Living a Valued Life: Integrating Mindfulness & Acceptance & Commitment Therapy into Trauma Treatment

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Agenda

• Introduction and mindfulness practice
• Mindfulness and trauma
  • Conceptual definitions
  • Psychological Mechanisms
  • Why is this an important tool for trauma patients?
• Mindfulness in ACT: The Six Core Processes
• Bringing ACT processes into trauma treatment
• Case examples woven throughout
• Questions and discussion
Mindfulness

- Paying **attention** in a particular way: on purpose, in the **present moment, and non-judgmentally** (Kabat-Zinn, 1994)

- Fosters **awareness** of moment-to-moment experiences in the mind and body

- Promotes a **flexible** and **open** approach to one’s experience, widening **behavioral choices**

- **Demonstrated utility** for a number of medical and mental health issues and general well-being
Mindfulness

- Provides a grounding mechanism, flexibly switching attention from thoughts, feelings, and sensations to the breath or other focus
- Inhibits secondary elaborate processing of distractions
- Developing an “observing mind” allows for a deeper understanding of how the mind works
- Curiosity, openness, flexibility
Mindfulness

- Emotion regulation
  - Recognition and acceptance of internal experiences
  - Ability to control behavior in the presence of unpleasant experiences
- Decreased rumination
  - Present-moment cognitive style
  - Positive reappraisal and perspective-shifting
- Nonattachment
Mindfulness

- Langer (2014): Mindfulness as the opposite process of "mindlessness"
  - **Mindlessness:**
    - reliance on heuristics, stereotypes, assumptions
    - being trapped in categories
    - automatic behaviors that yield undesirable outcomes
  - **Mindfulness:**
    - creating new categories
    - flexibly applying novel solutions to different situations and concepts
    - openness to new information and different perspectives, understanding that perspectives are limitless
Therapist Stance

• Deep present-moment engagement

• Personal mindfulness practice: formal and/or informal

• Model non-judgmental stance
  • Avoid evaluative statements
  • Use neutral descriptive phrases, i.e., “pleasant/unpleasant” instead of “good/bad”
In-Session Practice

• Mindfulness exercises:
  • Attention to breath
  • Mindful eating
  • Mindful walking
  • Grounding
  • Self-compassion
In-Session Practice

- Open-ended questions about client’s present-moment experience
  - Invite curiosity about sensations, feelings, and thoughts
- Make connections between body responses and verbalizations/thoughts
- Develop awareness, the observing self
Mindfulness & Trauma

- Trauma yields specific deficits in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning
  - Auditory and sustained attention
  - Inhibition of automatic responses
  - Attentional bias toward threat and negative emotion stimuli; inability to disengage
  - Intense negative reactions associated with trauma memories (e.g., fear, sadness)
  - Emotional numbing as a function of depletion
  - Avoidant behaviors and limitation of activity
Mindfulness & Trauma

- Mindfulness skills are well-suited to address the deficits experienced after trauma
  - Attentional training to develop the capacity to disengage from highly evocative stimuli
  - Reduce worry and rumination
  - Address alexithymia: labeling emotions
  - Nonjudgment, reappraisal
  - Acceptance of experience
  - Curiosity, openness, flexibility
Mindfulness & Trauma

• At the core of trauma is a fundamental loss of safety and security
  • Injury to the autonomic nervous system
  • The body remembers; deep in the viscera
  • Maladaptive behaviors may be seen as attempts to regain a sense of safety and stability

Rothschild (2000); van der Kolk (2014)
Mindfulness & Trauma

- Mindfulness skills can reintegrate mind and body to promote sense of safety
  - Understanding of sensory input and proprioception
  - Cultivates balance, clarity, and grounding capacities
  - Creates more choices as well as “putting on the brakes”

Rothschild (2000)
Considerations with Trauma

- Mindfulness is often associated with stillness and formal meditation practice.
- The internal distress (hyperarousal) experienced by those who have experienced trauma can make formal practice difficult.
- Essential to maintain awareness of these difficulties and adjust exercises accordingly.
Considerations with Trauma

- Developing a **mindful mindset**, noticing present-moment experience and assumptions
- Modifications to formal practice:
  - **Offer choices**
  - Eyes open
  - Increased cuing
  - Attention to external stimuli versus internal sensations
  - Focus on development of dual awareness, balancing experience of exteroceptive and interoceptive cues
Efficacy with Trauma

- **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**
  - Improved self-empowerment, self-acceptance, and self-care; decreased reactivity and distress (Dutton et al., 2013)
  - Significant reductions in symptoms of depression and PTSD posttreatment and at 4-month follow-up for adult survivors of childhood trauma (Kimbrough et al., 2010)
  - Significant gains of prior study were maintained after 2.5 years (Earley et al., 2014)
Limitations with Trauma

- Improvement in quality of life and increase in mindfulness skills among Veterans but no improvement in PTS severity (Kearney et al., 2013)

- MBSR with Veterans led to significant decreases in PTS posttreatment that were not maintained at follow up (Niles et al., 2012)

- Barriers:
  - Brevity of treatment
  - Need for specific emotion regulation skills
  - Imperative for acceptance: overcome active suppression
What is ACT?

- ACCEPTANCE and COMMITMENT therapy
  - Multilayered, dual process
  - Pronounced: “Act”
What is ACT?

- Transdiagnostic therapeutic approach
- Behavioral in nature
- Uses mindfulness, experiential exercises, and metaphors to cultivate “psychological flexibility”
- Targets “experiential avoidance” as the source of psychopathology and suffering
- Encourages movement toward values and goals through six core processes
Experiential Avoidance

- Efforts to change or avoid unwanted thoughts or sensations (Hayes et al., 1996)
- The root of psychological distress (Hayes et al., 2004)
- Typically results in negative behaviors: substance use, withdrawal from activities, self-injury, isolation
- “If you don’t want it, you’ve got it”
ACT Hexaflex

Contact with the Present Moment

Acceptance

Values

Cognitive Defusion

Committed Action

Self as Context

Psychological Flexibility
ACT Hexaflex
ACT Efficacy

- Anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Stress
- Pain
- Weight management
- Smoking cessation
- Trauma

Laifer, Wirth, & Lang (2017)
ACT & Trauma

- Experiential avoidance is the key feature of trauma
  - Avoidance of internal experiences
  - Deliberate withholding of emotions
  - Thought suppression
  - Difficulty with impulse control
  - Difficulty with engaging in goal-directed behavior

Walser & Westrup (2007)
Case Conceptualization in ACT

- Not simply assessing a particular symptom
- Need to understand the **functional impact** of the presenting complaint
  - Client’s History
  - Current situational triggers
  - The domains of avoided private events
  - Specific behavior avoidance patterns
  - **Unworkable strategies**

Adapted from Hayes & Strosahl (2004)
Case Conceptualization in ACT

- What private experiences is the client attempting to avoid?
  - Traumatic memories
  - Negative thoughts
  - “Bad” emotions: sadness, guilt, shame
  - Unpleasant physiological states

Adapted from Hayes & Strosahl (2004)
Case Conceptualization in ACT

- What avoidance behaviors are being used and how pervasive are they?
  - Overt behavioral avoidance
  - Internally-based emotional control strategies
  - Behaviorally-focused emotional control strategies
  - In-session avoidance or emotional control behaviors

Adapted from Hayes & Strosahl (2004)
Goals of Treatment

- Being able to take chances, even when feeling insecure and afraid
- Choosing whether or not to respond to various feelings, particularly anger
- Staying committed to what you care about and taking action toward goals, even when feeling anxious, tired, or unmotivated
- Growing stronger in the face of mistakes and failure
Mindfulness in ACT

- Core process of ACT: contact with the present moment
- Each session begins with a brief mindfulness exercise
  - Positive impact on sustained and divided attention
  - Present-moment awareness allows one to move away from automatic maladaptive thoughts
  - Non-judgmental stance counteracts negative thoughts
- Mindfulness is the vehicle that allows other ACT processes to unfold
Finding Inner Stillness

- **Mindful breathing**
  - Anchor in the storm
  - Allows you to pause and respond thoughtfully
  - Can be done any time, anywhere

- **How to do it**
  - Notice your breath
  - Fill the balloon
  - Practice!
Willingness ~ Acceptance

• Willingness to be open to thoughts, feelings, and sensations, even those that are difficult

• Recognizing the costs and “unworkability” of avoiding or trying to change them

• Experiential avoidance
  • Short-term gain vs long term cost
  • Loss of vitality in living
Observing the Battle Within

- CONTROL IS THE PROBLEM
  - Attempts to rid oneself of negative internal experiences are unsuccessful and time-consuming
  - Control strategies, while appealing, are unworkable
  - A wish for control ~ which is impossible ~ is a key element that maintains trauma symptoms

- Metaphors: Tug-of-War, Chinese Handcuffs
Emotional Awareness

• LABELING EMOTIONS
  • Joy
  • Fear
  • Anger
  • Shock
  • Love
  • Disgust
  • Sadness
  • Guilt
  • Curiosity

• The unworkability of shutting them off
Willingness ~ Acceptance

- **Willingness**: An alternative to Tug of War
  - “I’m willing to have ____________ (discomfort), in order to ________________ (do something you care about)”

- Using mindfulness skills to work through difficult feelings

- Sometimes you will choose willingness and other times you will not
Cognitive Defusion

- Noticing thoughts without interpreting them as literal truths
- Rather than dispute thoughts, as in traditional CBT, individuals are taught to accept a thought as one of many things that pass through the mind on a given day
- Metaphors: Leaves on a Stream, Passengers on a Bus
Understanding the Mind

- The mind is a problem-solving machine
  - Survival
  - Fixing
  - Evaluating

- The difference between solving inside problems and outside problems

- Using observing skills
Defusing from Thoughts

• Exercise: the “bad” cup
  • The mind’s evaluation doesn’t change things, simply your view of things
  • You don’t have to “buy” your thoughts

• Never mind your mind
  • Observing what your mind says
  • Observing what you do when you listen to it
  • Listening to values
  • Deciding what to do
Self-as-Context: The Observing Self

- We are not defined by our thoughts, feelings, and sensations: *these are momentary, passing experiences*
- We exist as beings amid ever-changing phenomena
- Healthier perspective-taking
- Metaphors: Chessboard, Soup Bowl, Trash Can
Self-as-Context: The Observing Self

- **Self-as-Context:** another observing skill
  - Thoughts come and go
  - Feelings change
  - Bodies change
  - “You” have an inner capacity to observe, learn, and grow that does not change

- **Wise View:** moving away from the self-limiting stories that the mind tells
Benefits of the First Four

• Acceptance and awareness of the present moment
  • Gain control over attentional processes
  • Counteract unsuccessful emotion regulation strategies

• Development of an observer self
  • Defuse from unhelpful thoughts
  • Gain a balanced perspective on experience
  • Reduce thought suppression
  • Decrease attachment to rigid beliefs, self-evaluations, and predictions
Identification of Values

• Life your life in a way that is deeply important and meaningful for YOU

• Chosen life directions that reflect purpose and meaning and serve as guideposts for living

• Multiple life domains: work, relationships, health, spirituality

• Exercise: Imagine Your Funeral
Knowing What You Value

- Keeps you focused and engaged on your path
  - “I stand for this”
  - “I care about this”
  - “I want to be about doing this”

- YOU decide
  - Exercise: Getting a Glimpse of Values
  - Exercise: Daring to Dream
Valuing Yourself

• “Self” values
  • Having courage
  • Being creative
  • Being wise
  • Adventuring
  • Being curious
  • Enjoying food
  • Enjoying entertainment

• Learning
  • Being self-disciplined
  • Having fun
  • Being spiritual
  • Being attractive
  • Relaxing
  • Being healthy
  • OTHER VALUES…
Values in Relationships

- Understanding others
- Being humble
- Being kind
- Being honest
- Being humorous
- Forgiving

- Communicating well
- Being loving
- Being accepting
- Being supportive
- OTHER VALUES...

- Developing empathy: Inside-Outside Vision
Values in the Wider World

- Building things
- Working cooperatively
- Promoting fairness
- Improving the world
- Being careful
- Designing things
- Helping others
- Persisting
- Achieving
- Leading
- Keeping promises
- Organizing
- OTHER VALUES...

- Inner success versus outer success
Values vs. Goals

- Values are unending
- Failure and mishaps do not signify an end
- Values are deeply personal
- **Goals are concrete stepping stones to values**
Committed Action

- Identify goals that accompany values
- Ongoing behavioral change
- Start small… set up for success!
Steps to Success

• Set goals that are specific

• As difficulty arises, remind yourself **WHY** you are taking a specific action

• Think of the benefits

• **Plan for difficulties!**

• Continue along your journey of valued living
ACT Summary

Acceptance:
Open up

Defusion:
Watch your thinking

Values:
Know what matters

Psychological Flexibility:
Be present, open up & do what matters

Committed action:
Do what it takes

Self-as-context:
Pure awareness

Be here now:
Contact with the present moment
ACT Summary

Be Present

Contact with the Present Moment

Self-As-Context

Committed Action

Psychological Flexibility

Open Up

Acceptance

Values

Do What Matters
Self-Compassion

- Kindness toward oneself in the face of struggle and suffering
- Counterintuitive in our culture
- Research demonstrates that those who are higher in self-compassion are generally higher in measures of well-being
- We all deserve to be kind to ourselves!
Self-Compassion

• **HOW?**
  • What would you say to a close friend?
  • What actions might you do to comfort a friend?
  • Employ mindfulness to manage difficult emotions and values to determine course of action
  • **Choose kindness!**
Online Resources

• Association for Contextual Behavioral Science
  www.contextualpsychology.org

• ACT for Adolescents
  www.actforadolescents.com

• ACT Mindfully – Dr. Russ Harris
  www.actmindfully.com.au

• Self-Compassion – Dr. Kristin Neff
  www.self-compassion.org
Books

- Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life: The New Acceptance & Commitment Therapy
  - By Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D., with Spencer Smith

- ACT Made Simple
  - A quick-start guide to ACT basics and beyond
  - By Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap

- Acceptance & Commitment Therapy
  - For the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder & Trauma-Related Problems
  - A Practitioner’s Guide to Using Mindfulness & Acceptance Strategies
  - By Robyn D. Walser, Ph.D., Darragh Westrup, Ph.D.

- An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
  - By Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap

Foreword by Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D.
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