

Experiential Work in ACT for Depression

Experiential work is a fundamental aspect of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) when working with clients experiencing depression. This worksheet will guide you in implementing various experiential interventions to facilitate practical learning opportunities for your clients. Use the following activities and techniques during therapy sessions to enhance the experiential dimension of your work.

Experiential Activities

- **Breathing exercise:** at the beginning of a session, guide the client in a brief breathing exercise. For instance, “Close your eyes and focus on the physical sensations of your breath and the sensations of sitting.” Such exercises promote present moment awareness and grounding.
- **Sensory exercise:** ask clients to engage their senses and notice their sensory experiences when entering the therapy session. Encourage them to observe their breathing, physical sensations, and environment. This practice fosters present moment attention and shifts the focus from internal thoughts to external stimuli.
- **Noticing thoughts and feelings:** invite clients, at appropriate moments, to pause and observe their internal experiences, including thoughts and feelings. Use language that emphasizes observation and labeling, such as, “What thoughts and feelings can you notice right now? Can you label them?”

- **Defusion work:** introduce defusion exercises that help clients create distance from their experiences. Encourage them to adopt a perspective from which they can observe their thoughts, feelings, and sensations without complete identification. Guide them to say, “That’s the experience I’m having,” rather than getting caught in rigid beliefs. Emphasize the transient nature of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.
- **Self-stories:** explore self-stories with clients, especially those struggling with depression. Help them to identify persistent and unhelpful thoughts as self-stories that influence their behaviors. For example, if the self-stories are “I’m broken” or “There’s no point”, encourage clients to recognize these as narratives rather than as absolute truths.
- **Time travel exercise:** engage clients in a future-oriented exercise in which they imagine the consequences of continuing to be governed by self-stories. Ask questions like, “How would your life look a year from now if you continued to sleep and avoid work or socializing?” This contrasts with an alternative scenario of being more active and pursuing employment. Encourage clients to reflect comparatively on their choices in this way.

Reflection Questions

One of the core elements of ACT is to be able to model and explain the concepts and techniques from your perspective. For that reason, it is always important to reflect, as therapists, on our own work. The following questions can help you with developing your personal stance on experiential work.

- How comfortable do you feel incorporating experiential work into your therapy sessions?
- Consider the sensory exercise mentioned. How can you adapt it to suit client preferences or therapeutic goals?
- Reflect on your approach to defusion. Can you integrate additional techniques to help clients create distance from their experiences?

- How can you guide clients in exploring their self-stories most effectively? What strategies can you employ to challenge rigid beliefs and narratives?
- Reflect on the time travel exercise. How can you ensure that clients understand the consequences of their current choices and empower them to envision alternative paths?

Key Points

- Experiential work is a core component of ACT for depression, focusing on practical learning rather than theoretical explanations.
- Implement breathing exercises, sensory awareness, noticing thoughts and feelings, defusion techniques, exploring self-stories, and time travel exercises in your therapy sessions.
- Emphasize the transient nature of experiences and help clients to develop a broader perspective on their thoughts, feelings, and self-narratives.