



# Integrating Spirituality and Promoting Ego Transformation: The Role of ACT Therapy

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# The Ego

- The term “ego” began with the conception of Sigmund Freud’s structure of the personality in the 1860s and connotes one’s conscious and thinking self (Sheedy, 2014). As human beings, we live in the realm of our mental and emotional selves, and this human existence can either be bound to a path of anxiety, repression, and unawareness or to a path of enlightenment and transformation. James (1902) stated that there must come a unification of the self in the process of spiritual growth and transformation.



# Transformation

- In traditional Eastern religions, spiritual enlightenment equals death of the ego. Phipps (2001) stated, “Every major enlightenment teaching in the world has long held that the highest goal of spiritual and indeed human life lies in the renunciation, rejection and, ultimately, the death of the need to hold on to a separate, self-centered existence” (page 38). In the Western culture, there is an emphasis on the acceptance and transformation of one’s ego rather than its death. To strengthen self-esteem, promote spiritual growth, and heal the ego, psychotherapy now has many new meditative and mindful awareness practices for resculpting the brain and transforming the ego (Bingaman, 2012).

# What is the ego?

- According to Freud, the ego is part of personality that mediates the demands of the id, the superego and reality. The ego prevents us from acting on our basic urges (created by the id), but also works to achieve a balance with our moral and idealistic standards (created by the superego). While the ego operates in both the preconscious and conscious, its strong ties to the id means that it also operates in the unconscious. When interpreting Ego Strength Scales in the MMPI, the Es scale score can be viewed as an indication of overall psychological adjustment. In addition, high scores on the Es scale indicate persons who:
  - Have fewer and less severe symptoms
  - Lack chronic psychopathology
  - Are stable, reliable, and responsible
  - Are tolerant and lack prejudice
  - Are alert, energetic, and adventuresome
  - Are determined and persistent

# A Strong Ego

- “There is a perception in today’s world that comes from both the Eastern mystical traditions and the Western intellectual and religious tradition that there is something wrong with the ego. From a creativity perspective, there is nothing wrong with the ego per say, it is only a vehicle for experience and we can transform it to become whatever we desire. We create it by what we believe, how we believe, how we think, and by the choices we make (Ferlic, 2014).” ACT therapy uses mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based living to free oneself from depression, emotional pain, negative thinking and self-judgment and allows the client to commit to a life that is valued.



# Getting Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life

- Hayes (2005) uses a wonderful metaphor to describe the ACT approach to psychological issues. He compares the function of a psychological disorder and the form it takes in one's life to someone standing in a battlefield fighting a war. The war is not going well. The person fights harder and harder. Losing is a devastating option: but unless the war is won, the person fighting it things that living a worthwhile life will be impossible. So the war goes on. However, in fact, he or she can quit the battlefield and begin to live life now. The war may still go on, and the battlefield may still be visible. The terrain may look very much as it did while the fighting was happening. But the outcome of the war is no longer very important and the seemingly logical sequence of having to win the war before beginning to really live has been abandoned.



# Mindfulness, Acceptance, and Values



- ACT is based on a new model of cognition. The model underlies specific techniques, which are designed to help you change your approach to problems and the direction in which your life has been going. These techniques fall into three broad categories: mindfulness, acceptance, and value-based living.



# Mindfulness

- Jon Kabat-Zin (2005) defines mindfulness as “moment to moment non-judgmental awareness cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-judgmentally and as openheartedly as possible” (p. 108). Brewer, Bowen, Smith, Marlatt, and Patenze (2009) stated, “A recent consensus definition of mindfulness emphasizes two complementary elements: (1) the placement of attention on the immediate experience; and (2) adopting an open curious, accepting attitude towards that experience” (p. 169). These elements are essential spiritual disciplines for living in the here and now moment and letting go of the “oughts” and “ifs” of the past (Nouwen, 1994).

# Mindfulness, Ego, and Spirituality



- Martin and Martin (2012) stated that the ego exists with our physical and mental body, and when we live just from the human aspect, we become separated from God. In addition, the authors add that your ego strength involves the degree to which one knows, accepts, and works with human imperfections. Mindfulness helps bring the ego into balance and allows the individual to embrace human imperfections and to manage stress and conflict. Also, mindfulness allows us to share both the suffering and grace of others and reminds us that we are all connected in an unseen spiritual stream (Jacob-Stewart, 2010).

# Immune System and Empathy

- Meditation bolsters immunity, strength, flexibility, and the production and secretion of Beta endorphins. The following is found at
- <http://www.eocinstitute.org>:
- 1. *Meditation boosts antibodies.* A recent study confirmed that, after given weekly meditation training for 8 weeks, 48 biotech workers had significantly higher levels of antibodies than the control group, their coworkers, as well as higher levels than before the study. Best known for neutralizing foreign agents like viruses and bacteria, antibodies are paramount to a healthy immune system, thereby making meditation a frontrunner for the immune system's best exercise award.
- 2. *Meditation melts away stress.* Meditation, through its ability to undo the damage caused by daily stress, is your immune system's greatest ally. When you focus in meditation, you release stressful thoughts and remove yourself from the daily pressures and demands on your body, mind, and emotions. This creates a more positive state, increasing oxygen uptake and blood flow, while allowing feelings of relaxation, love, trust, and well-being to permeate.

# Immune System, continued

- 3. Meditation stimulates immune system brain-function regions. Meditation increases electrical activity in the prefrontal cortex, the right anterior insula, and right hippocampus; all parts that control positive emotion, awareness, & anxiety. These are also the areas of the brain which act as a command center for your immune system, and when stimulated, make the immune system function much more effectively. A fortified immune system wards off all would-be invaders.
- 4. The immune system is intimately linked to thoughts. Since your immune system, for reasons unknown, responds to both negative thoughts and positive thoughts, meditation creates the perfect environment for the immune system to flourish. This means better health, more energy, and greater happiness. In case you didn't know, these are the ingredients for a wonderful and productive life.
- 5. Everyone wants to be happy and healthy. Is it such a surprise that happiness and health are intertwined? Through meditation, you increase your health by increasing your happiness, reducing stress, and stimulating your brain to activate your immune system. There are no surgeries, pills, or magical potions which can do all that, which is why meditation is your key to a strong immune system.

# Empathy

- Several studies suggest that mindfulness promotes empathy. One study found that premedical and medical students who participated in an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction training reported significantly higher empathy with patients. Other studies concerning therapists have found that mindfulness meditation helped the counselor experience greater empathy toward clients and scored higher on measures of self-reported empathy than therapists who did not meditate.



# Experiential Activities

- Exercise in Sensing
- The Prayer of the Heart
- Loving Kindness Meditation
- Heart Rhythm Meditation



# Etiology: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)



- As more knowledge is attained regarding interconnectedness between mind, body, and spirit; there has been an emergence of a more holistic approach to not only psychiatry but the practical application from a mental health perspective (Culliford, 2011).
- A holistic approach has expanded because there is a universal reality that all individuals experience some suffering and attempt to find a way to heal from it and hopefully find meaning out of it ( Hayes, 2005; Gundy, Woidneck, Pratt, Christian, & Twohig, 2011).

# Etiology: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

- Knowing that human suffering is normal and that we desire to alleviate that suffering; it is critical to consider the reality that suffering needs to be an “accepted” part of life that one cannot escape.
- The concept of acceptance can help increase understanding of the normalcy of suffering as a universal problem that cannot be completely eliminated ( Hayes, 2005; Gundy, Woidneck, Pratt, Christian, & Twohig, 2011).

# Definitions of Acceptance



- Rogers, Steen, & McGregor (2013), “..acceptance is central to interpersonal relationships and is considered a core element of some therapeutic approaches” (p.113).
- Rogers, Steen & McGregor (2013) view acceptance in a spiritual context in which a client can learn to accept all aspects of self which include “feelings, thoughts, actions, and sensations” (Rogers et al, 2013, p.117) especially in relation to object relations theory.
- Hayes (2005), “acceptance is the act of receiving... taking completely, in the moment, without defense” (p. 45).

# Tenants of Acceptance in ACT

- Behind the notion of acceptance is how individuals apply meaning and understanding based upon experiences which creates a learned relation.
- Individuals attempt to suppress feelings including physical sensations especially in relation to a somatic pain or distressing emotions that are commonly related to events (Frances, Miller, & Mack, 2005; Hayes, 2005).
- The attempt to suppress or problem-solve these emotions by avoidance or alleviation in various forms as a means of self- control and regulation are counterproductive (Cioffi & Holloway, 1993; Hayes, 2005; Hayes, 2012,).

# Tenants of Acceptance in ACT, continued

- The spiritual healing application process that can happen with acceptance, includes the power of acknowledging that acceptance involves a person stepping back, acknowledging, being aware, and taking action that is value driven (Hayes et al., 2006; Hayes 2005).
- With acceptance, one is making room for the experienced and not attempting to control or regulate it (Gundy et al., 2011).





# Tenants of Commitment (ACT), continued

- Part of the perspective of acceptance is being committed to the process.
- This involves being committed to accepting feelings, thoughts and their subsequent physiological response (Hayes, 2005)
- This leads to individuals being “committed” to the process of spiritual transformation that can be clearly identified through evaluating one’s personal values (Hayes, 2005)



# Tying it all together

## (Psychological Processes of ACT)

- Six psychological processes that are evident in the ACT protocol (Hayes, 2012; Hayes, 2005; Gundy, et al., 2011)
- The six processes encourage the use of psychological flexibility
- These processes create connection between acceptance, commitment to the process, and begin a life of valued-based living
- When specific approaches are utilized, ego transformation and spiritual connectedness can occur but should be considered in relation to the change process.
- Connection (connected to the present moment)
- Defusion (stepping back and detaching from thoughts and worries)
- Expansion (making oneself available to painful feelings and sensations)
- Observing self (awareness and attention in the mind)
- Values (the desire for your life that are deeply rooted)
- Being committed to taking action to assess personal values

(Hayes, 2012; Hayes, 2005; Gundy, et al, 2011)

# The change process in ACT

- Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of change is a linear model that “incorporates an understanding of the ‘natural’ dynamic tendencies that individuals show regarding self-change” (Petrocelli, 2002, p. 23).
- This change process is applicable both within and outside of a therapeutic setting as one attempts to navigate the process of adapting thinking, behavior, and functioning to a more optimal level of functioning (Petrocelli, 2002).
- Precontemplation (Denial, lack of awareness that there is a problem)
- Contemplation ( an individual begins to evaluate one’s life through the processes of consciousness raising, dramatic relief, and environmental reevaluation)
- Preparation (aware of problem, taking small action steps such as gathering evidence but not fully committed)
- Action (Cognitive shift and behavioral change occurring)
- Maintenance ( ways to reinforce the behavioral changes)

# The Change Process in ACT

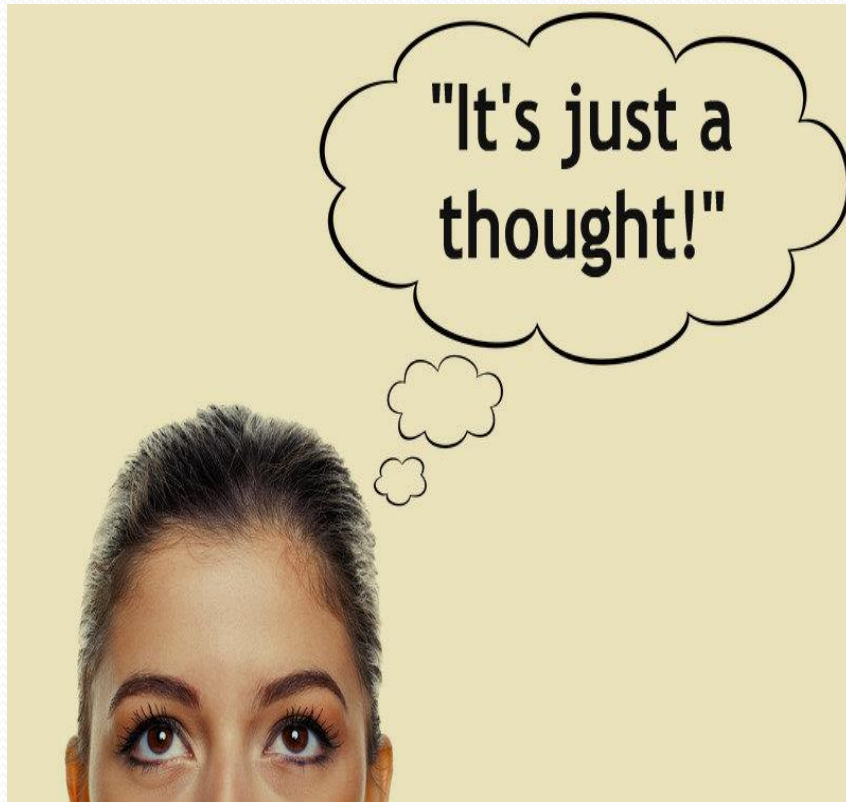
- Part of the commitment process in ACT is the process of growth that is transformational as *change* occurs
- When considering the implications that spirituality can have on ego transformation, a clinician can approach the promotion of change as a form of spiritual transformation (Jankowski, 2002).



# ACT Activities to promote: acceptance, commitment, & value-based living

- Cognitive Diffusion
  - The Power of the Word
  - Separating Thoughts from Their Referents
  - Are not methods for eliminating or managing pain but rather how to be present in the here and now
  - When we “think” a thought; it structures our world BUT when we can “see” a thought, one can see how the world is structured and that we are the ones doing the structuring (Hayes, 2005).

# Cognitive Diffusion Exercised



- Milk
- Floating leaves on a moving stream
- Reflection

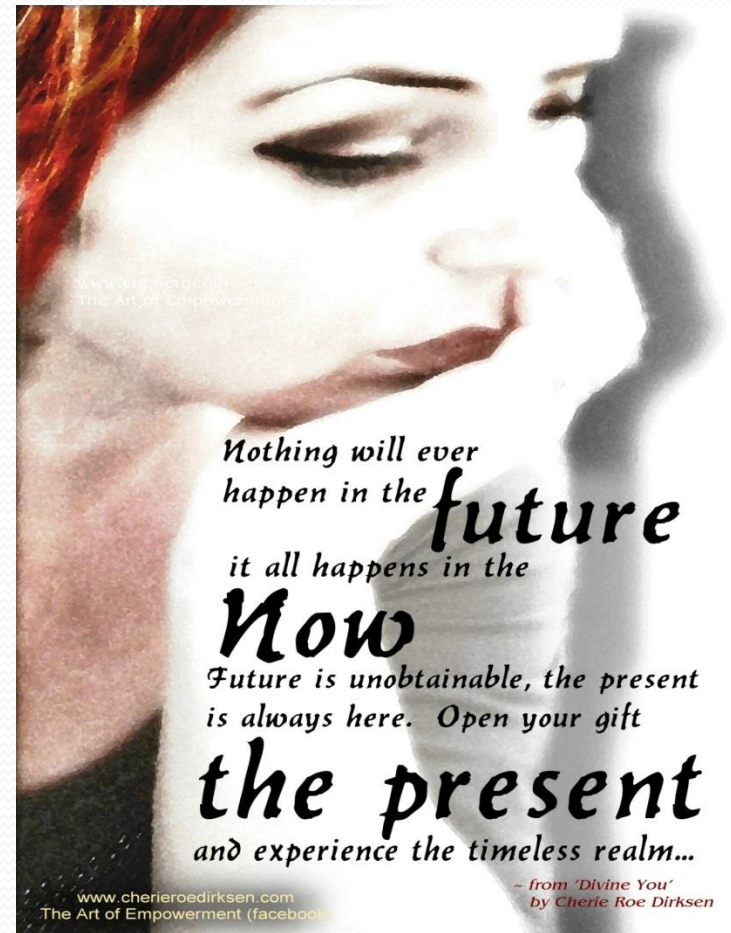
The goal of these exercises is to help clients realize it is just a word and not attach meaning to it. This can be a powerful way to recognize that one is more than a mere thought but a spiritual complex being (Hayes, 2005)



# Activity: Present Moment

- Silent Walking
- Minute Breathing Space

Having present moment awareness helps individuals to enhance their understanding of personal thoughts, beliefs, and subsequent emotions and behaviors (Hayes, 2005; Brady & Whitman, 2012).





# Expansion and Observing Self Exercises

- Expansion, Observing Self & Acceptance

- Willingness: the pain in your head

Part of the expansion of one's experience is a sense of willingness. It is about embracing all the thoughts, feelings, and memories that show up and merely accepting them.

- Observing self

- Self-Awareness: I am ; Experientially, I'm not that

It is critical that individuals on the journey to ego transformation, evaluate self-concept. Knowing that there are three aspects of self: the observing self, self in relation to thoughts, and the ongoing process of self-awareness and growth (Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, & Dymond, 2001), one needs to evaluate the self in relation to thoughts because it is a script that needs to be understood.

# Value-based living

- Value based living involves an assessment process
  - Example:  
<http://www.valuescentre.com/pva/>
  - 10 Domains
- Direction
- Choice
- Values are Not:
  - Goals
  - Feelings
  - Not in place to get you what you want
  - Does not mean the path is always straight
  - They are not in the future
- Values are:
  - Responsibility
  - They are always perfect because they are your own.
  - Is a powerful choice

# Value Based-Living

- Who or what will you serve?
- Individuals must decide what is important and pursue that direction
- You have the power and ability to live in the service of what you value
- The word “values” is rooted in the Latin root to mean “worthy and strong” (Hayes, 2005, p.166).



# 10 Value Domains to Consider

- Marriage/Couple/Intimate Relationships
- Parenting
- Family Relations (Other than intimate relations and parenting)
- Friendship/Social Relations
- Career/Employment
- Education/Training/Personal Growth and Development
- Recreation/Leisure
- Spirituality
- Citizenship
- Health/Physical Well-Being

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