

Acceptance and Commitment Coaching: An Introduction



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Abstract

In this short paper we introduce ACT as a psychologically informed approach to behavioural change. We review briefing the underlying principles, research and its translation to coaching psychology, before exploring how coaching psychologists can apply this approach with clients. In future articles we will share a number of related Acceptance and Committed informed techniques.

Introduction

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a relatively modern therapeutic approach in what has been classed the third wave of cognitive behavioural approaches, along with Mindfulness, Compassion, Dialectical Behavioural Therapy and Metacognitive Therapy. ACT combines mindfulness strategies with behavioural interventions with the aim of enhancing the client's psychological flexibility. This article aims to act as an introduction to ACT through exploring its theoretical underpinnings, reviewing ACT research and examining its translation to and application in coaching. Previous series of coaching techniques in *The Coaching Psychologist* have considered mindfulness, positive psychology and Motivational Interviewing (MI) and it seems appropriate to add ACT to this list as the approach continues to gain popularity in both coaching psychologist education programmes and in coaching psychologist practice.

Foundations of ACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a behavioural therapy developed by Steven Hayes and colleagues (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999) which builds on the work of early behaviourists including Pavlov, Skinner and Watson (Leach, 2022). It focuses on helping individuals live according to their core values and develop psychological flexibility, which is the ability to be present, open to experiences and take action aligned with personal values, even when facing difficult thoughts and feelings (Harris, 2019). Unlike other cognitive-behavioural therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, ACT does not aim to change thoughts or feelings through techniques such as reframing, but encourages individuals to instead change how they relate to these internal experiences (Anstiss, 2021; Anstiss & Blonna, 2014). This approach encourages a refocusing on values-based actions, rather than avoidance behaviours which it may be argued temporarily ease discomfort but ultimately prolongs dissatisfaction (Harris, 2019).

ACT is rooted in two key principles: Relational Frame (RFT) developed by Hayes (1991) and Functional Contextualism, what might be considered to be an extension of Skinner's work on radical behaviourism. RFT explains how individuals relate concepts through cognitive 'frames', language often traps them in negative patterns (Hayes, 2019). Functional contextualism emphasises that behaviour should be evaluated by its

functionality within a specific context rather than by moral or judgemental standards (Harris, 2019). ACT aims to enhance psychological flexibility through six core processes, which we will discuss in more depth below. By focusing on the "workability" of thoughts and behaviours within an individual's life context, ACT enables clients to engage in meaningful, values-aligned behaviours, even in the face of psychological discomfort (Harros, 2019; Hayes, 2004).

Review of ACT Research

While many models, frameworks and approaches used in coaching remain unresearched or under-researched this is not true for many of the more psychologically informed approaches which have emerged as behavioural change strategies from therapy. In the cases of MI, mindfulness and ACT, the literature is rich with thousands of studies, from randomised control trials (RCT), to systematic literature reviews and meta-analysis studies. Over the period 1984-2024, a substantial body of research has emerged supporting ACT's efficacy across a range of clinical and non-clinical populations, although worthy of note is that the Effect Size of ACT is broadly similar to CBT, suggesting ACT despite its claims is simply an alternative to CBT, as opposed to an improvement on it.

Table 1: Research in non-therapeutic contexts

Bond, F. W., & Bunce, D. (2000)	Study examined the use of ACT with 90 volunteers in a media company looking to enhance people's ability to cope with work related stresses. ACT compared to an alternative innovation promotion programme (IPP) and a control group, finding that improvements in mental health were found in both interventions. Improvements came with accepting uncomfortable thoughts and feelings with the ACT group and attempts to modify the stressors in the IPP group.
Bond, F. W., & Bunce, D. (2003)	2 wave panel study to examine how acceptance can explain mental health, job satisfaction and work performance in a sample of customer service centre workers, finding that increased acceptance positively influenced mental health. Higher levels of acceptance also enhanced the benefits of increased job control.
Howell, A. J., & Passmore, H. (2019)	Study identifies 5 randomized experiments measuring improvement in student well-being as a result of using ACT as a positive psychological intervention.
Flaxman, P. E., & Bond, F. W. (2010)	Study looked at the effectiveness of ACT based stress management training in the workplace delivered to 311 local government employees. A significant reduction in employee distress was measured over a 6-month period. More meaningful effects were found on those who were already in a distressed state, 69% improving to a significant degree.
Gross, M., Moore, Z. E., Gardner, F. L., Wolanin, A. T., Pess, R. & Marks, D. R. (2018)	RCT examining the efficaciousness of mindfulness- acceptance-commitment (MAC) approach for improving the mental health and performance of 18 female athletes compared to traditional psychological skills training. Results showed reduced substance use and emotional dysregulation over time plus reduced levels of anxiety, fewer eating

	concerns, less psychological stress, and an increase in psychological flexibility as well as improved sport performance.
Moran, D. J. (2011)	Examines ACT being used as a leadership coaching model and suggests how ACT training can increase work performance (particularly in decision making), increase innovation, reduce workplace stress and reduction in errors. Concludes in suggesting psychological flexibility is key to crisis-resilient change leadership.
Noetel, M., Ciarrochi, J., Van Zanden, B., & Lonsdale, C. (2017).	A review of 66 studies looking at impact of mindfulness and experiential acceptance approaches in promoting athletic performance. Positive effects were found on flow, performance and competitive anxiety; however, the evidence was graded as low quality and further research is required.
Reeve, A., Tickle, A., & Moghaddam, N. (2018)	A systematic review and meta-analyses of work-related stress in those in direct care roles in mental health settings. For those already at a higher stress baseline, ACT was effective in reducing psychological stress, but no statistically significant effect for the improvement of burnout or psychological flexibility. However, recommendations are made for the implementation of ACT for work-related stress.
Shaw, T. A., Juncos, D. G. & Winter, D. (2020)	Study looks at how training a music teacher to use ACC with a student suffering from performance anxiety enabled an increase in ability to manage anxiety through acceptance and defusion processes.
Skews, R. & Palmer, S. (2016)	Makes the case that ACT offers an effective coaching approach to address psychological barriers whilst remaining goal focused; reduce emotional reactivity and increase acceptance, as well as being applicable to range of populations.

ACT has been proven effective in treating various psychological issues, including anxiety, depression and chronic pain. Research highlights that approximately 40% of ACT studies have focused on non-DSM conditions emphasizing its adaptability for a broad range of behavioural and performance-related challenges, such as improving quality of life, enhancing workplace performance and managing chronic illness. ACT's global appeal is also noteworthy, with substantial research emerging from both high- and low-income countries. This global adaptability stems from ACT's focus on universal human experiences, making it easily applicable in diverse cultural contexts.

Leach (2022) provides a comprehensive review of research studies, which we have summarised in Table 1. She concludes “the research is overwhelming positive for ACT as an efficacious intervention” (Leach, 2022, p. 148) But she notes as is true for much of coaching, no quantitative evaluation studies have yet to be completed within a workplace coaching context with the evidence restricted to training interventions in the workplace (Archer, 2018)

ACT Principles.

The ACT process highlights six core processes: (i) Values based living (ii) Committed Action (iii) Defusion (iv) Acceptance (v) Present moment awareness (vi) Self as context

(i) *Values-Based Living*

ACT encourages individuals to live in alignment with their values, providing a sense of direction and purpose (Harris, 2019). Values in ACT are deeply personal and can act like a compass, helping to guide behaviour. Values based living means more than having goals, but rather, it refers to an ongoing process of reflecting on the alignment between our goals and values so that we can continually learn and stay on course with these values. The coach's role is to help clients discover these values and find ways to live them out to the full (Anstiss & Blonna, 2014).

(ii) *Committed Action*

Committed action involves engaging in purposeful behaviours that align with core values, even in the face of discomfort or internal resistance. It is about taking action while accepting negative thoughts or feelings that might arise, rather than avoiding challenges (Harris, 2019). ACT can help clients overcome experiential avoidance and encourage them to persist in value-driven action, even when the mind suggests repeated self-defeating narratives like "I will fail" or "You are a unworthy" (Anstiss, 2021).

(iii) *Defusion*

Defusion is the process of detaching from thoughts, treating them as mere words or images rather than truths that control behaviour. This cognitive distancing allows individuals to observe their thoughts without being dominated by them, creating space for more workable actions based on values (Hill & Oliver, 2019). Defusion helps clients neutralize unhelpful thoughts by noticing and naming them, and helps to reduce their impact (Harris, 2019).

(iv) *Acceptance*

Acceptance in ACT means allowing unpleasant thoughts and feelings to exist without trying to suppress or control them. This contrasts with experiential avoidance, where people try to eliminate negative experiences, often leading to long-term problems (Hayes et al., 2006). Through acceptance, clients learn to accommodate distressing emotions rather than wrestle against them (Anstiss & Blonna, 2014).

(v) *Present-Moment Awareness*

ACT emphasises mindfulness and present-moment awareness, helping clients focus on their current experiences rather than getting stuck in thoughts about their past or future

lives. By being fully present, clients can reduce anxiety or guilt and become more psychologically flexible (Anstiss, 2021). This flexibility allows them to engage more fully in life, recognising when their present focus is being compromised by rigid thought patterns (Hill & Oliver, 2019).

(iv) Self as Context

ACT differentiates between the “self as content,” which is tied to personal stories and narratives, and “self as context,” where one observes their thoughts and feelings without being entangled in them. This perspective-taking enhances psychological flexibility by allowing individuals to see situations from multiple viewpoints, fostering more adaptable behaviour (Harris, 2019). Coaches can encourage this through reflective exercises, helping clients step back and reassess their challenges (Hill & Oliver, 2019).

Application in coaching

The boundary between coaching and therapy has become increasingly blurred over the past twenty years, with many techniques, models and frameworks bleeding from therapy into coaching. This in part is due to the growth of coaching psychology, now a formal division within the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the growth of coaching psychology programmes in universities. Secondly, many therapists have transitioned to or work across the coach-therapy divide, providing both services and thus bring with them their therapeutic practices. Thirdly, an increasing number of coaches are seeking evidence-based approaches to enhance their impact, with third wave approaches such as ACT seeing a growth in coaching related publications over the past decade (Anstiss, & Blonna, 2014; Skews, 2018; Archer, R. 2018; Anstiss, 2021).

In many instances it is possible to simply apply ACT in similar ways to its use in therapy, focusing it towards clients with emotional issues such as workplace anxiety and towards unhelpful thinking such as low self-confidence – low self-esteem. My own experience of using ACT is as a supplementary tool, much like MI. While I might initially focus on building the relationship with the client, listening to their ‘story’ and contracting how we will work together, ACT, Motivational Interviewing and Mindfulness approaches all sit together and are most frequently deployed as a supplement to Cognitive Behavioural Coaching. Helping clients reframe can be useful, but often habituated patterns of thinking, developed over several decades, are hard to change. Acceptance and Commitment Coaching can provide a different way of seeing these behaviours and thinking patterns.

Conclusion

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy provides a powerful framework for coaching psychologists seeking to foster meaningful, values-driven change in their clients. By promoting psychological flexibility, ACT can offer a supplementary tool for those experienced in using CBC, but where habituated thinking patterns continue to return. Over future issues we will share a handful of ACT techniques which coaching psychologists can use in their practice.

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