

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy: An Introduction



**EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS, THEORETICAL
MODEL, AND BASIC INTERVENTIONS**

**ADAM BUHMAN-WIGGS, PHD
STORMONT VAIL
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Objectives



1. Describe the empirical history and support for the ACT model and its therapeutic efficacy
2. Understand the ACT Model and its theoretical underpinnings
3. Develop a basic understanding of the therapy process within the ACT model
4. Discern how elements of the ACT model and therapy process can inform your work as a clinician

My ACT “Street Cred”



- *23.75 hours formal CE in ACT in the past four years*
- *Previously taught basics of ACT in formal CEU didactics, as well as Intro to Counseling course*
- *Practiced ACT model and interventions daily after returning to full-time clinical practice July 2019 to Dec. 2021, and since September 2023:*
 - *Chronic pain*
 - *PTSD*
 - *GAD*
 - *Depression*
 - *Grief*
- *So, I know enough to do no harm – and to do this training! 😊*

A brief history of ACT



- A member of the “3rd Wave” of CBT treatments, grounded in Eastern traditions and Western CBT, esp. Relational Frame Theory
- Model established around 1999, with two foundational constructs:
 - Acceptance: *Willingness* to experience
 - Commitment: Living in line with *values*
- Major names: Stephen C. Hayes (founder), Kirk Strosahl, Kelly Wilson, D.J. Moran (I know this dude)
 - The original “bible” of ACT: Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Abbreviated model, FACT, developed in the last 10 years

ACT Defined



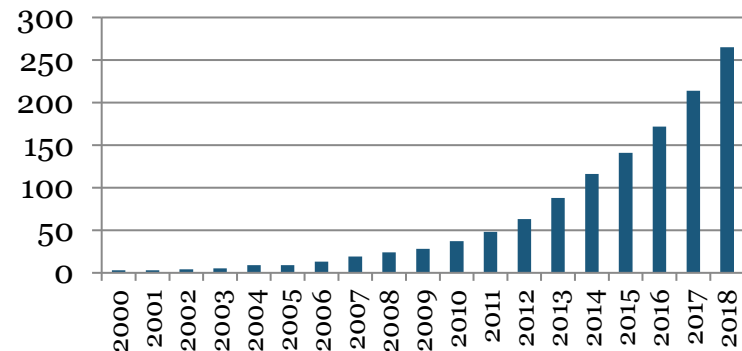
- Born of the behavioral perspective of Functional Contextualism:
 - The way the world is
 - What “works” in the world (“context”)
 - Value-driven action
- ACT is a contextual cognitive and behavioral therapy that uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.
- The objective of ACT is to foster ***psychological flexibility***:
 - “contacting the present moment fully as a conscious human being and based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behavior in the service of chosen values.”

The Empirical Case for ACT



- Over 1,300 RCTs and over 550 reviews of ACT outcomes since the 1990s (https://contextualscience.org/metaanalyses_and_systematic_scoping_or_narrative_reviews_of_the_act_evidenc)
- Regarded by APA Div12 as having at least modest support as an EST/EBP for: (<https://div12.org/treatments/>)
 - Chronic Pain (strong support)
 - PTSD
 - OCD
 - Depression
 - Mixed Anxiety disorders
 - Psychosis
 - Panic

Cummulative ACT RCTs



The Empirical Case for ACT



- Australian Psychological Society (2018*) adds a few additional approvals at Level II and IV (Level II = at least one RCT, Level IV = Case series with either posttest or pretest/posttest outcomes)
 - *Adults, Level II*
 - Anxiety disorders - Generalised anxiety disorder
 - Anxiety disorders - Social anxiety disorder
 - Anxiety disorders - Panic disorder
 - Borderline personality disorder
 - Depression
 - Hypochondriasis
 - Obsessive compulsive disorder
 - Pain Disorders
 - Psychotic disorders
 - Substance use disorders
 - *Adults, Level IV*
 - Binge eating disorder
 - Body dysmorphic disorder
 - *Children (age 10-14 years)*
 - Pain Disorders – Level II Evidence

*https://contextualscience.org/state_of_the_act_evidence

Central Premises of ACT



- Psychological pain is normal, it is important, and everyone has it.
- You cannot deliberately get rid of your psychological pain, although you can take steps to avoid increasing it artificially.
- You can live a life you value.

F.E.A.R. as the Enemy



- **Fusion with your thoughts**
 - Inability to separate yourself from thoughts as “truth” or “self”
- **Evaluation of experience**
 - Often negative, always engaging
- **Avoidance of your experience**
 - Symptoms develop to reinforce avoidance
- **Reason-giving for your behavior**
 - Struggling to make sense is still struggling

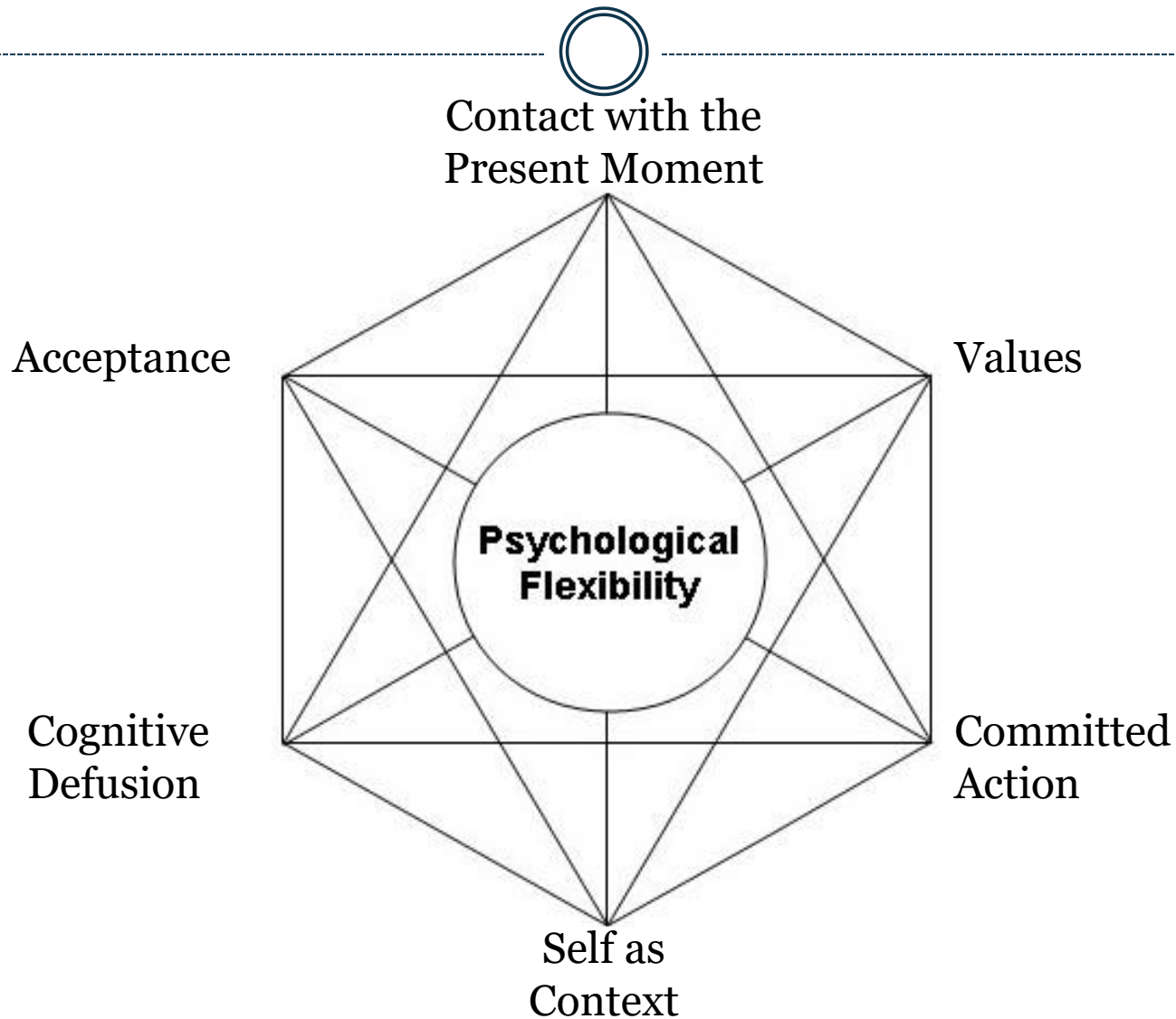
Six Aims of ACT



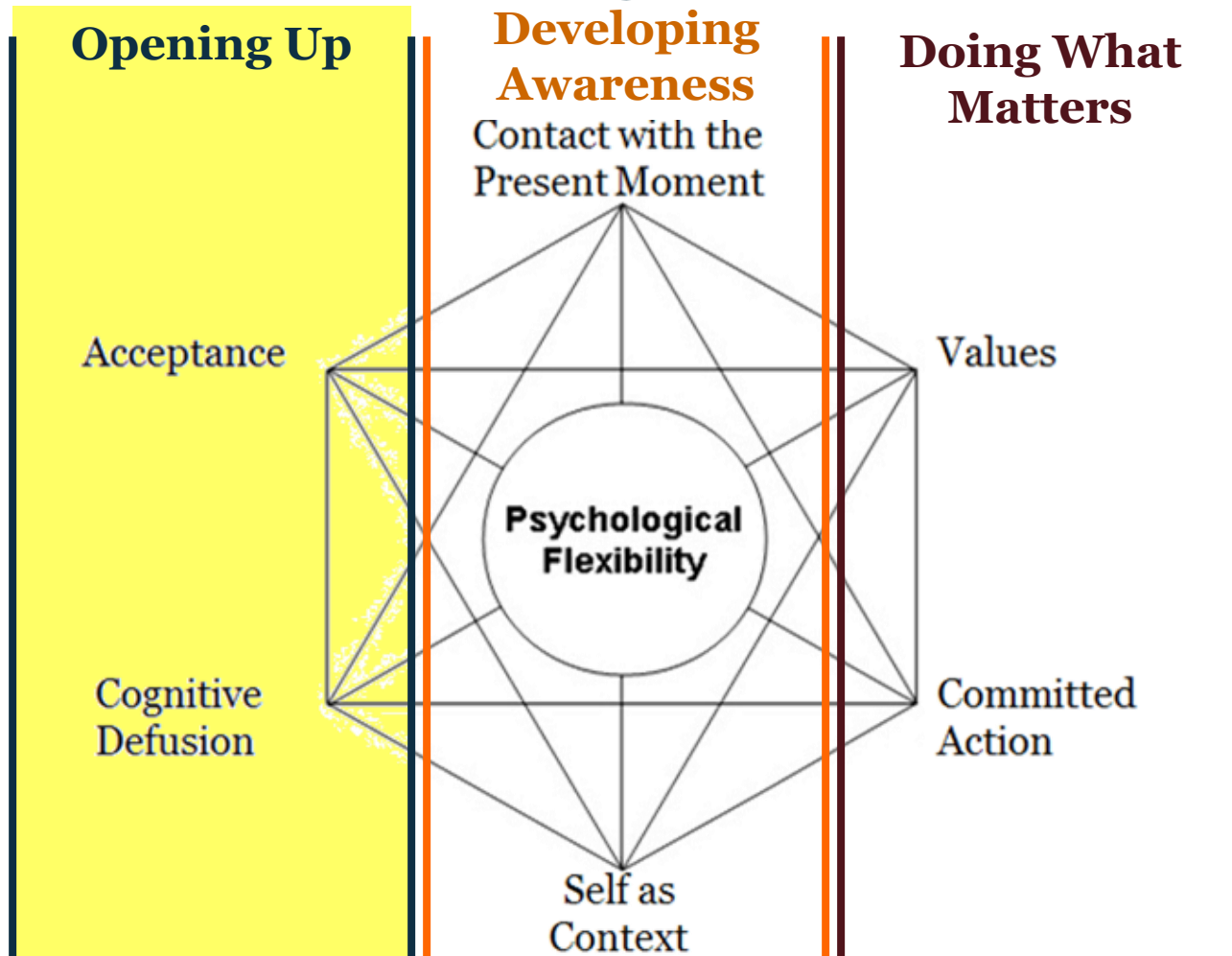
For patient/provider to:

1. Be in the present moment.
2. Accept what is.
3. Watch your thinking.
4. Be aware of yourself.
5. Know your values.
6. Carry out valued behavior.

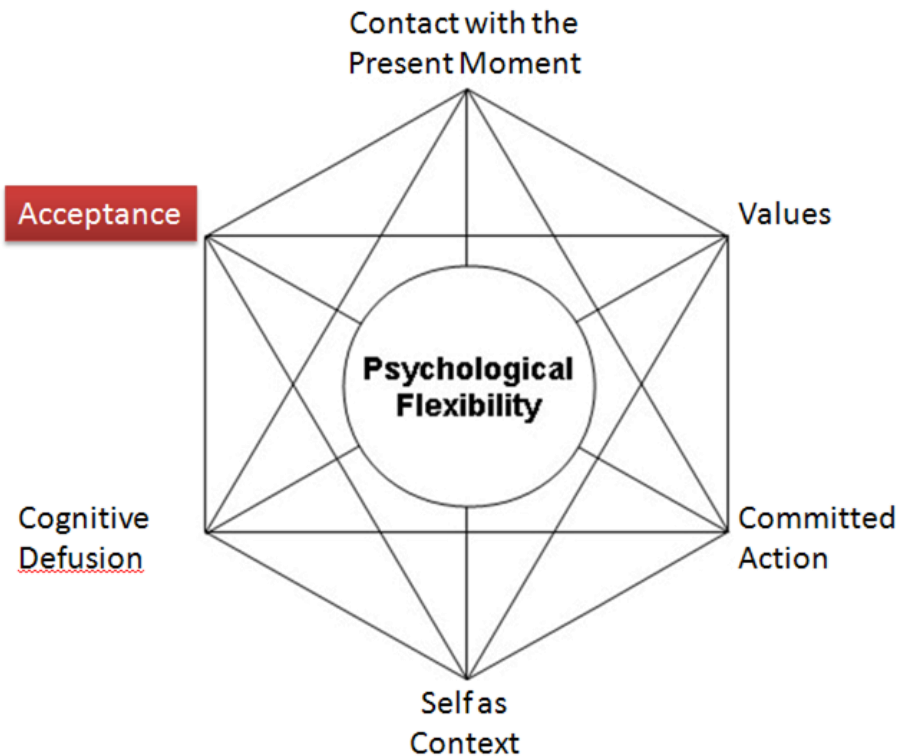
The ACT (“Hexaflex”) Model



The ACT Model



Acceptance

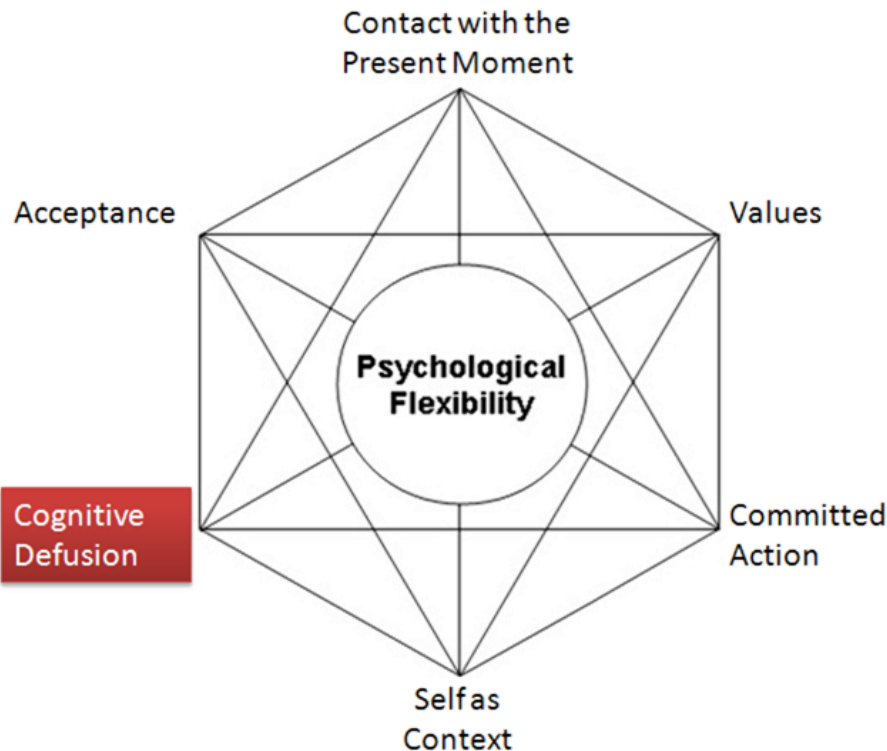


Opening up and making room for painful feelings, sensations, urges, and emotions.

In ACT, acceptance is not a passive resignation but an active acknowledgment.

Acceptance = Willingness

Cognitive Defusion



Learning to “step back” and separate or detach from our thoughts, images, and memories.

Recognizing that our thoughts are simply context, a context we can choose not to engage, but only observe.



Don't think about....



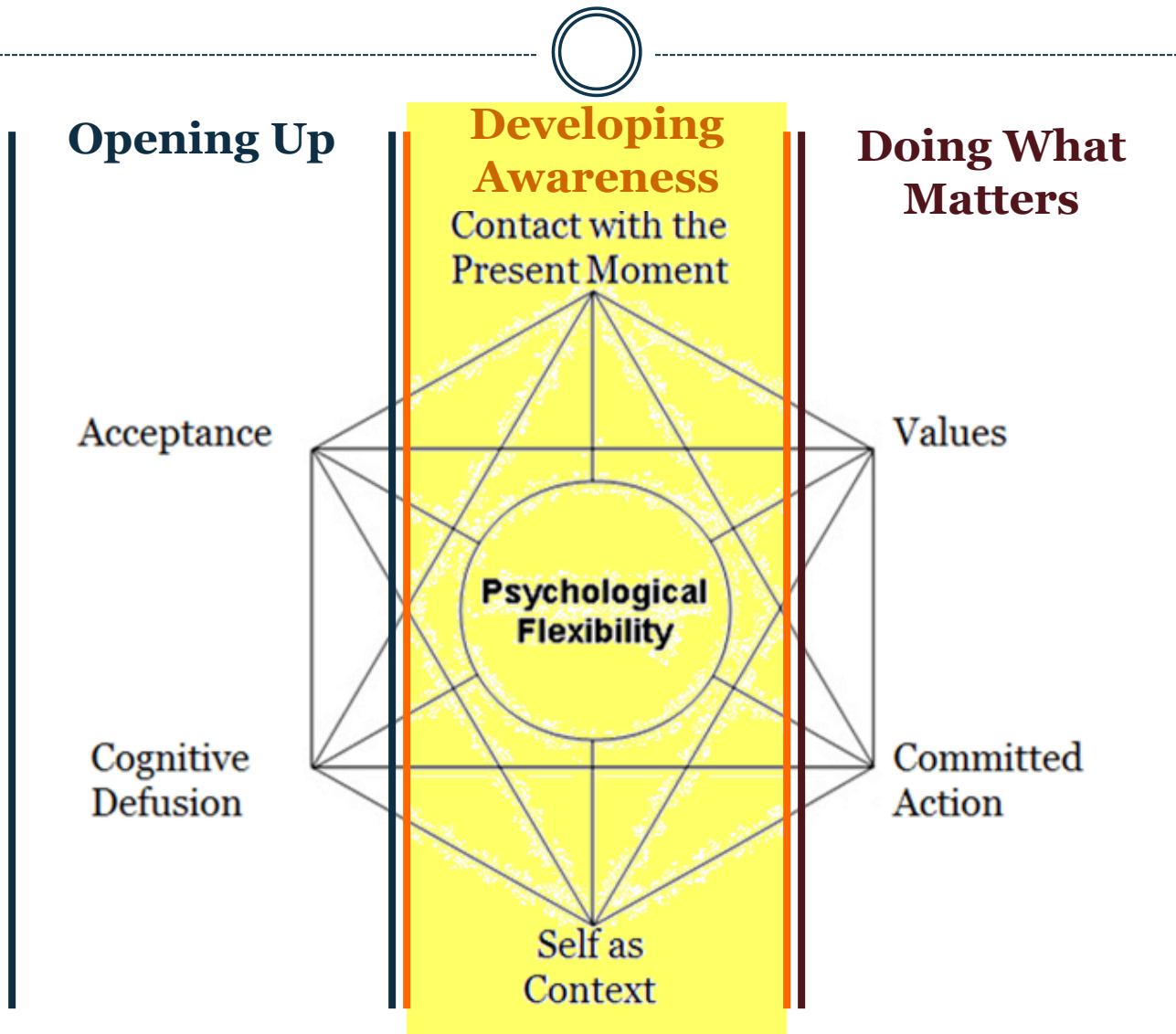
CHOCOLATE CAKE



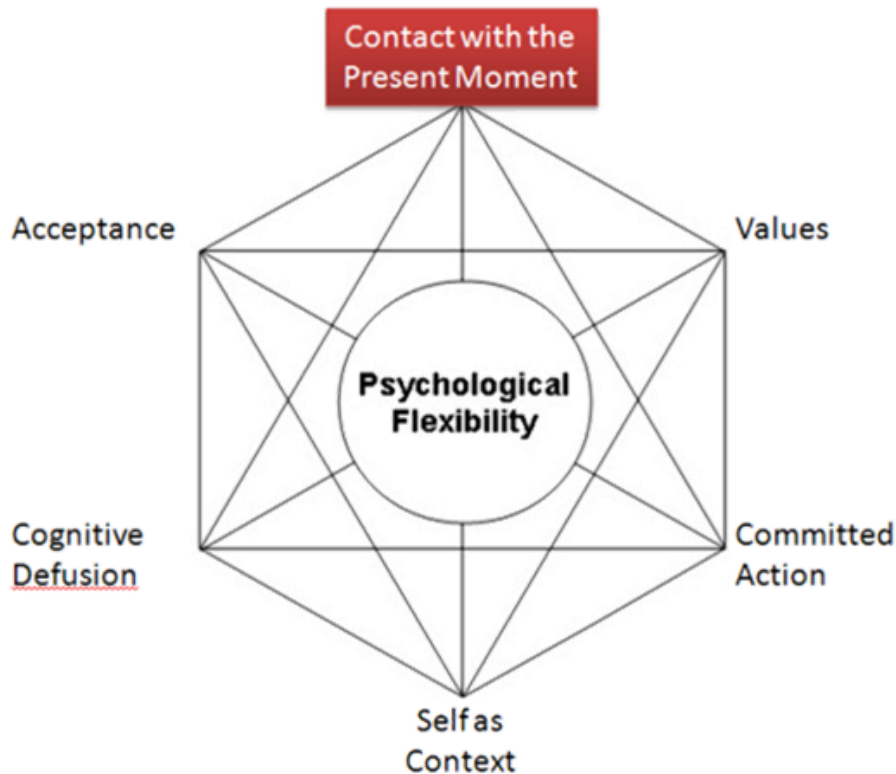
Defusion: Leaves on a Stream



The ACT Model



Contact with the Present Moment



Consciously connecting with and engaging in whatever is happening in this moment.

Contact with Present Moment



- About “therapist” as much as “client”
- Not just meditation
- Mindfulness:

*“paying attention
in a particular way:
on purpose, in the present
moment, and
non-judgmentally”
(Kabat-Zinn)*

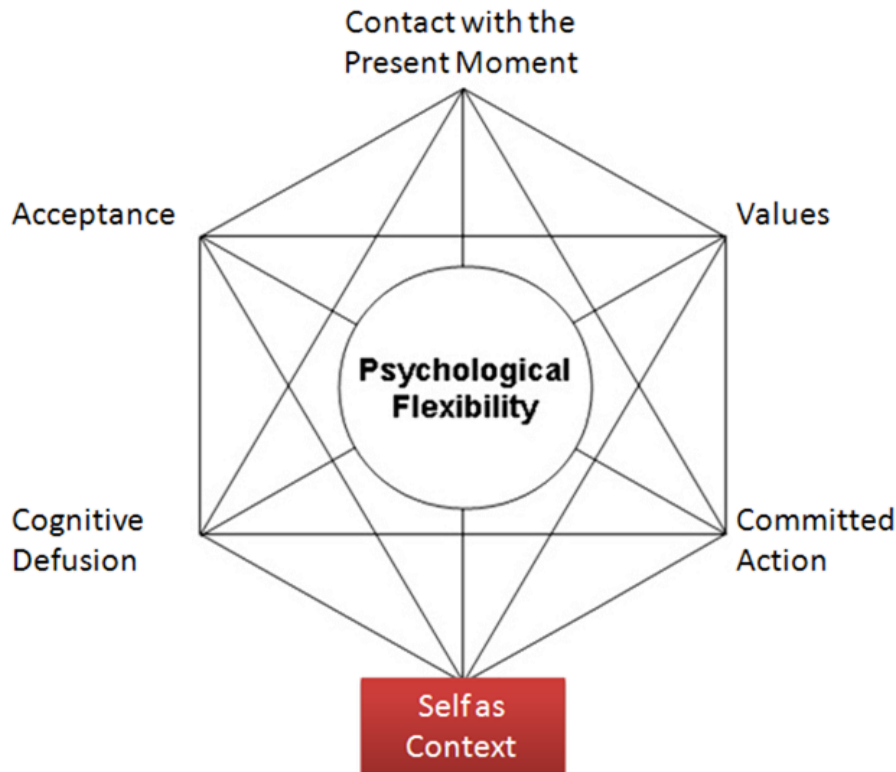


A Different Approach to Past, Present, & Future



- **Instead of...**
 - re-hashing the past
 - to make sense of the present
 - in order to predict the future...
- **ACT seeks to...**
 - minimize the distraction of dwelling in the past
 - or fantasizing about the future
 - in order to live richly in the present.

Self as Context



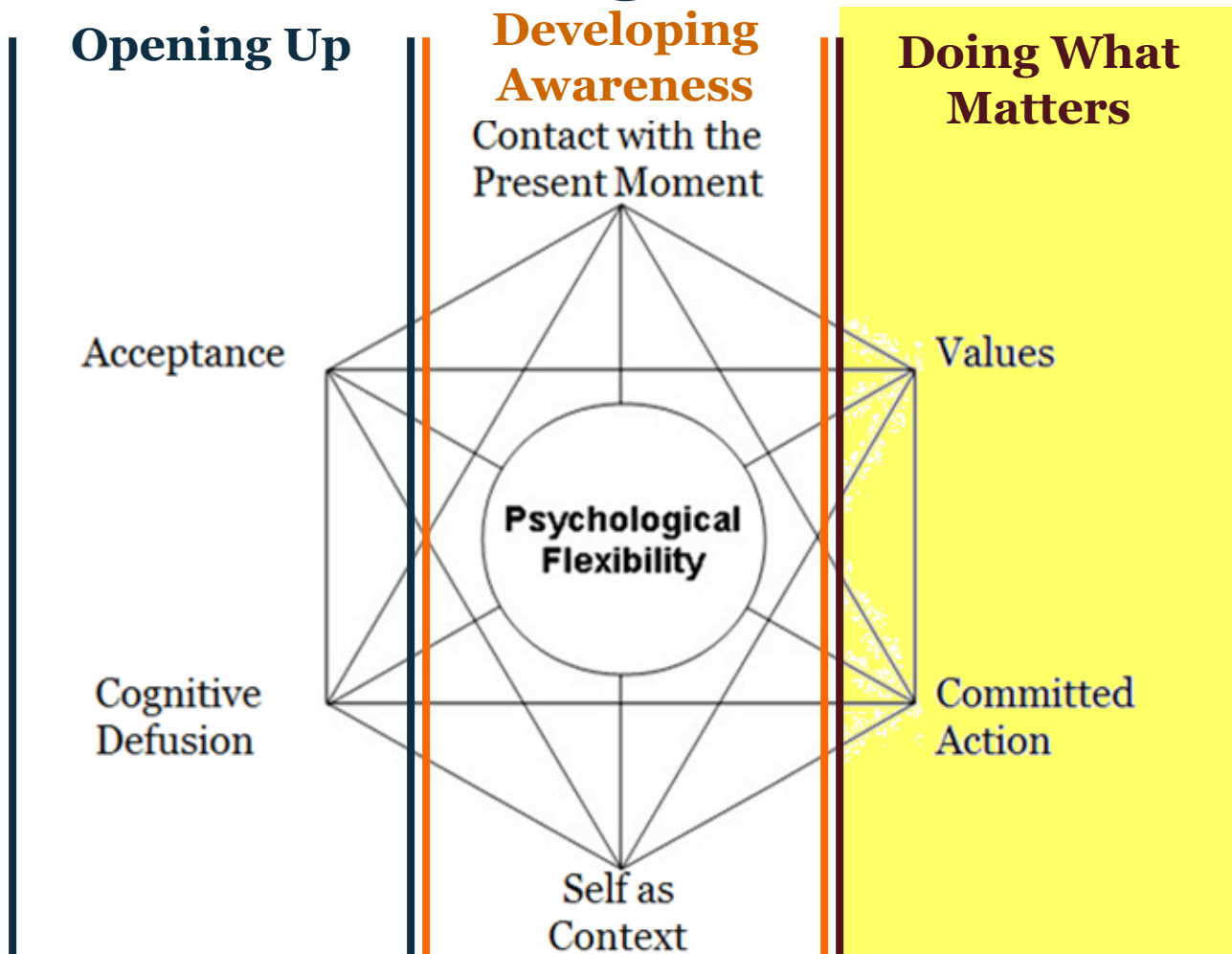
Developing awareness of the “observing self” that is aware of what we’re thinking, feeling, sensing, or doing in any moment.

Three Senses of Self

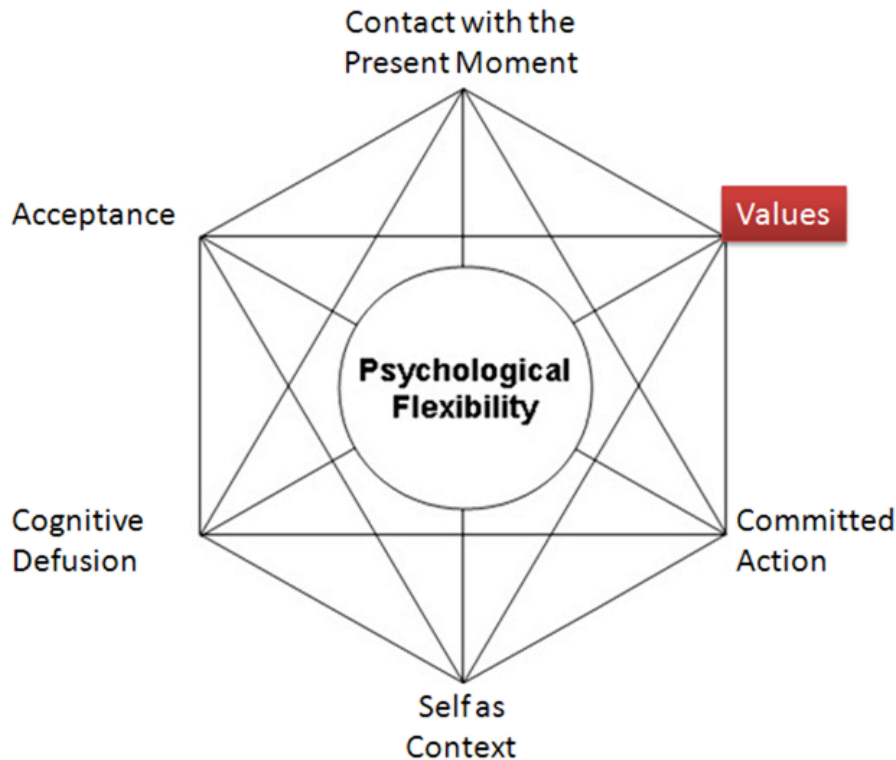


- **Conceptualized self**
 - Self-concept; self-description
 - “Who I am” as a person
- **Self-as-awareness**
 - Ongoing process of noticing our experience
 - Contacting present moment
- **Self-as-context**
 - Space from which “noticing” happens (the “observing self”)
 - The “I” (as opposed to “me”)

The ACT Model



Values



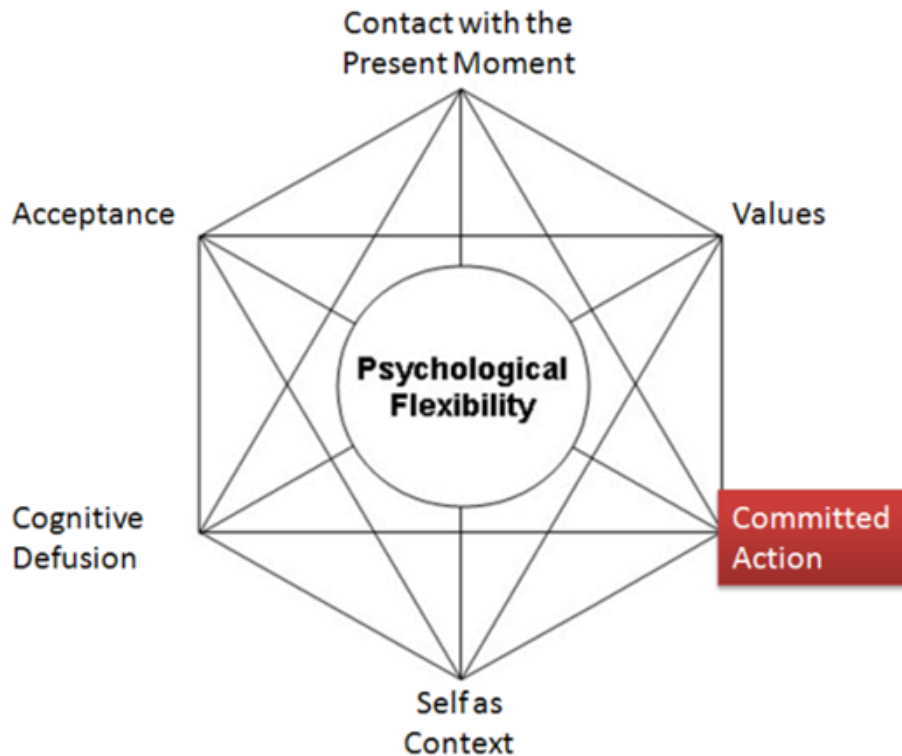
Knowing and clarifying desired qualities of ongoing actions, or chosen life directions.

Values



- In ACT, values:
 1. are here & now.
 2. are not about being justified.
 3. often need to be prioritized.
 4. are best held lightly.
 5. are freely chosen.
 - The battery exercise is a personal fav.

Committed Action



Taking effective action, guided by our values, even in the face of pain and discomfort.

Commitment



Values

- Direction
- Process-oriented
- Intangible
- Can't check off



Goals

- Destination
- Outcome-oriented
- Tangible
- Can check off



Saddlebag of Interventions

Lastly, let's look at a variety of interventions you can use in therapy today that reflect the ACT model and principles.

Be aware: additional and substantial training will be required to fully understand the model and use it as intended, in an integrated, flexible, and effective manner.

• Acceptance galore:

Unhooking	Thoughts/feelings don't always lead to action
Identifying the problem	When we battle with our inner experience, it distracts and derails us. Use examples.
Explore effects of avoidance	Has it worked in your life
Defining the problem	What they struggle against = barriers toward heading in the direction of their goals.
Experiential awareness	Learn to pay attention to internal experiences, and to how we respond to them
Leaning down the hill	Changing the response to material – <i>toward</i> the fear not away
Amplifying responses	Bring experience into awareness, into the room
Empathy	Participate with client in emotional responding
In vivo Exposure	Structure and encourage intensive experiencing in session
The Serenity Prayer	Change what we can, accept what we can't.
Practice doing the unfamiliar	Pay attention to what happens when you don't do the automatic response
Acceptance homework	Go out and find it
Discrimination training	What do they feel/think/experience?
Mindreading	Help them to identify how they feel
Journaling	Write about painful events
Tin Can Monster Exercise	Systematically explore response dimensions of a difficult overall event
Distinguishing between clean and dirty emotions	Trauma = pain + unwillingness to have pain
Distinguishing willingness from wanting	Bum at the door metaphor – you can welcome a guest without being happy he's there
How to recognize trauma	Are you less willing to experience the event or more?
Distinguishing willingness the activity from willingness the feeling	Opening up is more important than feeling like it
Choosing Willingness: The Willingness Question	Given the distinction between you and the stuff you struggle with, are you willing to have that stuff, as it is and not as what it says it is, and do what works in this situation?
Focus on what can be changed	Two scales metaphor
Caution against qualitatively limiting willingness	The tantruming kid metaphor – if a kid knew your limits he'd tantrum exactly that long; Jumping exercise – you can practice jumping from a book or a building, but you can step down only from the book – don't limit willingness qualitatively
Distinguish willing from wallowing	Moving through a swamp metaphor: the only reason to go in is because it stands between you and getting to where you intend to go
Challenging personal space:	Sitting eye to eye



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- Defusion favs:

“The Mind”	Treat “the mind” as an external event; almost as a separate person
Mental appreciation	Thank your mind; show aesthetic appreciation for its products
“I’m having the thought that ...”	Include category labels in descriptions of private events
Just noticing	Use the language of observation (e.g., noticing) when talking about thoughts
Open mindfulness	Watching thoughts as external objects without use or involvement
Focused mindfulness	Direct attention to nonliteral dimensions of experience
Sound it out	Say difficult thoughts very, very slowly
Sing it out	Sing your thoughts
Your mind is not your friend	Suppose your mind is mindless; who do you trust, your experience or your mind
Monsters on the bus	Treating scary private events as monsters on a bus you are driving
Feed the tiger	Like feeding a tiger, you strengthen the impact of thoughts but dealing with them
Who is in charge here?	Treat thoughts as bullies; use colorful language
Carrying around a dead person	Treat conceptualized history as rotting meat
Take your mind for a walk	Walk behind the client chattering mind talk while they choose where to walk
How old is this? Is this just like you?	Step out of content and ask these questions
And what is that in the service of?	Step out of content and ask this question
Get off your butts	Replace virtually all self-referential uses of “but” with “and”
Find a free thought	Ask client to find a free thought, unconnected to anything
Do not think “x”	Specify a thought not to think and notice that you do
Find something that can’t be evaluated	Look around the room and notice that every single thing can be evaluated negatively
Carry cards	Write difficult thoughts on 3 x 5 cards and carry them with you
Carry your keys	Assign difficult thoughts and experiences to the clients keys. Ask the client to think the thought as a thought each time the keys are handled, and then carry them from there



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• Self as Context:

Observer exercise	Notice who is noticing in various domains of experience
Therapeutic relationship	Model unconditional acceptance of client's experience.
Metaphors for context "confidence"	Box with stuff; house with furniture; chessboard con = with; fidence = fidelity or faith – self fidelity
Riding a bicycle	You are always falling off balance, yet you move forward
Experiential centering	Make contact with self-perspective
Practicing unconditional acceptance	Permission to be – accept self as is
Identifying content as content	Separating out what changes and what does not
Identify programming	Two computers exercise
Programming process	Content is always being generated – generate some in session together
Process vs outcome	Practice pulling back into the present from thoughts of the future/past
ACT generated content	Thoughts/feelings about self (even "good" ones) don't substitute for experience
Self as object	Describe the conceptualized self, both "good" and "bad"
Others as objects	Relationship vs being right
Connecting at "board level"	Practice being a human with humans
Getting back on the horse	Connecting to the fact that they will always move in and out of perspective of self-as-context, in session and out.
Identifying when you need it	Occasions where "getting present" is indicated (learning to apply first aid)
Contrast observer self with conceptualized self	Pick an identity exercise
Forgiveness	Identify painful experiences as content; separate from context



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- Values:

Coke and 7-Up	Define choice and have the client make a simple one. Then ask why? If there is any content based answer, repeat
Your values are perfect	Point out that values cannot be evaluated, thus your values are not the problem
Tombstone	Have the client write what he/she stands for on his/her tombstone
Eulogy	Have the client hear the eulogies he or she would most like to hear
Values clarification	List values in all major life domains
Goal clarification	List concrete goals that would instantiate these values
Action specification	List concrete actions that would lead toward these goals
Barrier clarification	List barriers to taking these actions
Taking a stand	Stand up and declare a value without avoidance
Pen through the board	Physical metaphor of a path – the twists and turns are not the direction
Traumatic deflection	What pain would you have to contact to do what you value
Pick a game to play	Define a game as “pretending that where you are not yet is more important than where you are” -- define values as choosing the game
Process / outcome and values	“Outcome is the process through which process becomes the outcome”
Skiing down the mountain metaphor	Down must be more important than up, or you cannot ski; if a helicopter flew you down it would not be skiing
Point on the horizon	Picking a point on the horizon is like a value; heading toward the tree is like a goal
Choosing not to choose	You cannot avoid choice because no choice is a choice
Responsibility	You are able to respond
What if no one could know?	Imagine no one could know of your achievements: then what would you value?
Sticking a pen through your hand	Suppose getting well required this – would you do it

Wrapping Up and Taking ACTION



Foster ACCEPTANCE

- Help your clients be present and be present with them
- Accepting what is and where you are is the beginning of freedom
- No need to justify or explain, only to defuse

Build COMMITMENT

- The future springs from values
- Values create strength and direction
- Help clients KNOW and CHOOSE to pursue what they want in spite of what they don't

Thank you all for attending!



**REFERENCES/LITERATURE ARE AVAILABLE
UPON REQUEST, JUST EMAIL ME:
ADAM.BUHMANN-WIGGS@MYMLC.COM**

**ALSO, CONSIDER JOINING
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