

Working With Values and Defusion in ACT

This handout provides an overview of key concepts and actionable strategies to aid your work with clients. By reviewing these principles of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), you can enrich adaptive responses to distressing thoughts, and guide your clients confidently toward meaningful change.

Values in ACT

Every client has their own unique set of values, a personal compass of what truly matters. We explore these values in therapy to better understand the motivations behind the desire for change.

- **Identify values:** ask your client about what's truly significant to them in life. What qualities do they aspire to exhibit?
- **Understand the “why”:** determine why a client wants to engage in challenging therapeutic work.
- **Anchor to the North Star:** highlight the central values to keep in focus during therapy. For instance, the values of independence, growth, connection, and adventure were identified as the guiding principles in the case study provided.

Defusion in ACT

Defusion techniques aim to help clients create a mental distance between themselves and their thoughts, sensations, or emotions. This helps them observe rather than get entangled in their experiences.

1 The Fish Metaphor

- **Concept:** think of life as a serene pond where the client is a fish. Above the water, fishermen dangle tempting baits (hooks). These hooks symbolize life's challenges, fears, triggers, or negative thoughts.
- **Goal:** not to get rid of these hooks but to learn not to bite them. Recognizing these hooks can reduce the client's tendency to get hooked by distressing thoughts or feelings.

2 Functional Analysis

- **Identify the trigger:** recognize what begins the chain of reactive behavior.
- **Immediate response:** observe the immediate cognitive or emotional reaction.
- **Short-term benefits:** understand the immediate relief the avoidance offers.
- **Long-term consequences:** analyze the long-term impacts of such avoidance on life and alignment with core values.

3 Promote Curiosity Over Fear

Encourage clients to become curious about their sensations. Understanding these sensations in the therapy room can be more potent and beneficial than addressing them outside of the therapeutic setting.

Key Points

- Core values act as the client's North Star, guiding them toward meaningful change. In the case provided, Sarah's values were independence, growth, connection, and adventure.
- Defusion techniques in ACT lead clients to observe their sensations, thoughts, and emotions from a distance. The aim is to cultivate curiosity about these experiences rather than reacting with fear.
- The fish metaphor aids defusion, teaching clients to recognize their personal hooks and navigate life without getting caught by them.