Chapter 5
Mindfulness–Based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy:
A Practitioners View

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ABSTRACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one of the latest mindfulness-based behavior therapies shown to have compelling evidence and efficacy with a wide range of clinical conditions. ACT is so hard to categorize that it is often described as an amalgamation of existential, humanistic, cognitive-behavioural therapy. ACT is often referred as process-based CBT and is one of the 'third-wave' of behavioural therapies. It is currently the fastest growing evidence-based therapy in the world, with currently at least 304 Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) being recorded all over the world. It has proven effective in different cultural contexts with a diverse set of clinical conditions, from depression, Obsessive-compulsive disorder, chronic pain, grief, loss and terminal illness, anxiety, and workplace stress.

INTRODUCTION

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one of the latest mindfulness-based behavior therapies shown to have compelling evidence for a wide range of clinical conditions. As all behavioral therapies, in ACT as well, there is a major emphasis on taking action, and hence, the standard way of pronouncing ACT is to say the word "act" as a whole, and not as the initials A-C-T (Harris, 2009).

The last twenty years has been a steady rise for third wave behavioral therapies with a lot of prominence on acceptance and mindfulness strategies. In ACT, through the usage of mindfulness-based experiential exercises, people begin to get in touch and make contact with their internal events: thoughts, feelings, memories, and body sensations, and learn to take action guided by their values. There has also been special focus on process-based approach as the core modality, and hence ACT, being a part of this third-wave is commonly referred to as process-based CBT (Hayes & Hofmann, 2018).

PRIMER ON THE THREE WAVES OF BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

First Wave

The first wave came about during the 1960s with the popularity of B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning, and other behaviorists like Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning. This era is marked with principles that were investigated through work with animals and then taken on to be tested successfully with human beings. Cutting-edge methodologies were developed to treat clients with phobia such as systematic desensitization and even till today it is safe to assume that these have a stronghold as being evidence-based approaches. This era of behavioral psychology paved the way for preciseness and deep accurate work.

The first wave died soon because there was less emphasis placed on human cognition, thoughts, and feelings (Harris, 2009). In fact, in 1957, Skinner wrote a book 'Verbal Behavior' in which he laid the foundation for development of language in human beings. Interestingly, Steven Hayes, the originator of ACT, further developed this concept, because although Hayes was captivated by this book and its ideas, he also found a lot of limitations.

Second Wave

The cornerstone of second wave was about including human cognition as a vital strategy for behavioral change (Harris, 2009). This 1970s era also saw the rise of famous cognitive therapists like Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) had many evidence-based successful outcomes. However, focus on cognition seemed to have its own limitations.

A famous CBT study, where children stayed in the dark longer when they watched a video that trained to help them self-talk in a more positive light such as "I am a brave boy and I can stay in the dark!" was debunked when Steven Hayes and his team tested it out with an additional social context added in. Incidentally, when the children knew that the experimenter had access to watching them, they stayed longer, but when they were hoodwinked into thinking that the experimenter was not watching them, they did not stay longer. So, although CBT placed a lot of emphasis on the content of thoughts, this testing proved that the social context also was important (Hayes, 2019).

In the next discussion of third wave, there is a fundamental shift from content to context. It turns out now, in the 2020 era, CBT does not in fact work because of its cognitive disputation strategies, but because of its behavioral component (Hayes, 2019).

Third Wave

The fundamental transformation from second wave to third wave is to look at cognition not through content, but through *how you relate* to the content. So, it is about stepping back, noticing the function of thoughts and feelings, rather than what the thought in itself is about. A famous cognitive defusion strategy from ACT is, adding a label of "I notice I am having the thought…" (Harris, 2009). Accordingly, if clients are presenting with "I am a loser", they are encouraged to say, "I notice I am having the thought that I am a loser".

The envisioning of anxiety during second wave was based on one basic piece of information – that anxiety is toxic and getting rid of it was the sole goal. Control strategies such as practicing relaxation, positive self-talk, taking tranquilizers, safety measures like having a friend around, and taking your

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