶⁶ Each of the six core processes is set to overcome aspects of human functioning that are not workable. These six core processes are defined as follows:

Values

As will be demonstrated, all the core processes of ACT are interconnected. In this way the choice of which value to place first is somewhat arbitrary. Values will be explained first. Values have a specific meaning in ACT.

Deep in your heart, what do you want your life to be about? What do you want to stand for? What you want to do with your brief time on this planet? What truly matters to you in the big picture? Values are desired qualities of ongoing action. In other words, they describe how we want to behave on an ongoing basis. Clarifying values is an essential step in creating a meaningful life. In ACT, we often refer to values as “chosen life directions.” We commonly compare values to a compass because they give us direction and guide our ongoing journey.⁶⁷

It is important to see that values are desired actions and not how the person wants to be treated. “Living a valued life is in essence, what ACT is all about. In ACT, values are chosen paths that the individual defines as important and meaningful.”⁶⁸ In this sense, values in ACT are not goals or morals but ways that the person desires to act. The central theme of ACT focuses on helping people truly determine what their values are and then living those with integrity. This is very

66. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 30.

67. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 11.

68. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 127.

consistent with many religious commandments to behave in certain ways. This does not require us to accept some version of moral relativity, but accept the freedom and agency that each person has.

Despite this, the chaplain does not need to sit quietly as someone states unworkable values. Many levels of deviant behavior are representations of people trying to be happy, feel loved or avoid pain, i.e., a mentality of sexual conquests or addictions. Other core processes will discuss how to deal with feelings of rejection, and so on. Values focus on action regardless of response. They should not be confused with pleasure or preferences but actions guided by a sense of what is right. Values are actions.

Just as ACT is careful to define values, it is also careful to define what values are not.⁶⁹ Values are not feelings since feelings cannot be directly and reliably controlled. Similarly, values should not be considered as making other people feel or act a certain way. To be more specific, if the person being counseled states that their value is being treated kindly or being seen as competent, this is dependent on others and is not a value in ACT.

One way to distinguish between the uncontrollable and values is to operationalize the desire the person feels. For example, if the person states that their value is to feel happy the chaplain could ask them what they would do if they were happy.⁷⁰ The way they answer can be very revealing. If someone is unable to grasp the concept of values, it may not be the appropriate place to start. If someone is overly focused on happiness for example, reviewing the core process of acceptance may be a better place to start.⁷¹

Just as values are not internal states they are not goals either. Goals

69. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 128.

70. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, 128.

71. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, 128.

are more about a destination. For example, an ACT consistent value could be ‘to treat children with compassion and love.’ This is not a goal because it cannot be arrived at.⁷² Values in ACT suggest the life direction the person chooses. The ACT chaplain helps the person define these values in a way that provides them with a direction to be pursued regardless of difficulty.

The focus of this core process is to get people to identify what they want their life to be about. As people can identify what purpose will drive their action, they are able to deal with the normal ups and downs of life. It is not enough for someone to say that they want their life to be focused on giving them pleasure. One of the main tenants of ACT is that by focusing only on pleasure, people are trapped into a cycle of suffering.

The joy of this concept for chaplains is that it is equally useful for believers or unbelievers alike. It may be surprising, but when people honestly reflect on their values in their deepest core, they often come to very positive values even if those values are not guided by religiosity. For Christian service members these values can be identifying the commands of God in scripture. For the sailors who do not have a faith system, they can still find positive goals such as treating friends well or performing stellar work that matters. Chaplains can harness the spiritual tradition of the counselees in helping to establish these values. This will be depicted in the context of the Bible in the scripture section below.

Values Scriptural Reference – Matthew 16:24-28⁷³

24. Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and

72. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 129.

73. All quotations and citations from the Bible will be from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

follow me.

25. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

26. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

The context of this scripture is in the days before the mount of Transfiguration where Jesus' glory, at least in part, is shown to Peter, James, and John.⁷⁴ This anecdote shows up in the gospel of John, it immediately follows the doctrine of the Eucharist which caused many to stop following Jesus. His pronouncement of his pending death is significant. "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."⁷⁵ It is interesting that Jesus presents his path as someone who must also suffer as he has.

It would be far too audacious to suggest that Jesus is talking about values as defined in ACT; however, the application of His words here demonstrate that He feels that people need to put Him above all worldly pleasures. Whatever gets in their way should be put aside in pursuit of the path that He represents. This is also reflected in the saying of Jesus in the Gospel of Mathew "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."⁷⁶

Jesus presents His path as the thing of highest importance. In this way, a Christian person visiting a chaplain could recognize this message as being consistent with their faith. They may be more likely to perceive the source of these values as God through scripture instead of their internal processes. This would not be problematic if the person truly values these teachings on an intimate level. If someone is doing

74. Matthew 17:1-2.

75. Matthew 16:21.

76. Matthew 10:37.

them out of social pressure, then these surface level values might not provide the needed guidance and could become unworkable. The chaplain could help them gain a witness of the beliefs they profess.

In this way, the Chaplain could help the person explore their faith. Through spiritual counseling they may begin to view the words of Jesus as a source for deeply rooted values. This could be an important aspect of ACT based pastoral counseling for a Christian. These values then would be defined in terms of specific action that the person would carry out, such as treating others with love and kindness or being more consistent in prayer or scripture reading.

If the person is not religious, this does not deter the process of defining values. If the person is not Christian the chaplain would likely not refer to these scriptures as appropriate. Living according to values is a consistent aspect of many world religions. For example, Muslims consider the source of their values as the Quran and the life of Mohamed.⁷⁷ The Buddhist eight-fold path is a type of value system consistent with ACT.⁷⁸ Judaism has the Ten Commandments which could form the basis of a system of values.⁷⁹

Atheists do not have a unified belief system and as such do not have a unified form of values. For this reason, a chaplain can help guide an atheist to find things in their life that they deeply value. This may include moral philosophy, poetry, or even teachings of respected religious figures. On a human level, many values are shared. Critics may suggest that using arbitrary values could lead to the chaplain condoning or supporting horrible things such as trying to help a

77. John Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 10-11.

78. Roy C. Amore, "Buddhist Tradition" in *A Concise Introduction to World Religions 2nd edition* ed. Willard G Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal (Ontario Canada, Oxford University Press, 2012) 385.

79. Alan F Segal, "Jewish Tradition" in *A Concise Introduction to World Religions 2nd edition* ed. Willard G Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal (Ontario Canada, Oxford University Press, 2012), 89.

Nazi pursue their values or helping pedophiles pursue their values of carrying out sexual violence.

Although such situations could exist, they often disappear under the light of the ACT model. For example, pedophiles may want support for their actions, but that usually occurs within the extreme experiential avoidance pattern needed to keep from feeling what it is like to be a molested child. When that issue has been addressed, the underlying value may not, in fact, be to molest children. Thus, even though we admit that some value conflicts may be irresolvable, we prefer to try to find common ground and see if a healthy therapeutic contract is possible.⁸⁰

Ultimately, the chaplain does not need to acknowledge any values that are directly in conflict with what they feel is right. On realistic level, to operate as a chaplain to people not of one's own faith, chaplains are already expected to use the faith or values of the counselee for their healing. This honors the need for chaplains to help the counselee work out their own values as derived from their experience or tradition.

Values Metaphor – The Mission

Here is a sample text of what could be said for this metaphor. This specific wording is not required but the concept is best illustrated in context:

Chaplain: Being in the Military you have certainly seen various missions and operations that you have been involved with. You have probably seen some good missions and some that you had problems with. What is it that makes a mission good?

80. Jason, Luoma, Steven C. Hayes, Robyn Walser, *Learning ACT: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Skills-Training Manual for Therapists* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007), 140.

Soldier: Some missions don't make any sense [responds with various things. You listen to the response and search for elements of meaning]

Chaplain: How would you do things differently?

Soldier: Well I would be really clear about what the mission was supposed to accomplish, like what things specifically needed to be done. If you don't know what you are doing, how can you possibly do it?

Chaplain: You are the general designing your own life mission right now. You can consult with experts and what you feel is right. What are things that you would want to be part of that mission?

Soldier: [pause] Well I've never really thought about that. You want me to imagine that my life is a military mission?

Chaplain: Well, you're living your life according to some mission, regardless if you chose it or not. What things do you want your life mission to be about? What are the types of actions that you want to be part of your rules of engagement?

Soldier: Well I want to be happy and not feel so bad.

Chaplain: I can tell you're really hurting. I think many people share your goals of not hurting. What I have found is the best way to find more lasting satisfaction is to live according to a set of values. That is what your life mission is about. For example, much of the world has a goal for world peace but that doesn't mean that we don't need specific missions and rules of engagement. What kinds of actions would you want to be part of your mission and

rules of engagement?

Soldier: Well, I guess I could be more patient with the other guys in my unit.

Chaplain: Great [pause waiting for more].

Soldier: Yeah, I think that is something that I highly value. I want them to treat me better, so maybe I should be more patient when they do something wrong.

Chaplain: Our rules of engagement may or may not change the actions of those around us. Not only that, but our mission is not against the people around us. What is your life mission about?

You could then continue a discussion of helping the soldier to define his values.

Values Case Study

A soldier comes to see you because he feels lonely and isolated. He reports that he often seeks out short term sexual conquests to try to avoid that feeling but is starting to notice that this is not producing lasting happiness. As you begin to explore this service member's values, he expresses a desire to get women to accept him. Instead of resting on his desire to control the feelings of others you help him explore what he wants his life to be about. He then says that he wants to be desirable. Again, this represents control of others. You help him explore what he thinks is desirable behavior. As he begins to identify desirable behavior, you help him develop the behaviors he values. For example, he may identify his values as doing high quality work, taking meaningful risks, and living in a way that is not dependent on the thinking of others. You can help him clearly identify what kind of

living he wants in life. This can be linked to the other core processes of ACT.

By providing an alternative to receiving the approval and acceptance of others in meaningless ways, this service member is freer. This will allow his thinking to focus more on what he wants to work towards.

Committed Action

Once someone can identify their core values, in terms of defined actions, a great deal of work remains ahead. Real life will provide an endless supply of ways for people to become distracted, demotivated, or forgetful of these values.

Further, as he continues moving forward with committed actions, the client may come in contact with any number of emotional experiences he typically evaluates as negative, such as worry, disappointment, or rejection. The commitment to action necessitates willingness to experience these and other private events, providing an opportunity to build psychological flexibility.⁸¹

This is another way in which the interconnected nature of the six core processes is demonstrated. Once values are defined, the other four core processes of ACT can be called on in support of valued action. This is a totally normal process and it is represented in literature thousands of years old.⁸² Humans struggle doing what they know they should.

Scripture clearly points out repeatedly, that this is a common occurrence. This does not make it less disturbing to someone who

81. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 152.

82. Romans 7:15-30.

has finally resolved to improve. Therefore, this is placed as its own step and not simply a part of the values core process. There are times when chaplains meet with someone who knows that they are doing wrong, and they want to change this. It may be motivated by religious conviction or conscience. In religious circles, this can lead to guilt and shame.

The ways presented in ACT to help people live in a way consistent with this core process is pragmatic and not religious. “In an approach similar to that of other forms of behavior therapy, in ACT committed action is fostered through goal setting, skills acquisition, exposure, behavioral activation, and the like.”⁸³ There is no one-size-fits-all approach in ACT and you must use creativity to help the person find the motivation and tools to succeed.

Committed action means taking effective action, guided by our values. It’s all well and good to know our values, but it’s only via ongoing values- congruent action that life becomes rich, full, and meaningful. In other words, we won’t have much of a journey if we simply stare at the compass; our journey only happens when we move our arms and legs in our chosen direction. Values-guided action gives rise to a wide range of thoughts and feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant, both pleasurable and painful. So committed action means “doing what it takes” to live by our values even if that brings up pain and discomfort. Any and all traditional behavioral interventions—such as goal setting, exposure, behavioral activation, and skills training—can be used in this part of the model. And any skill that enhances and enriches life—from negotiation to time management, from assertiveness to problem solving, from self-soothing to crisis coping—can be taught under this section of the hexaflex.⁸⁴

83. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 151.

84. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 11.

All the six core processes of ACT can be employed to overcome the psychological and spiritual inertia against positive change that is common to humankind. In fact, one of the main functions of ACT is to help people focus more on living a virtuous life instead of constantly pursuing “happiness”. Since emotions are elusive, the pursuit of valued action is what leads to a fulfilling life.

Not everything that gets in the way of pursuing values is internal. “It is important to differentiate between experiential and environmental barriers [to overcoming values].”⁸⁵ These external barriers would be things in the physical situation such as social structures, poor interpersonal skills, or a hostile work environment. Even with these external barriers, there may be internal processes that make dealing with these external barriers less workable.

Deidrich Bonhoeffer spoke of the idea of costly grace. This shares similarities with the idea of committed action as shown in the following quote:

The cost of following God’s will is worthy of the sacrifice because God is ultimately at the center of existence, giving true life. Therefore, although Christians are to relinquish their own will, experiencing suffering and hardship in the process of dying to self, the rewards of living a life devoted to God outweigh the costs.⁸⁶

To the ACT consistent chaplain this idea is compatible with the idea of committed action. According to Bonhoeffer, God should be followed regardless of the consequences. He lived this by resisting Nazi’s and eventually being hanged for participating in a failed

85. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 153.

86. Joshua J. Knabb, Keith G. Meador, “A Theological Lens for Integrating ACT with Conceptions of Health, Healing, and Human Flourishing,” in *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors* ed. Jason Nieuwsma, Robyn D. Walser, Steven C. Hayes (Oakland, New Harbinger Publications, 2016), 28.

assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. Once a person's values are defined they can be pursued regardless of the consequences.

Committed Action Scriptural Reference – John 14:15-18

15. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

16. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

17. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

The context of this scripture is placed after the last supper and before the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. These verses represent a framework for viewing the pursuit of values. If the Christian defines their values in terms of the teachings of Jesus, then this scripture directly builds on that foundation. “If you love me keep my commandments.”

In this scripture, Jesus demonstrates the true motivation for following His commandments. People who have tried to pursue their values in a religious context, or any other context, can identify that it is not always easy. This is acknowledged in ACT. It is not enough to know what your values are, but they must be followed to experience fulfilment. Despite this knowledge, we still fall short. There is a constant need to live values that we have identified.

In this scripture, Jesus ties together the ideas of obedience, love, and the advocate as a comforter. This is theologically important. The advocate is another name associated with the Holy Spirit. Because of this, the pursuit of values derived on the teachings of Jesus brings the presence of the Holy Spirit into the life of the counselee. If this

interpretation is correct then it justifies overcoming cognitive fusion, and experiential avoidance to pursue these values.

Committed Action Metaphor

You're flying high up in the air preparing for your first parachute jump. You have done lots of training. You know that soon you will be falling, not sure if the chute will open. The door opens and cold air rushes around the aircraft. You feel a chill. You are waiting in line as all the soldiers in front of you jump out of the door without hesitation. You feel butterflies in your stomach and you think you might throw-up. You start to wonder if your chute is packed right. You remember talking to your uncle who was a paratrooper in Vietnam and who badly damaged his back during a harsh landing. You start to wonder if you are going to get hurt also. You stop at the door. What is keeping you at the door? You know what your mission is but there are distractions preventing you from fulfilling the mission. What can you do to overcome your fear?

Committed Action Case Study

A service member comes to you because he finds himself unsatisfied with life. He expresses that he grew up Christian but hasn't gone to church in many years but that he is open to it. He recently transferred to this duty station. After you ask him about his life, you discover that he often spends the weekends playing video games alone. When you talk to him about this he doesn't really enjoy it but keeps doing it. He tells you that he wants to have friends and a girlfriend but when the weekend rolls around he gives up on those plans and ends up staying home isolated. As you talk to him, you help him identify values. After some clarity, he states that according to his values, he loves playing music but hasn't played in a long time.

The step of guided action moves from identifying these values to helping discover what is preventing from him from living that value. You decide to help him move more toward this desire to create music. He talks about how he used to play worship music at his home church when he was a teenager. You talk to him about a church that you know, that is looking to expand their worship band. You help him make plans to create music with a worship group at a local church and then work with him about what may prevent him from taking this valued action. You follow up with him the next week to see if he was able to make contact with the worship leader.

Acceptance

Acceptance is a somewhat paradoxical concept. In ACT, attempts to control negative experiences seen as mostly problematic and a cause of increased suffering. The inverse of acceptance is called emotional avoidance and is referred to as ‘the control agenda.’⁸⁷ This is one of the things that can get in the way of people living fulfilling lives guided by their values.

The concepts of acceptance and willingness stand in contrast to experiential avoidance and psychological inflexibility. Acceptance involves the action of allowing the presence of all experiences-internal and external, positive and negative-as they are in the moment without attempting to change the form or frequency of these experiences. Thus, the behavior of acceptance is an alternative to experiential avoidance.⁸⁸

An unfortunate aspect of life is that not all experience is pleasant. When people have an expectation of happiness they can be disappointed when things do not go their way. “The idea that accepting problematic thoughts and emotions somehow gives them

87. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 29.

88. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 29.

less control over us is paradoxical.”⁸⁹ The goal then in ACT is not to force a particular internal experience but to help the person realize that pleasant and unpleasant experiences will occur as they pursue their values. “So much suffering is paradoxically caused by efforts to avoid pain.”⁹⁰

An example of avoidance could be someone drinking to avoid their current discomfort that ultimately produces more suffering in their lives. Much of the time the fear of the negative experience is more pronounced than the actual problem itself and it can be freeing when we stop running from it. The process of acceptance is focused on realizing that if we focus the purpose of our lives on values, then the times when we experience a slump will not necessarily derail our enjoyment of life. If satisfaction is tied to valued action then we can overcome unpleasant experience more readily.

In Relational Frame Theory (RFT) which is the underlying theory of ACT, avoidance of experience can be conceptualized as maladaptive and unworkable rule-following behavior.⁹¹ RFT will be discussed at the end of this booklet. Seen in the lens of contextual behaviorism, this is avoidance that does not result in a relief of internal suffering. Instead it stems from arbitrary thoughts that have value associated to them that could be changed to make life more workable. In this way, avoidance strategies have no meaning other than the following of a chain of arbitrarily learned rules. By learning to allow the experience to remain without the experience of compulsive responses this teaches the brain that other options are possible.

Acceptance means opening up and making room for painful feelings, sensations, urges, and emotions. We drop the struggle with

89. Jason Luoma, Steven C. Hayes, Robyn Walser, *Learning ACT: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Skills-Training Manual for Therapists* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007), 12.

90. Luoma, Hayes, and Walser, *Learning ACT*, 13.

91. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 129.

them, give them some breathing space, and allow them to be as they are. Instead of fighting them, resisting them, running from them, or getting overwhelmed by them, we open up to them and let them be. (Note: This doesn't mean liking them or wanting them. It simply means making room for them!)⁹²

This is far from masochism or wallowing in sadness. It is a form of emotional exposure therapy to the undesired internal experience.⁹³ Instead of looking for yet another way to control the emotion, acceptance can be presented as a willingness to experience an emotion while it is present with the knowledge that all internal experiences are temporary.

The danger is that if the person perceives acceptance as a new control strategy then it will likely be unsuccessful to serve as true exposure. As stated previously, avoidance is a type of rule-following behavior. This can be made more ingrained when rigid beliefs and thoughts accompany it.

Acceptance Scriptural Reference - Philippians 4:11-13

11. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

12. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

13. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

The epistle of Paul to the Philippians have been described as the

92. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 9.

93. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 46.

most positive of the epistles.⁹⁴ Here Paul is addressing a group of Christians who are being heavily persecuted.⁹⁵ Philippi is a city that is heavily populated by retired Roman soldiers who are patriotic. They see Christianity as anti-Roman and therefore the Christians are being heavily persecuted. Paul had a deep familiarity with suffering in this world. He suffered so many different persecutions and natural disasters. His suffering was external⁹⁶ and internal.⁹⁷ For this reason his pronouncement of contentment is so meaningful. Paul did not suggest that it is by the removal of trials that contentment comes. It is by learning the secret of extremes, both fullness and emptiness. Being guided by a sense that he is doing what God wants, Paul receives strength from God to endure the bad times.

This is very consistent with the concept of acceptance in ACT. It is not needed that all external and internal undesirable experience be avoided to find peace nor is it required to enjoy unpleasant experience. Regardless of how a person lives their values, life will be difficult. The Lord causes rain and sun to fall on both the righteous and the wicked.⁹⁸ As referenced above, those who follow Christ must pick up their cross. This shows that the Christian life is not meant to be free of struggle. What it does show is that following Jesus is the way to obtain fulfillment and contentment in this life, and eternal peace.

Christian acceptance can take the form of surrender to God. “Surrender your heart to God, turn to him in prayer, and give up your sins - even those you do in secret. Then you won’t be ashamed; you will be confident and fearless.”⁹⁹ In this paradigm, when a person surrenders to God they give up on the idea that they can control

94. Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010), 279.

95. Arnold Bittlinger, *Letter of Joy*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1975), 21.

96. 2 Corinthians 11:25.

97. 2 Corinthians 12:7.

98. Matthew 5:45.

99. Job 11:13-15.

the current moment. In ACT, acceptance takes a somewhat similar form. The person acknowledges that their current experience is not fully under their control, especially their internal experience. This is supported by RFT that suggests that internal evaluations of what is difficult are inherently formed based on the context and inherently meaningful in themselves. The truth of God does not require us to believe that certain unpleasant feelings are infallible.

As stated above, Paul found peace in recognizing the inevitability of this struggle. By doing so, it had less control over him. In this way, adversity is presented as a teacher and as an indirect benefit. This sentiment is echoed in James chapter one. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”¹⁰⁰ Having purpose in the form of values and even personal growth makes suffering more understandable and, in a way, palatable. We need to be in a place where we are willing to reexamine our thoughts.

Acceptance Metaphor

You were selected for a high-profile training, that if you complete successfully will greatly benefit your career prospects. You will be evaluated on the success you have in accomplishing various tasks. The first task given to you is to supervise the construction of a small project. You are assigned two workers who are civilians and you will be evaluated on being able to get them to complete the building assignment. As you begin to give directions, the workers tell you that they need tools to begin. They say they are going to go get the tools. As you wait for their return an undue amount of time begins to pass. You go and look for them and find that they are taking a break. You direct them to get the tools and to return to work which they do. Immediately

100. James 1:2-4.

after returning they begin to disagree with your directions about how to get started. Since you are already frustrated, you tell them in no uncertain terms how they are to progress. After about ten minutes of work the two civilians begin arguing between themselves as to who is going to do which job. They start fighting over who will use the drill. They come to you and ask you to get the other person to give up the drill. Your frustration is almost overflowing as you resolve the issue and direct them how to continue. After all of this, their physical coordination is extremely poor, and they struggle to balance several pieces of wood and you step in to help. Before the project is finished they start asking about pay which you have nothing to do with. They say that unless you resolve this issue they won't proceed. At this point you completely lose it and tell them they have not done any work deserving of any pay and that they need to finish the simple directions you have given them.

After this, one of your instructors approaches you and informs you that this was not actually a building supervision test but a test to see how you overcome and deal with frustration. He tells you that you scored mediocre on the frustration grading scale. It seems success in this assignment is largely contingent on the ability to recognize that, despite the negative things that happen, that you need to learn not to let your own personal expectations cloud your decision making.

What kinds of tests like this do you feel are going on in your life right now?

Acceptance Case Study

A service member is referred to you because of his drinking. He goes out drinking at bars and has recently been convicted of a DUI. He is a competent sailor and does his work on time and with solid quality. After some conversation, he claims that the reason why he drinks is

because of painful memories of his family life growing up. He doesn't enjoy drinking, but he wants to numb out the pain of the past. You decide that helping him overcome avoidance may open up new options to him. You allow him to vent some of his pain which he does. When the timing is right, you start to talk to him about what expectations he has about pain. You are sensitive to allow him the appropriate time to transition to change. You engage in empathetic listening. He tells you about his past. Just telling you about it has caused him to look more relaxed and open. You ask him about the negative aspects of his drinking. He begins to open up to the idea of stopping but is worried about the pain. You agree to meet with him to help talk through his progress but in the time between then you help him realize that he can experience pain while also working through it, like he has during this session.

As you talk to him, he begins to let go of his need to control his pain. Your present alternatives to him in the form of committed action and values instead of pursuing certain feelings. He starts to realize that he can feel pain at the same time he pursues improvement. As he has learned to not force control over this experience he feels freer to do things that are crucially important to him. You work to help him move toward what he values instead of moving away from what he fears. When he meets with you again, he has had mixed results but reports that learning acceptance has caused him to not fear the pain and that it has been less powerful over him. You discuss the possibility of seeing a counselor for more in- depth work on his past, which he considers.

Defusion

Defusion is spelled and defined uniquely in ACT and represents a departure from cognitive fusion. Cognitive fusion is when someone sees their own perceptions as absolute. "Fusion is most likely to arise across six cognitive domains: rules, reasons, judgments, past, future,

and self.”¹⁰¹ Each one of these domains demonstrates elements of subjectivity; however, when someone is experiencing fusion they do not recognize it. “Cognitive fusion pulls us away from living in alignment with our values.”¹⁰²

Defusion means learning to “step back” and separate or detach from our thoughts, images, and memories. (The full term is “cognitive defusion,” but usually we just call it “defusion.”) Instead of getting caught up in our thoughts or being pushed around by them, we let them come and go as if they were just cars driving past outside our house. We step back and watch our thinking instead of getting tangled up in it. We see our thoughts for what they are—nothing more or less than words or pictures. We hold them lightly instead of clutching them tightly.¹⁰³

Each person perceives their thoughts with different levels of rigidity. When we place too much faith in our own conclusions they set up a trap for us. As stated previously, RFT suggests that human thoughts are based on context. As such human knowledge is limited and flawed. This is part of the fall of humankind. It is important to point out that this does not demand that the person reject objective truth in the universe, but that human logic is incapable of understanding it completely. For Christian chaplains this idea should not be foreign, since it is represented in the Bible such as when Isaiah says the ways and thoughts of God are higher than that of humans.¹⁰⁴

The complexity of life leaves a lot of room for the perceptions of humans to be incomplete or distorted. More specifically these incomplete perceptions are often seen in ACT as unworkable. For

101. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 63.

102. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 63.

103. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 9.

104. Isaiah 55:8-9

example, if someone makes absolute declarative statements about their opinions this would represent cognitive fusion. This is true in the case of social anxiety where someone thinks that everyone will reject them. These thoughts can seem like absolute truth in the mind of the person. If someone develops an absolutist mindset then they may perceive their situation as unchangeable. This results in hopelessness and frustration that may not be helpful.

One way that you can help the person is to help them realize the distance between absolute truth and their own thoughts. For example, in the above case of social anxiety you could help the person by having them use distancing language. Imagine the person has, as one of their values, to act in an open way in social settings. If the person says, “everyone will reject me,” this may make it more challenging to approach others in social settings. If this person sees this thought as absolute, then they may reject taking actions that would be needed to improve their situation. This is what is meant by cognitive fusion. By employing defusion, the person can begin to open-up and pursue their values. Here is another example how the six core processes of ACT work together. Acceptance can be used in tandem with defusion.

In the above scenario you could get the person to rephrase their worry as a thought that they notice that is going on in their brain and not an absolute predictive future. Observation is one level of abstraction. Noticing the observation is a second level of abstraction. The restatement would be “I notice that I am having the thought that everyone will reject me.”¹⁰⁵ As the person begins to observe their emotions they realize they are separate from them. As they realize they are inner experiences they realize they are malleable. This puts the person in a better position to adjust their thoughts to become more workable.

There is an element of humility required to engage in defusion.

105. Russ Harris, *The Happiness Trap* (Boston, MA: Trumpeter Publications, 2011), 40.

When the person begins to open themselves up to the possibility that their personal evaluations may not be definitive and universal truth, they are better able to see what is helpful. This may arise in someone's theological worldview. You can help them realize that their understanding of God is not the same thing as God. For example, suppose someone says: "God hates me." This is not a fact that they can know with certainty. Helping them defuse this thought as a feeling can be very freeing although it may encounter some resistance. When the person begins to see their thought that God hates them as a judgement in their own mind, acceptance can be used to help them experience the pain of that feeling while realizing that it does not need to prevent them from behaving consistent with their values.

Defusion Scriptural Reference – 1 Corinthians 2:9-14

9. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"—

10. these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

11. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

The context on the epistle of 1st Corinthians focuses on exhortations to the people of Corinth based on wrongdoing.¹⁰⁶ The selected scripture is interesting because it points out our futility in understanding God's ways without His help.

This is one of the most valuable of Paul's letters, not only for the light it throws upon the character and mind of the apostle (e.g., 2:16; ch4) and for its vigorous presentation of the gospel (1.18-31, "Christ crucified"; 15.1-11, the "good news" of Christ's death and

¹⁰⁶. 1 Corinthians 6.

resurrection), but also for the vivid pictures it brings us of the actual life and problems of a particular local church at the middle of the first century.¹⁰⁷

Paul quotes from the Book of Isaiah chapter sixty-four verse four: “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.”¹⁰⁸ Various other places in first Corinthians also outline the limits of human wisdom.¹⁰⁹ This discussion resembles an argument made by the postliberal theologian George Lindbeck paraphrased in this quote, “Human language seems incapable of representing God fully.”¹¹⁰ This is more than an abstract theological concept. It directly ties to the notion of defusion in ACT. If people hold too rigidly to their own opinions and hold them as faultless, they will operate more inflexibly, and this could result in unworkable thinking. This includes us as chaplains.

The idea of defusion in ACT is meant to demonstrate that human judgements and opinions are not faultless. This scripture lines up with that concept well. Some Christians may be hesitant to accept the idea that their ideas, specifically as they understand the Bible, are not flawless. The thing that is in question is human understanding and not theological realities. Ultimately, the success of human understanding does not dictate the objective truth of the universe and the things of God. Accepting human failings does not require a person to accept that there is no objective truth or that God’s revelation is not accurate. It can be helpful for the people you counsel to let go of their preconceived notions and open up to the possibility of change.

107. John Knox, and John Reumann, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible Completely Revised and Enlarged* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), 229NT.

108. Isaiah 64:4.

109. 1 Corinthians 1:17, 1 Corinthians 3:18 1 Corinthians 1:19, 1 Corinthians 1:20, 1 Corinthians 1:22, 1 Corinthians 3:19.

110. Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2017), 138.

Defusion Metaphor

A new Navy Submarine Officer (Ensign O1) recently qualified as Engineering Duty Officer (EDO). He is standing his first watch in maneuvering and is placed in charge of the reactor operator (RO), electrical operator, and throttleman. The watch begins calmly enough. Things are going smooth. After answering several bells (changes in power have been ordered from the bridge), things begin to become stressful. The new EDO begins to be flustered. The new Ensign incorrectly orders the RO (a senior E6 with years of experience) to withdraw control rods. The reactor operator says, "With all due respect sir, I recommend you don't order me to do that." The young Ensign is under a high amount of strain and stress and rejects the suggestion. The E6 Reactor Operator flatly refuses to withdraw the control rods by stating that he will not willingly participate in violating reactor integrity. The Ensign orders him to be relieved. Within several minutes another RO replaces him for the duration of the watch.

After the watch the Engineering Officer (O3) Calls the Ensign into his office to review why the RO was relieved. After getting the details the Engineering Officer severely disciplines the Ensign for not listening to the highly qualified Reactor Operator. The Ensign is disqualified as EDO and required to report to the Captain after completing several other re-qualifications.

Because the Ensign was confident that his perspective was the only valid one he made a serious error. By realizing that his perspective is not the only legitimate one, he missed out on harnessing the experience of others who could help him operate better.

You can then continue the conversation by making specific application of these ideas. This is a fairly direct example, but it can be helpful for people who may benefit from very firm examples.

Defusion Case Study

During your talks with a sailor, you notice that he makes absolutist statements about the military. “The Navy is always trying to run you down.” This view is making it hard for him to adapt to policies that the new Commanding Officer is implementing. In talking to him, you notice that he has a habit of seeing things in only one way and not being able to see other perspectives. This has recently caused conflict with his chain of command who state that he is not adapting to new leadership well. He complains that, “people are always getting on my case and won’t admit when they are wrong.”

You know that he has multiple Navy Achievement metals and was put for sailor of the quarter (SOQ) last year. To help him lessen his grasp on his rigid opinions you guide the conversation to past successes. You ask him about the SOQ. He starts to talk about all the hard work he put in for that and how his LPO put in for it because his work helped the ship deploy on time. You gently ask him if there are ever times when the Navy does not run him down. His position softens. You then spend several moments talking with him about alternatives to his rigid mindset. One method you suggest is that each time he finds himself saying that something is always is a certain way, that he instead say. I notice I’m thinking this frequently... or other more flexible language. Through the rest of the conversation, you help him catch himself using absolutist thoughts and you help him rephrase them. At first, this irritates him but after a while he understands your point. After some discussion, he begins to agree to attempt to loosen his grip on his unhelpful opinions. You talk to him about values, and how acceptance can help him cope with the anger of feeling that the command is in the wrong.

Living in the Present Moment

Living in the present moment has been used out of context so much that many people do not know what it means. Living in the present moment includes not worrying about the past or future and having a heightened yet loose focus on the current moment. In some ways, it is like mindfulness; however, it is not done- expressly for enlightenment. There is no spiritually mandated component to this idea, but it can be coupled with spiritual ideas. For this reason, it is recommended that chaplains discuss previous familiarity with mindfulness or perhaps use other language to discuss the phenomenon to avoid resistance since ACT does not endorse any single spiritual worldview.¹¹¹ You can discuss this with servicemembers in their context.

Some Christians have become suspicious of the idea of mindfulness and living in the present due to forms of new age spirituality that use this term. Evidence of the scientific benefits of mindfulness can be helpful and make it less mysterious. For example, mindfulness can lead people to become more tolerant to disturbing thoughts, emotions and sensations.¹¹² For some people it may also be useful to suggest that it is not magical but rooted in science. It can even be helpful to equate living in the present moment to exercise or emotional hygiene.

This core process helps people experience distance from their thoughts and emotions, and to accept difficult experience as well. This distinction concerning control of experience is important to point out. Similarly, although there are many spiritual origins of mindfulness, that is not the justification used for including it in ACT. The nature of RFT shows that learning through direct experience is more real than

111. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 87.

112. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, 87.

rule-following behavior associated with abstract learning. In this way, mindfulness helps the person make contact with their experience.¹¹³ It is not through explanation or reason but direct experience with the present moment as supported by RFT.

Within ACT, the inclusion of mindfulness creates a different orientation than that in many other psychological approaches. Rather than being goal- directed and attempting to control a conscious experience, such as evaluating a thought or interpreting a problem, ACT utilizes mindfulness to help people monitor their conscious experience through present-moment awareness, and to help them do so from an open and accepting stance, which is engendered through acceptance, defusion, and self-as-context techniques.

Other potential misunderstandings are possible. For example, mindfulness is not mere relaxation.¹¹⁴ Similarly, when someone experiences relaxation this is considered a side effect of mindfulness. If people begin to see relaxation as the goal, then this becomes a new control strategy. For example, if someone experiences stress they would see that as a failure. This would be in opposition to acceptance. If someone tries to avoid painful experience by relaxing, then this becomes a new form of avoidance.¹¹⁵

Contacting the present moment means being psychologically present: consciously connecting with and engaging in whatever is happening in this moment. Humans find it very hard to stay present. Like other humans, we know how easy it is to get caught up in our thoughts and lose touch with the world around us. We may spend a lot of time absorbed in thoughts about the past or the future. Or instead of being fully conscious of our experience, we may operate on automatic pilot, merely “going through the motions.” Contacting the

113. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, 87.

114. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 88.

115. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT*, 88.

present moment means flexibly bringing our awareness to either the physical world around us or the psychological world within us, or to both simultaneously. It also means consciously paying attention to our here-and-now experience instead of drifting off into our thoughts or operating on “automatic pilot.”¹¹⁶

One concrete way to do this is by enhancing the current experience through practice. The outline for how to do this is well represented by Dr. Rick Hanson in his book *Hardwiring Happiness*.¹¹⁷

The acronym HEAL is used to help build positive mental habits which is summarized below:

H – Have a positive experience. This can be anything big or small. It could be as simple as getting to sleep, resting a few moments. It is important that it is genuine.

E – Enrich the experience. Spend 15-30 seconds reflecting on this genuinely positive moment.

A – Absorb this moment. Allow this to become a part of how you experience the world. You can visualize the happiness from this moment being literally absorbed into your body.

L – Link the experience to past events. This fourth step is optional and can be challenging. You can use a more powerful positive experience to overwhelm weaker negative past experiences. Extremely strong negative experiences, such as trauma, may overwhelm positive experience so this step should be used with care.

116. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 9.

117. Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (New York: Harmony Publishing, 2013).

For more information on this process, the book *Hardwiring Happiness* covers this in depth.

Live in Present Moment Scriptural Reference – Matthew 6:25-30

25. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
26. Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?
27. And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,
29. yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.
30. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

This scripture is part of the sermon on the mount which comprises Matthew chapters 5-7.¹¹⁸ It is difficult to determine the exact context of this scripture since some scholars believe that it was not actually a single sermon, but a series of sayings that were gathered together.¹¹⁹ Arthur Bellinzoni uses this exact section of scripture in his book about New Testament scriptural analysis to point to similarities and differences between the Gospel of Matthew and Luke’s.¹²⁰ An indepth comparison of these scriptures is beyond what I am trying to convey. Suffice it to say, that the context is difficult to determine.

118. Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2017), 110.

119. Arthur Bellinzoni, *The New Testament: An Introduction to Biblical Scholarship* (Eugene, OR, Wipf & Stock, 2016), 84.

120. Arthur Bellinzoni, *The New Testament: An Introduction to Biblical Scholarship*, 84.

Added to the disputed context, the nuances of this scripture can be confusing. This seems to be in direct contradiction to Galatians “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.”¹²¹ In some ways all of scripture seems to place demands on the reader, yet here Jesus is comparing his listeners as birds who do not reap or sow. It seems these comparisons are to prepare the readers for reliance on God above all else. There is an element of acceptance in this scripture. It is not that His followers must not plan, or even suffer consequences from their actions, but that there is trust. The focus is on living in the current moment without placing undue focus on the future worries or the labors of the past.

A similar idea is shown in Luke when a man asked Jesus if he could bury his father before following Jesus. Jesus’ response was “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”¹²² The similar sowing metaphor is used. This scripture does not deny the importance of familial love, or the emotional importance of grief. In another scripture, Jesus says “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;”¹²³ This also is not a justification to mistreat family because of the prominence of God. This speaks more to the priority of God, who in-turn wants us to treat each other with love and compassion. This type of mindset prioritizes the experience with God in the current moment and our connection to each other.

As we consider this experience with God we recognize that all choice is made in the current moment and that no choice can be made in the future or in the past. All decisions are made from this moment. This holds true in ACT as well. The current moment is the only position from which the person can improve. This is the only time

121. Galatians 6:7.

122. Luke 9:60.

123. Matthew 10:37.

when they can follow their values.

The idea of presence has to do with dealing with this moment as the only contactable human experience. When we die and encounter the afterlife, it will be the present moment. It is only in this moment that we can have a relationship with anything. The idea of presence has a theological appeal as well. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber suggested a personal relationship with God is the form of true revelation. “If revelation is understood as information about God, God is reduced to an “it”; if God is conceived as a “thou,” revelation must be thought of in terms of a relationship with an individual believer, or presence within that believer.¹²⁴ This relationship between the person and God leads to a need to understand the self.

Live in the Present Moment Metaphor

You start by confirming with the soldier if she knows what a sandtable is. If she doesn't know what it is, you can talk to her about how it's a diagram of a specific engagement. You can point out examples in the movies where generals stand around a table with model tanks and battalions and push them around to demonstrate where different military assets are.

Chaplain: Have you ever considered your place in the world?

Soldier: I guess so.

Chaplain: Are you willing to do an exercise with me? It will help you center yourself a little.

Soldier: Yeah.

124. Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2017), 138.

Chaplain: Sit back in your chair with your feet flat on the ground. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that and take some deep breaths. [pause as the soldier accommodates herself] Right now you are in this room with me. Other people are outside. If you listen hard enough you can hear various sounds. Imagine that you have a camera looking down on us that you can see through the ceiling. As you zoom out on this camera you can see yourself as though you are on a sandtable. Imagine that there is a marker for you and me and as you zoom out there are markers for other people. [pause allowing for this visualization] as you zoom out, you begin to see yourself as part of the base here. You imagine the connection between yourself and others on the sandtable. In this moment you imagine the markers for other people moving around the sandtable right now.

You can continue helping her notice things around her. If there are distracting sounds you can use those to draw attention to what's outside. The point of this is to help her become mindful of the interaction she has with others. Other mindfulness type experiences are geared toward the inner experience and may be more appropriate in some cases. Both external and internal mindful experiences can be helpful.

Live in the Present Moment Case Study

You are working with a soldier in an aid station in the field. He reports having intense visual flashbacks of a recent combat situation. During these flashbacks, he loses contact with reality. You are far from any mental health services. You listen empathetically, and he expresses fear of these flashbacks. He is losing his contact with the present moment. As you are talking with him, you draw his attention to physical objects around him, including running his hands through cold water and other physical objects. You hand him a challenge coin

and have him examine it and flip it around in his hand and notice every detail about it. You ask him to describe this coin in as much detail as possible and tell you about what he notices about it and how it feels on his fingers. You teach him some deep breathing exercises. You help him become observant of what is happening in his body. He expresses tension and fear. As he continues to observe this tension he becomes aware of how tight he is. You see him consciously relax his muscles although the tension in his face has not totally left. As time passes, he seems calmer.

As you continue to talk with him you can help to normalize the fear he is feeling. You talk to him briefly, about how our brains are hard wired to preserve themselves but that they can get overloaded and that his brain has been overloaded with stress. You ask him about any spiritual practices that have helped him find peace. He explains some things that have been helpful for him in the past during stressful times. After a lengthy conversation, he seems much more connected to his current reality. You help him set expectations that his body may continue to process this stress and you set additional times when you can check in with him and discuss getting checked out to get additional support from docs and mental health. You help normalize seeking additional help and he warms to the idea. You can then decide if using the idea of acceptance can be helpful in this discussion.

Self as Context

We are not born with the ability to see the perspective of others, and gaining this ability represents a developmental milestone.¹²⁵ Identity is a concept that is developed as well. This is done based on observations. Despite what other people try to teach us the only thing that changes us is what we learn. Sometimes the ways people identify themselves can be workable and other times identity becomes

125. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 109.

problematic. On some level, this core process attempts to overcome problematic cognitive fusion about ourselves. For example, assume someone views themselves as an aggressive military leader, which may include being demanding and impatient regarding how others comply to their orders. If they also have a value of treating their children patiently despite their disobedience, an overly rigid adherence to these identities may interfere with pursuit of this value. This core process of ACT relies on the idea that people's identity is flexible.

In ACT, an underlying concept is that the identity of a person can never be contacted as a direct experience. I'll explain this in more detail in the section on Relational Frame Theory (RFT) which is the underlying theory of ACT. Actions and words can be directly contacted but any definition of self that follows is not complete in an absolute sense. All humans experience ourselves vicariously only through self-generated stories about ourselves and the feedback from others. People create and fabricate their self-image based on what they perceive about themselves, but this is filtered through their perspective. This doesn't mean who we really are is subjective, only that it is hard for us to understand that on our own.

In everyday language, we talk about the "mind" without recognizing that there are two distinct elements to it: the thinking self and the observing self. We're all very familiar with the thinking self: that part of us which is always thinking—generating thoughts, beliefs, memories, judgments, fantasies, plans, and so on. But most people are unfamiliar with the observing self: the aspect of us that is aware of whatever we're thinking, feeling, sensing, or doing in any moment. Another term for it is "pure awareness." In ACT, the technical term is self-as-context. For example, as you go through life, your body changes, your thoughts change, your feelings change, your roles change, but the "you" that's able to notice or observe all those things never changes. It's the same "you" that's been there your whole life.

With clients, we generally refer to it as “the observing self” rather than use the technical term “self-as-context.”¹²⁶

The point of self as context that is represented here is not that humans are only an amalgam of their perspective but that they can gain something valuable by trying to observe the self or in other words the part of us that is having these observations. Since this topic is intellectually challenging it is better to try experiential learning. Instead of trying to explain this, ACT has used the following exercise:

While talking with someone in a counseling setting the following question is posed. ‘Who are you really?’ Regardless of what the answer is, you can point out how the definition provided is only a portion or even a caricature of who the person really is.¹²⁷ At some point, the person may begin to entertain the notion that a full description might not be possible and that their identity may be a part of themselves which cannot be described. This prepares the person to question what is left. The person thinking about these identities is apart from them.

Self as context is not just a restatement that people are complicated. It is more a specific realization that there is another uncaptured aspect of identity that can never be directly observed. That is the part of us that observes the world. This is why we feel like the same person when we are 20 or 40 despite changing in significant ways. Self as context appears to experience a version of the self. The self, as represented in ACT, is presented as the perspective or context from where the person views the world. The person that is observing themselves acting is the self.

At times, clients may ask if this is the soul. My response is simple: ‘That’s not a word I would personally use, but you can call it whatever

126. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 10.

127. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple*, 186.

you like. Whatever words you use to describe it, this is the part of you that notices all those words.’¹²⁸

To be clear the concept of the observing self is just the realization that some part of us is observing every thought and action. Pondering on this part of our identity can help people escape unworkable forms of self-image and reduce worry about controlling it.

It is interesting to note here that ACT does not make absolutist claims about theological aspects of identity only human perception. In other words, if someone perceives themselves as a being created by God, this would not derail the above search for the observing self. For example, even as creations of God we can still have an internal observing self that we struggle to understand that can help us reduce adherence to unworkable ways to identify ourselves. We are so much more than we can describe. This awareness allows us to see our problems through a new lens.

Self as Context Scriptural Reference – Psalms 8:1-6

1. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.
2. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.
3. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
4. what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?
5. Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.
6. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

128. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 186.

you have put all things under their feet,

One line above all has an existential element to it. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?”¹²⁹ One aspect of this, in the context of the scripture, is the unworthiness of humans. Another aspect is the worship of a being altogether different from us. In this way, this scripture reflects a rethinking of what humans are on an existential level. There is no clear benchmarks against which humans can define themselves outside of God. Christians may claim that they define themselves based on what the Bible says about them. The problem is that the Bible’s identification of us is very complex.

On top of that, an in-depth analysis that could be done on all available references to the complexity of human identity relies on human thinking to understand it. Humans cannot know the mind of God. Isaiah states clearly that the ways of the Lord are higher than the ways of humans.¹³⁰ Although this may seem defeatist or pessimistic, it is not intended to be. Human understanding is limited, and God’s is not. This recognizes the reality of the limits of human experience but also that this is not a surprise to God. It also allows the person to experiment with the idea that the way they identify themselves is not the only possible assessment. This is most useful when people have unworkable views of themselves that are very negative. It is more important that the person sees themselves as a being that can continually observe the world and the things of God, and will never achieve a full picture of who they are. This does not mean that workable forms of self- identity need to be challenged.

This question is common to philosophers and thinkers in history. This was such a profound aspect of Rene Descartes contribution that a biography of Descartes by Richard Watson was named after his famous

129. Psalms 8:4.

130. Isaiah 55:8-9.

statement “Cogito Ergo Sum” or I think therefore I am.¹³¹ The problem is that this question is effectively a black hole of meaning. Although it can be a useful mental exercise to consider these statements, they are far from definitive. Whatever the answer to this question is, it will never be definitive. In other words, Descartes definition may represent some deep truth, but it would not be a complete definition of self. This ultimately does not really answer the age old human question: “who am I?” Any answer given could receive a response such as ‘that partly captures it, who are you?’ and if that is who you are, how are you able to observe that? This scripture makes a similar point. As we think of the grandeur of God, a valid result is an upsetting of our assurances of our own understanding of identity.

This is the same point being made by ACT.¹³² This is not saying that human value is nonexistent or even arbitrary. As stated earlier, defining values and expanding compassion to the suffering of others can be very helpful in living a more fulfilling life. It is only saying that that any version of identity is incomplete and can be adjusted if it is unworkable or inconsistent with ones theological understanding. For example, a person may see themselves as a sinner sometimes and as a loving father at other times. These may both have supporting evidence, but they are both incomplete descriptions in their own way. This is not to say that if someone is a sinner than they should look hard enough at themselves until they see that they are not a sinner. The focus on values as the first core process clearly lays out that people need to work toward their values. Self as context asks the question if you are only a sinner, how can you observe that you are a sinner? Some aspect of ourselves can observe ourselves. That part of us cannot be contained in any single definition other than a vague reference to ourselves.

The functional reason for this is to get people to reconsider

131. Richard Watson, *Cogito Ergo Sum: The Life of René Descartes* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2002).

132. Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 186.

the rigid ways in which they view themselves. The above Psalm appears to have the same purpose. It causes people to reflect and ponder what value they have and how they could define themselves. Chaplains could use this to help people question unhelpful ways people identify themselves and by so doing help the person become more open to make meaningful and lasting change to overcome the things that distract them from living their true values. For many of us, the above conversation may not be the best place to focus your time, but for others it will be crucial. If you read this and found it far too philosophical, it is important to note that other people may not. Some books even center their explanations of all the six core processes around this idea. Ultimately, all the core processes flow into each other and none of them is actually the first or that is to say, “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”

Self as Context Metaphor

Generals and Admirals observe the battlefield. They take in as much information as possible to make the best judgements possible. The actions and decisions of a general make a huge difference to the outcome of a war. Despite this, most soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen, never meet the general. The general is a person that is unknowable to them in a way. They may conceive of the idea that there is a general. If they are thoughtful they may even observe how the General's actions affect the conflict, but it is unlikely that they will ever be in a firefight with a General. Despite this disconnection, this does not reduce the importance of the involvement of the Flag Officer in the life of the service member.

You can use this as a metaphor for showing that the observer perspective (self as context) is extremely helpful to us regardless of our direct experience with it.

Self as Context Case Study

An Navy Senior Chief (E8) approaches you because his wife is talking about leaving him. After some investigation, you start to examine the most problematic parts of what he is telling you. He states almost proudly that he is a salty senior chief and that his family has a very hard time following his directions. His conception of who he is seems to be tied to the salty senior chief identity and he tries to live this same way at home with his wife and children. They resent being treated like military subordinates. He struggles being able to see other aspects of himself. You try and help him realize that all his thoughts and perceptions could be perceived from another perspective, that is to say, inside of himself. You ask him about other hobbies, or settings where he doesn't consider himself a salty chief. He tells you that he loves working on his old Mustang with the hopes of getting it running again. You ask if he thinks about himself being a salty senior chief when he is working on the car. He says that he has never really thought about it that way. You ask if there is some part of him that can observe both of those parts of himself. He seems a little confused. You use a metaphor to get him to see the observing part of himself as an internal admiral who observes from a distance that he doesn't know very well. He thinks about it for a bit and then realizes that there is some part of him that can observe everything. Since he can analyze what a salty chief is there is at least some part of him that is outside of this definition. By helping him determine that he is more nuanced and complex than a single two-dimensional definition, he begins to see that he has other aspects of his identity that require more work. It may be appropriate to examine skills training in parenting and/or relationships. Also, role change can help one examine the experience of self, i.e., another perspective.

This represents the end of the discussion on the six core processes of ACT.

Relational Frame Theory

Although there are more aspects of ACT, the six core processes are the main points. This section on Relational Frame Theory (RFT) is meant to provide background to the foundations of ACT. You might find it helpful to understand where these ideas come from. There are some good insights gained by understanding that ACT is heavily based on RFT.¹³³ It must be said that RFT is not an easy model to understand since it has some abstract concepts. I will explain it below as briefly as possible to help you realize where the core processes come from. With that said, a full understanding of RFT is not required to be proficient in ACT, but it can help.

ACT is a third-wave cognitive behavioral model.¹³⁴ As such, it draws from the same rich history as other behavioral models. The difference is that ACT is not simply a rehashing of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT); however, instead of approaching change in a purely behaviorist way the foundations of language are considered and handled in a different way. This frame work is called RFT, and it is one of the key foundational concepts of third wave behavioral models such as ACT.¹³⁵ A summary of RFT is in order:

Relational Frame Theory [...] is a contemporary contextual behavioral account of human language and cognition. As a contextual behavioral account, it seeks to facilitate prediction and influence with precision, scope and depth over behavior within its gambit. Given this scientific aim, gathering relevant empirical evidence is extremely important. Accordingly, it is also important that we take stock of RFT's

133. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT: An Introduction to Relational Frame Theory and Its Clinical Application* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2010), 6.

134. Martin O'Connor et al., "Citation Analysis of Relational Frame Theory: 2009-2016" *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* 6, no. 2 (April 2017): 153.

135. Martin O'Connor et al., "Citation Analysis of Relational Frame Theory: 2009-2016" *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* 6, no. 2 (April 2017): 153.

progress in generating an empirical stream of research.¹³⁶

The idea undergirding RFT is that human language is inherently disconnected from reality. Beyond this, human reasoning is not perfectly represented in language or actions.

If we think about it carefully, though, we find that what is accessible isn't the thought itself; it is what is said or written. These expressions are often related to the original thought, but they are hardly identical to it. The experience of thoughts in themselves is directly available only to the person who is thinking those thoughts.¹³⁷

RFT also suggests that the unique capability of humans to respond to derived relationships (which places us at the top of the food chain) is exactly what traps us in emotional suffering. Specifically, our abilities to plan, predict, evaluate, verbally communicate, and relate events and stimuli to one another both help and hurts us.¹³⁸

This inaccessibility of thoughts can be represented by the following important distinction. In RFT there are two categories of experience. One is arbitrary, such as language, and is referred to as arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR).¹³⁹ This means that the sounds that humans make (language) to approximate physical meaning were invented and may not be universally shared by everyone, even if they speak the same language. People understand words differently. Anyone who doubts this only needs observe a marital fight or political debate in order to see this in action.

The inverse would be non- arbitrarily applicable relational

136. Martin O'Connor et al., "Citation Analysis of Relational Frame Theory: 2009-2016," 152.

137. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 27.

138. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 5.

139. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 83.

responding such as contact with the physical world. These non-arbitrary experiences can be referred to as contingent on the physical experience.¹⁴⁰ This language is used to refer to direct experience. Physical experience is said to be non-arbitrary. Although people experience physical things differently also the actual experience was shared. It is precisely the processes of meaning-making that makes these experiences seem different.

An example of AARR would be abstract statements such as $A = B$ and $B = A$.¹⁴¹ There is no context regarding what this equation represents but somehow it means something. A non-arbitrary, or contingency, example would be to compare two stacks of coins, which can be physically equated in either number, color, or some other direct way. These could be compared without arbitrary constructs of language, although it would be difficult to articulate this comparison without language the experience could exist independent of language.

There are various forms of arbitrary reasoning, or AARR, outlined in RFT such as mutual entailment (i.e., if $A = B$ then $B = A$); combinatorial entailment (i.e., if $A = B$ and $B = C$ then $A = C$); and other types.¹⁴² To further clarify, RFT suggests that all human language is inherently arbitrary but not all human learning is.¹⁴³ As we mature from birth, our minds increasingly links arbitrary sounds to non-arbitrary objects and actions. According to RFT, this arbitrary reasoning “represents the basic functional ‘unit’ from which phenomena like meaning, rule- governed behavior, and stimulus

140. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 76.

141. Martin O'Connor et al., “Citation Analysis of Relational Frame Theory: 2009-2016” *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* 6, no. 2 (April 2017): 152.

142. Martin O'Connor et al., “Citation Analysis of Relational Frame Theory: 2009-2016,” 152.

143. Martin O'Connor et al., “Citation Analysis of Relational Frame Theory: 2009-2016,” 152.

equivalence spring forth.”¹⁴⁴

Before the connections to ACT are established it is important to consider how this conception of language vs. experience impacts human experience. Writers in RFT suggest that it comes down to how language is used to reinforce social behavior and internal experience. The impact on social behavior is what makes it applicable to counseling. The change in internal experience can lead to change in perceptions that lead to improved mental health.

From very early in language training, humans learn to use combinations of sounds in a way that successively becomes very important for how we interact. What is functionally crucial in this behavior, according to Skinner, is the possibility of behavior being reinforced in an indirect way, by how other individuals act, rather than as a direct result of the speaker's actions. This makes it possible for me to be given a desired object without having to direct my actions toward physically obtaining the object myself. I can ask for something and receive it by way of another person's actions.¹⁴⁵

This functional perspective on language connects the arbitrary world of thoughts, to the tangible side of our human experience. As we mature, we learn to apply the same form of abstraction to our own internal experience; however, this does not make it less arbitrary.¹⁴⁶ When one person listens to and adheres to the verbal commands of someone else, or even themselves, this creates what RFT refers to as rule-governed behavior.¹⁴⁷ These rules can direct in specific ways such as a single command or a set of verbal rules explaining a game. This can equally apply to laws or military instructions. One of the points that ACT makes is that internal rules create inflexibility and

144. Sean Hughes, S and Dermot “Barnes-Holmes Relational Frame Theory: The Basic Account,” In *Handbook of Contextual Behavioral Science*, eds. Steven Hayes, Dermot Barnes-Holmes, Robert Zettle, and Anthony Biglan, (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 176.

145. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 29.

146. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 35.

147. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 40.

therefore internal arbitrary assessments represent a significant part of unnecessary human suffering.

Human reasoning is admittedly very complex. What makes it more challenging to analyze is the ability humans must create derived stimulus relationships. These means that humans create impromptu connections from weak inferences in context. The following study demonstrates that more clearly. In this experiment researchers presented participants with arbitrary stimulus such as random shapes or a sequence of random letters.¹⁴⁸For clarity, they will be discussed as single letters here. Niklas Torneke summarizes this well by stating:

The participant is shown E and given the option of choosing either D or another stimulus, which we can call F. If D is chosen, this is reinforced. This is repeated with different options involved, but choosing D when E is presented is consistently reinforced. Thus far, E → D has been specifically trained via operant learning. E now functions as a discriminative stimulus for choosing D. If E is shown with D as a possible option, the probability is high that the participant will choose D. This procedure is called matching to sample. In this case, E is the sample and the task is to match another of several possible stimuli (D or F).

Let's move on to the phenomenon we want to take a closer look at, wherein new relations arise without being specifically trained: The conditions are now changed by presenting D, after which participants can choose between several different meaningless stimuli, one of which is E. In this case, participants are likely to choose E, even though D hasn't previously been presented as sample and there is no learning history where choosing E has been reinforced. The latter is ensured by using only meaningless stimuli in the experiment; they are made up

148. Murray Sidman and William Tailby, "Conditional Discrimination Versus Matching to Sample: An Expansion of the Testing Paradigm," *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 37, no. 1 (January 1982): 5-22.

purely for the experiment and there is thus no prior relation among them. After training $E \rightarrow D$, another relation has been established between the stimuli without specific training: $D \rightarrow E$. This is known as a derived stimulus relation, as it is not trained directly but is derived by the study participants in a situation of this type. We train one relation ($E \rightarrow D$) between stimuli, and another one ($D \rightarrow E$) is entailed.¹⁴⁹

To summarize this, the participants were rewarded for selecting D when E was shown. After this training was established the order is reversed. In other words, E was more likely to be chosen as the option when D was shown. The participants had linked D and E in a reversible relationship without receiving any instruction to do so. Torneke goes on to explain that this seems obvious to humans because of their ease in being able to do it.¹⁵⁰ It seems unremarkable that this occurs, however this ability has not been shown with other types of animals,¹⁵¹ even with chimpanzees who have received years of 'language' training from humans.¹⁵² We simply find it unimpressive because we do it so easily.

Torneke goes on in his book to present more examples from the literature of increasingly complex relationships between arbitrary symbols that humans can intuitively make.¹⁵³ These relationships are important in RFT because they demonstrate how adaptive the human brain is and how meaning is made. The relationships created in the experiments were inherently arbitrary but RFT suggests that all human learning occurs in a similar fashion. This is even more pronounced for things which cannot be observed in a tactile way. One way that this shows up in common conversation is in the form of analogies or metaphors. These comparisons intentionally use familiar relationships

149. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 61-62.

150. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 61.

151. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 62.

152. Neil Dugdale and Fergus Lowe, "Testing for Symmetry in the Conditional Discrimination of Language- Trained Chimpanzees," *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 73, no. 1 (2002): 5-22.

153. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 63, 66, 81.

to establish unfamiliar ones.

There are two objects involved in the mapping associated with metaphor or analogy. The first object is the vehicle and the second is the target.¹⁵⁴ One possible example is when Jesus says he is the vine.¹⁵⁵ The vehicle is the object that the person has familiarity with and the target is the object that is less familiar. Characteristics are then transferred from the vehicle to the target. In this parable, the vehicle is the vine because it carries the meaning associated with it to further explain the target which in this case would be Jesus. The careful listener can then apply some characteristic of the vine (vehicle) to Jesus (target). There is a relation of coordination between the target and the vehicle. Despite this, some of the qualities the vehicle would be applicable to the target but not all.

It would be unreasonable to assume that all qualities of the vehicle must apply to the target for the metaphor to have value. In fact, it is precisely because the vehicle and the target are not the same that allows meaning to be carried. For example, if Jesus had ever said: “The Kingdom of God is like the Kingdom of God,” this would not have provided any new insights. As such it is required that the two things be different and therefore they will not share all characteristics. At some point all metaphors break down.

It is interesting to notice that, due to these differences, not all relationships of coordination are reversible.¹⁵⁶ This means the vehicle and target cannot exchange places in the sentence. Sometimes these relationships are reversible and sometimes they are not. An example of a reversible verbal relationship is found in 1st Cor 3:16-17 “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s

154. Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 91.

155. John 15:5.

156. This is the key difference presented by Torneke as the difference between analogies and metaphors referenced in Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT*, 96.

temple is holy, and you are that temple.” (NRSV) Here Paul makes a comparison between a temple and the body. This comparison could work in reverse to either teach the importance of a temple of God or the human body depending on the audience.

Other examples are less likely to be understood in a reverse manner. For example, when Jesus says he is the bread of life this could be a declaration of the life-giving nature that he represents. It would be difficult to use Christ as an example for someone who is unfamiliar with bread. Another metaphor would probably be clearer to describe bread. In this way, the relationship works in only one way. In RFT there is a distinction between reversible relationships, which it calls analogies, and metaphors which are not reversible. Analogies are also typically more simplistic.

These relationships are far from just a literary devices in RFT. The importance of these relationships is that they take something with which the person has familiarity and they transfer it to something the person does not have familiarity with. Through metaphor, someone can take language and use it to construct new understanding without physically contacting the new thing. As someone develops more complex relationships, metaphors become more useful since they can be used where the vehicle is something with which the person does not have any direct experience. Because of this, metaphor is useful in counseling settings too. It helps to harness both the current language-based framework and also the past experience of the counselee. This helps them to make new connections. This demonstrates a great potential for therapeutic value.

This is operationalized in ACT and is demonstrated by the following quote:

...ACT Therapists deal daily with subtle yet important

psychological postures that lie at the interface between direct experience and human language... ACT is attempting to change the relationship between people and their own psychological contact. ACT seeks to reign in the excess of such language process as judgement, prediction, problem solving, comparison, self-evaluation, and planning. People can become lost in their own verbal process and, because of that, fail to see or respond to their own experience or to the context in which they live. ACT helps us see an alternative.¹⁵⁷

In ACT, it is suggested that psychological inflexibility greatly contributes to human suffering and that this inflexibility is entangled with verbal rules and the pitfalls of language.¹⁵⁸

When a child is young, a parent may tell a child that a new food is like one that they enjoy. This is a form of metaphor where the vehicle is the preferred food and the target is the new food. Even this example draws on the past experience of the reader to make a point about metaphor. It is difficult to imagine human language without metaphor. Steven C. Hayes argues:

There was once no word even for something as basic as ‘feeling.’ The word was a metaphorical extension from the word for ‘hand.’ You have to imagine a time when to talk of feeling a feeling you had to say the equivalent of “you know, what the hand does.”¹⁵⁹

As tactile as the word feel is, it is based on a word that was created to approximate it. There are concepts much more abstract than this. Imagine love, or ideas of the physical yet distant realities of space. What is more complex still is that there are certain things that can

157. Steven C. Hayes, foreword to *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, by Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), x.

158. Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 31.

159. Steven C. Hayes, foreword to *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, by Jill A. Stoddard and Niloofar Afari (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), ix.

never be directly contacted. It is impossible for someone to experience something other than the 'here, now, I' perspective.

Humans are not born with the ability to perceive the perspective of others. Young children are unable to correctly answer questions regarding what other people know or what they see. The only way that people must learn about the perspective of others is through metaphor. If they gain an understanding of their own perspective, they can use this as the vehicle and the perspective of the other person becomes the target of this metaphor.

Just as people have no way of directly contacting the perspective of others, in a certain sense, people have no way of truly contacting their own core identity. Since it is something inside of themselves, they can never truly observe their self. They observe their thoughts, actions, emotions, and other aspects but the identity is something that cannot be contacted directly. It can only be understood through a history of behaviors and internal stories that someone tells themselves. Humans go about creating their own understanding of themselves based on how they act, feel, and think. The conception people maintain of who they are is just a collection of perceptions and thoughts about who they are. This type self-epistemology is one of the core foundations of many interventions in ACT. You can probably start seeing similarities between this and the self-as-context core process as well as defusion and acceptance.

This presents a foundational question. What can people know about themselves and how can they be sure their perception is accurate? As demonstrated above, RFT suggests that the means that people have about knowing themselves are incomplete and will never yield a complete picture of their own self. This means that they should hold these thoughts lightly and be open to readjust them. It can be seen from this how ACT operationalizes this information. Loosening

of unworkable perceptions of the self is one of the six core processes of ACT that was discussed above.

The remainder of the six core processes can be demonstrated to flow from RFT as well. Mindfulness is mainly used as a way to more directly recognize non-arbitrary relationships, and this is why it is contained in ACT. In the absence of non-arbitrary rules ACT suggests that the individual's values guide their actions. Ultimately, ACT is based on scientific theory. It happens to be very conducive to spiritual and moral frameworks. I hope that this introduction of ACT and now RFT has provided you with enough information to determine if you want learn more about ACT and to consider implementing some of these things in your work. If so, I have included a list of references for you to look into. These books will be much more detailed and hopefully will clear up any sections that were left unclear with such a short and protracted summary. I trust that by learning about ACT, you can learn additional ways to help people in the most important work on earth, namely, ministering to those who suffer.

Additional Resources

These books represent the core of ACT:

Jason Nieuwsma, Robyn D. Walser, Steven C. Hayes. *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*. Oakland, New Harbinger Publications, 2016.

Stoddard, Jill A. and Niloofar Afari, *Big Book of ACT Metaphors*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014.

Harris, Russ and Steven C. Hayes. *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009.

Luoma, Jason, Steven C. Hayes, Robyn Walser. *Learning ACT: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Skills-Training Manual for Therapists*, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007.

These are ACT books that are written with specific audiences, problems in mind:

Harris, Russ *ACT with Love: Stop Struggling, Reconcile Differences, and Strengthen Your Relationship with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2009.

Walser, Robyn D. and Darrah Westrup. *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma-Related Problems: A Practitioner's Guide to Using Mindfulness and Acceptance Strategies*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2009.

Books used in my project that are helpful but not ACT related:

Hanson, Rick. *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*. New York: Harmony Publishing, 2013.

Richards, P. Scott. *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2011.

Definition of Terms

To help understand terms that will be used throughout this project, the following definitions will be examined.

Acceptance – This is an ACT specific definition of realizing that the human experience is not fully controllable. This term refers to the fact that counselees can learn to not fear their experience and that it need not prevent them from acting in ways they value.¹⁶⁰

ACT – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. This is a rigorous counseling model, that is also highly congruent with a spiritual worldview. This will be the focus of this project and will be cited extensively.

160. Russ Harris and Steven C. Hayes, *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 9.

Chaplain – A person designated to provide religious and spiritual ministry in a specific context such as a hospital, prison, or military. Their work often includes pastoral counseling and connecting people to spiritual and religious resources. The current focus will be written mainly for military chaplains but is applicable to all chaplains.¹⁶¹

Defusion – This is a term specifically defined, and spelled, inside of ACT. It represents an awareness around the source and nature of internal thoughts. This also represents an awareness that human thoughts are not flawless and inherent. It is suggested that there is therapeutic value of being able to hold opinions lightly with an awareness that the opinion may represent flawed human thought. This is most useful with troubling thought.¹⁶²

Hexaflex – A graphic that represents, in image form, the interplay between the six core processes of ACT (acceptance, defusion, values, valued action, present moment awareness, self as context) relying on psychological flexibility.¹⁶³

Mindfulness – Also referred to in ACT as Contact with the present moment. A process of learning to consider and be present to the greatest amount of content without a sense of control. It has been shown to be effective in creating new neural pathways that can be

161. See the following regulations concerning the definition of chaplains: U.S. Department of the Army, "Army Chaplain Corps Activities," AR 165-1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2015); U.S. Department of the Air Force, "Chaplain Planning and Organizing," AFI 52-101 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2013); U.S. Department of the Air Force, "Chaplain, Chaplain Corps Readiness," AFI 52-104 (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 2015); U.S. Department of the Navy, "Professional Naval Chaplaincy," SecNav Instruction 5351.1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2011); U.S. Department of the Navy, "Religious Ministry in the Navy," OpNav Instruction 1730.1E (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2012).

162. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 9.

163. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 10.

therapeutically valuable.¹⁶⁴

Pastoral Care – The work performed by chaplains or others in a similar context that is meant to bring comfort and care on a human level and from the spiritual tradition of the person receiving support.¹⁶⁵

Pastoral Counseling – A form of counseling that involves a focus on spiritual wellness and is not necessarily connected to psychological counseling. Examples include the kind of counseling provided by pastors and chaplains. Some US states recognize licensure in pastoral counseling, but the term will be used informally in this paper.¹⁶⁶

Psychological Flexibility – This is one of the key focuses of ACT. It is meant to represent a type of resilience. By applying the six core processes of ACT a person can experience more of this type of resilience and be less overburdened by the suffering of this world.¹⁶⁷

RFT – Relational Frame Theory. This is a theory, with its own theoretical underpinnings. This is the theoretical underpinning of ACT and suggests a way in which human's process and adapt to information. Due to its complexity, it will be explained further in chapter two.¹⁶⁸

Self as Context – Also referred to in ACT as pure awareness. This is a thorough process to demonstrate to one's self how futile it is to try and nail down too carefully a personal identity. Every conception of personal identity can be limiting in a way. This can be a very spiritual concept as well, in that God will see his children in ways that they will

164. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 9.

165. Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growth* (Nashville: TN, Abingdon Press, 2011), 8.

166. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 9-10.

167. Russ Harris and Steven C. Hayes, *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 11.

168. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 2.

never be able to fully conceive.¹⁶⁹

Six Core Processes – These are the six may strategies of interventions of acceptance, defusion, values, valued action, present moment awareness, self as context.¹⁷⁰

Valued Action – Also referred to in ACT as Committed Action. This a shorthand way of describing the process of acting in accordance with personally held values. Many things can influence people to act in contrast to these values. For this reason, Valued Action is one of the six core processes of ACT.¹⁷¹

Values – A colloquial definition of values is not sufficient in the conversation of ACT. Values specifically define actions. These actions are deeply rooted in the desires and needs of that person and are not a reflection of what they want to feel, how they want to be perceived, or what things they think they should enjoy. There is great value in helping people define how they feel that they should act with integrity. Despite the uniquely personal motivations of the development of this model, it is rigorously researched and based in extensive literature as will be demonstrated in chapter two.¹⁷²

169. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 10.

170. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 9.

171. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 11.

172. Harris and Hayes, *ACT Made Simple*, 11.

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