

# Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) in the treatment of Anorexia

**The Bella Vita**  
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## Outline of Presentation

- Overview of ACT therapy
- Overview of ACT therapy  
in relationship to ED
- Practice tools for clinicians

# Why ACT for Anorexia?



- In the case of anorexia, cognitive therapy has been shown to have little effect on eating pathology.
- Cognitive therapy directly attempts to change the content of maladaptive eating-related cognitions. However, the egosyntonic nature of eating disorder cognitions may make them particularly resistant to direct modification efforts.
- Rather than attempting to modify the content of cognitions about weight and body image, it could be beneficial to focus on changing how the individual interacts with her thoughts and feelings.

# Why ACT for Anorexia?



- To date, little or no efficacious established treatments for Anorexia (Berman, Boutelle, & Crow, 2009).
- Head-to-head randomized controlled trial with mixed eating disorders.
  - Cognitive therapy produced modest decreases in eating pathology whereas ACT produced large decreases.
  - ACT was more effective than cognitive therapy at increasing global functioning among those with eating pathology (Juarascio, Forman, & Herbert, 2010).
- Case examples of individuals who had unremitting anorexia after previous treatments indicated promising results with ACT (Berman, Boutelle, & Crow, 2009).

# Why ACT for Anorexia?



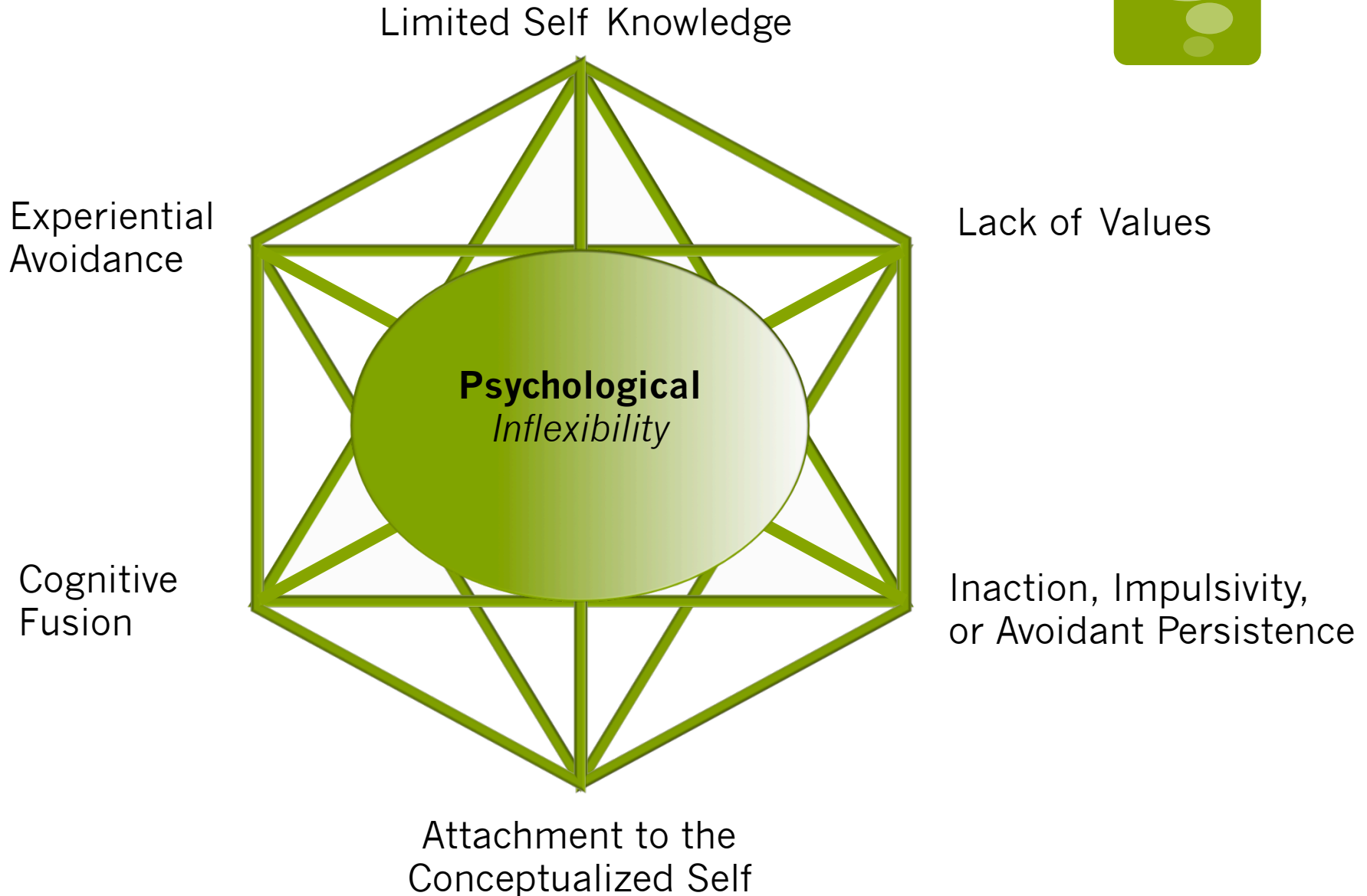
- ACT ~ **A**cceptance & **C**ommitment **T**herapy
- Entails:
  - 1) Acceptance of the uncontrollable thoughts and feelings you experience.
  - 2) Commitment and action toward living a life that you value.
- Does not focus on whether thoughts are rational or irrational, rather are your reactions to thoughts functional or non-functional?
- Views human suffering as unique because we have language.
  - Language gives us the ability to evaluate, judge, and critique.
  - Also leads to self-criticism, emotional avoidance, and becoming entangled with cognition.

# Why ACT for Anorexia?



- ACT ~ **A**cceptance & **C**ommitment **T**herapy
- ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.
- The ACT question:
  - “Are you willing to experience those things fully and without defense the things you are struggling to change and do what works for you in this time and situation?”
- The goal is to **FEEL** good, not to feel **GOOD**.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Experiential Avoidance

- Bob Dylan- *“People tell me it’s a sin to know and feel too much within”*
- The attempt to control or alter the form, frequency, or situational sensitivity of internal experiences (i.e., thoughts, feelings, sensations, or memories), even when doing so creates behavioral harm.
- Dieting is used to gain control over feelings about self. Occurs through Avoidance behavior, Distraction, Numbing, Direct control
- Loneliness, misery, or unhappiness that we attempt to avoid, dampen, suppress, or defend against.



# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Experiential Avoidance

- Emerges naturally from our ability to evaluate, predict, and avoid events. (E.g. “Anxiety is bad, if I do \_\_\_\_, I won’t be anxious which is good”.)
- When animals try to avoid pain, they are avoiding the situations and events in which physical pain actually occurs. This is adaptive for survival.
- Humans add a second level to suffering as a result of language.
  - Avoiding a negative thought. Example: “Don’t think of a baby.”
  - We avoid thinking about sad past events, potentially sad events in the future because we may feel as if the events were actually happening, when in fact our current state is nothing more than a thought or a feeling.
  - The language event becomes associated with the actual event.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Experiential Avoidance

- We suffer when we do not accept our reactions to painful events.
  - **Clean** discomfort – you get hit by a car, you have a disease, you lose a loved one.
  - **Dirty** discomfort – not accepting our feelings and struggling to avoid or get rid of them.
- Often based upon the myth that “It is normal to be happy”.
- Digging yourself into a hole – metaphor –
  - A child falls into a hole and attempts to dig out, harder and faster, which only results in being in a deeper hole.
  - Anorexia may be an attempt to dig out of a hole that life has let you fall into. Restricting only digs you deeper into the hole.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Experiential Avoidance

Differences in coping styles:

- Painful moments will hurt you if you don't do something to get rid of them
- The way to be healthy is to learn better ways to control and eliminate painful moments
- Being unable to control or eliminate a painful moment is a sign of weakness
- Painful moments can't hurt you even if they feel bad
- The way to be healthy is to learn to have painful moments and live effectively with them.
- Needing to control a painful moment is a problem

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Cognitive Fusion

- The tendency to get caught up in the content of what we are thinking so that it dominates over other useful sources of behavioral regulation.
- Emerges naturally from our ability to evaluate, predict, and avoid events.
- Excessive attachment to a thought that does not allow us to “be” in the present moment.
- The language event becomes associated with the actual event. Internal language gets overextended and concretized.
- Avoiding a negative thought. Example: “Don’t think of a baby.”

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Attachment to the Conceptualized Self

- When we become overly fixed to the categories and narratives we use to define ourselves.
- We attempt to define ourselves based upon “objective” facts because they are “true”, not necessarily because they are helpful for living.

## ■ Inaction, Impulsivity, or Avoidant Persistence

- An inability to behave effectively with regard to chosen values.
- Impulsivity or rigid persistence is manifested instead of flexible actions directed toward long-term ends.
- Behavioral repertoires narrow and become less sensitive to the possibilities for valued action in the current environment.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



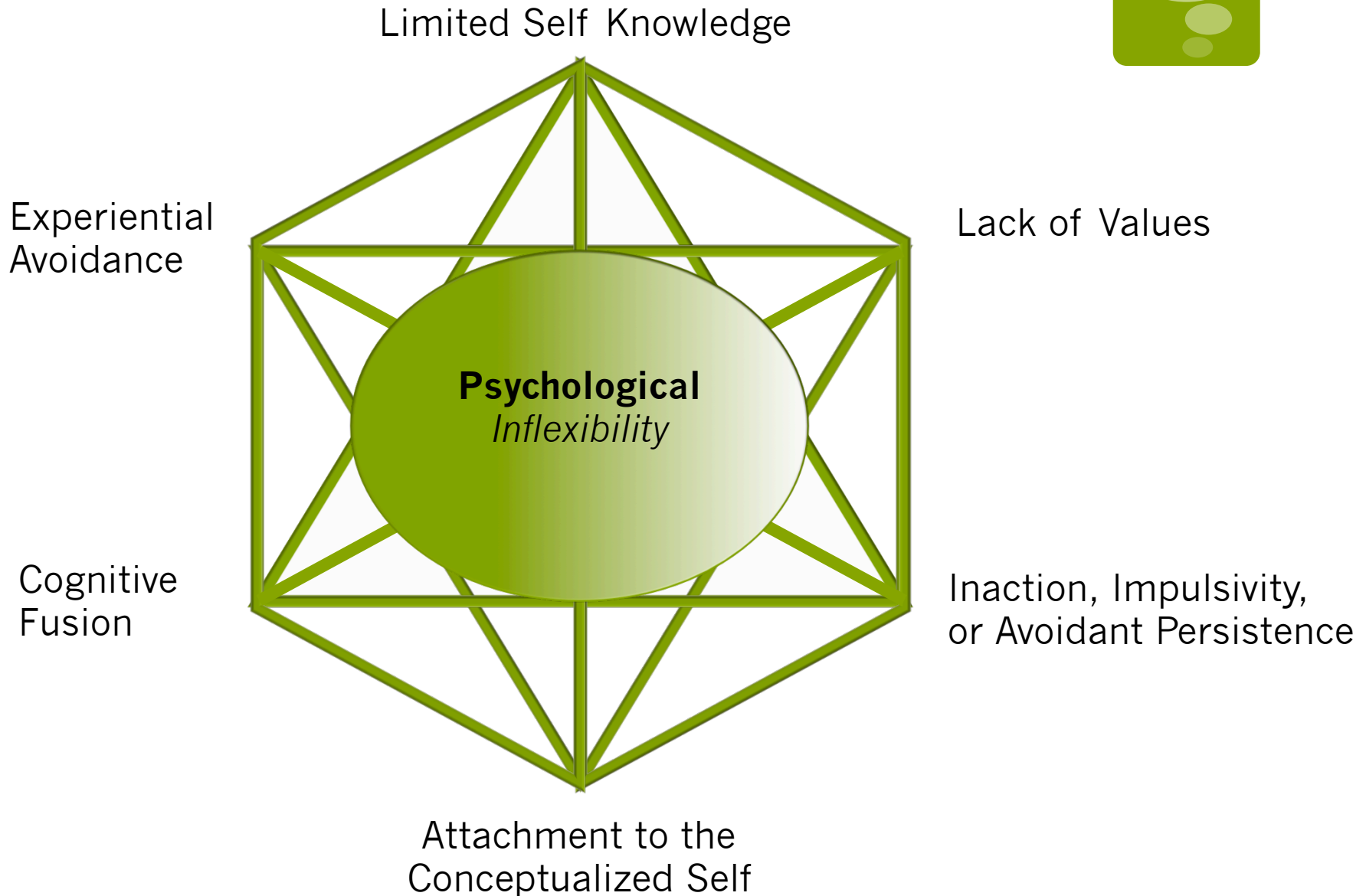
## ■ Lack of Values

- Values are chosen qualities of life that are represented by ongoing patterns of behavior.
- Pursuing a meaningfully chosen path in life.

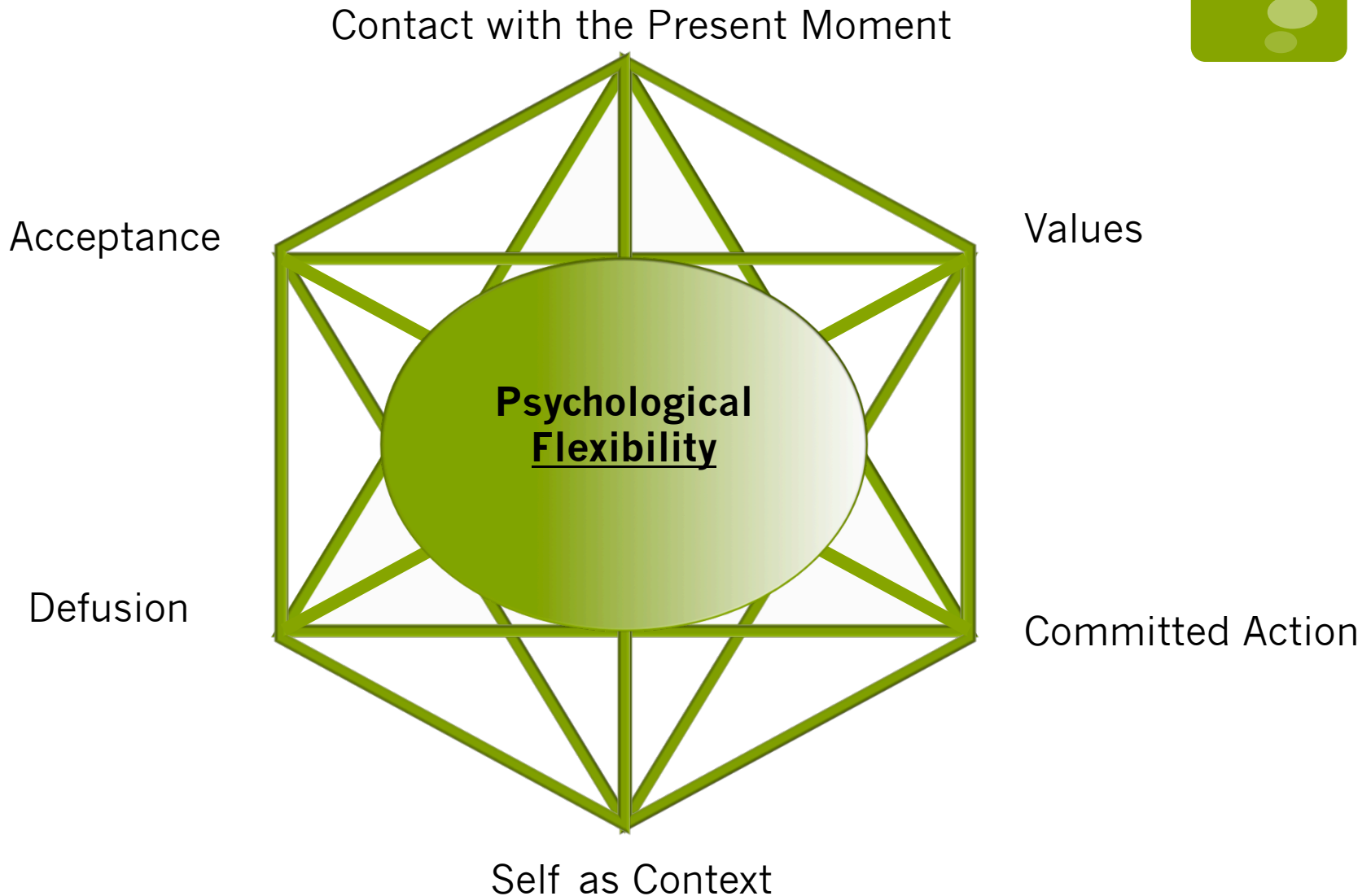
## ■ Limited Self-Knowledge

- Inability to access here-and-now information about one's experience.
- Often get stuck in past or future thinking dominates what is going on in the present.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



# ACT Model of Growth





# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- **Acceptance**
- Encourage direct moment-to-moment contact with previously avoided private events (that functionally do not need to be avoided).
- If control is the problem, why does it persist?
  - “If you are not willing to have it, you will”

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- Acceptance
- Getting Off your **BUT**
  - “I could go out with my friends, BUT I am self-conscious about my body”.
  - Saying that going out cannot occur alongside of feelings of self-consciousness.
  - Rather, “I could go out with my friends, AND I am self-conscious about my body.”

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- **Acceptance**

- The Tug of war in the mind of individuals with ED.
- Healthy voice versus ED
- How do we end the tug of war?
  - One of the teams can drop the rope. The team members would still be there, and the fight would be over.
  - Change the rules of the game.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- **Acceptance**
- Acknowledging the benefits of anorexia – sense of control, improves self-esteem and feelings of confidence, way to manage emotions, etc.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Defusion

- You are not what you think.
  - Say “I am fat and worthless”. How do you feel?
  - Fat and worthless is just a thought
  - By fusing oneself to this thought, you connect worthlessness with fatness and both worthlessness and fatness to you as a person. Fatness worthlessness and you become one and the same. You are fatness. Feelings of worthlessness become activated in you. You react to the thought as if you are the embodiment of fatness and worthlessness. You are IT!

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Self as Context

- Spirituality and transcendence as human experiences
- Making contact with the sense of self that is safe and consistent that promote a present focus.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Choices & Values

- Help patient to clarify the values they hold.
- Becoming motivated for treatment
- Help patient reorient their life from avoidance to approach of valued goals.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- **Contact with the present moment**
  - Mindful exercises to begin each session.
  - Leaves on the stream.
  - Doing versus Being



# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Leaves in a Stream

- Imagine that there are leaves floating in a stream below you. You are sitting under a tree on a hill a few feet away on a warm day watching the leaves float by. As each leaf goes by, allow it to have a thought or image of a thought on it, whichever applies for you. One thought is on each leaf. I want you to simply watch the leaves go by in the stream, without having to stop them or jumping in the stream with them. You are just to let them flow. This will probably be hard not to interrupt, and that is important. When you catch yourself interrupting the flow – when you are in the stream or have lost the exercise -- see if you can back up and see what you were doing just before that. Then go back to the tree and let the leaves float by once again.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



## ■ Metaphors

- Gun at the head
- Tug of war with a monster
- Quicksand
- Feed the tiger
- Train on tracks
- Remember three numbers
- Chinese Finger Trap
- Broken Dam

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- Metaphors
- **Chinese Finger trap** – Illustrates how doing something unexpected and seeming counterintuitive may be a better solution than persisting with the same old solution that does not work.
- The harder you pull the more the trap tightens.
- Dieting constrains and restricts your life and does not create space for you to live.

# ACT Model of Psychopathology



- Metaphors
- **Broken Dam** – You are walking along a nature path and find a broken dam....p. 60 anorexia workbook

# Therapy Exercises



- Declaration
- Tombstone
- What matters
- See Workbook

## References



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