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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy ACT (pronounced "act", not A-C-T)

I like to spread the word about ACT because it gives a great way to conceptualize mental health problems and improvement. I also think it's the most scientifically supported psychotherapy (which is my own take, an uncommon view, but for context I do have a PhD in experimental clinical psychology).

ACT is helpful, interesting and deserving of being more well-known than it is.

If I had to pick one type of psychotherapy to recommend to most people who have never tried psychotherapy, it would be ACT. If they've already tried a fair amount of evidence-based psychotherapy, I'd suggest somatic experiencing, which I offer in sessions over Zoom: see penock.com.

Online resources

- [▶ ACT: Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Overview for Therapists](#) – the key section is between 10:00 and 24:00 explaining the 6 components of "psychological flexibility"
- See [this diagram](http://thisdiagram.com) of the 6 components (from neshnikolic.com/hexaflex)
- With the [ACT Matrix | a simple perspective taking exercise](#), you can map out your current life of what's difficult inside, how you're reacting to that, and where you want to go in a very ACT-y way
- Here is a search tool to [Find an ACT Therapist](#), in case you're currently seeking a therapist (this is on contextualscience.org, the official ACT association website)

What to know about ACT

ACT is a type of psychotherapy, one of the "third wave" therapies that is a successor to CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy). Behavior Therapy was the "first wave", Cognitive Therapy (by Aaron Beck) was "second wave" and is now referred to as CBT, and the "third wave" therapies all incorporate mindfulness (including Mindfulness-Based CBT, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and ACT).

ACT's development started in the 1980's, with its [foundational book](#) published in 1999. Its popularity has grown steadily since 2000, as well as the breadth and quality of its research.

In my experience talking to people, maybe half of psychotherapists have heard of it, though often only vaguely. Very few non-therapists have heard of it.

A positive definition of mental health: psychological flexibility

In ACT, there's no particular need to focus on "disorders", trauma or chronic negative emotional states. Rather, we want to move towards mental health, defined as having "psychological flexibility". Here are some alternative (yet compatible) ways of defining the concept.

Psychological flexibility includes both present-moment processes (being flexible with attention, connected to body, de-identified from thoughts) and life processes over time (able to pursue values via effective actions, not just avoiding challenging experiences).

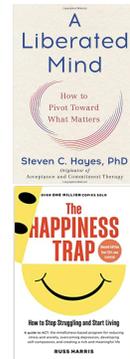
Kashdan and Rotterburg (2010) define psychological flexibility as how well a person: "(1) adapts to fluctuating situational demands, (2) reconfigures mental resources, (3) shifts perspective, and (4) balances competing desires, needs, and life domains."

Or, basically it means having all six of the official ACT components (in the [hexaflex](#)) working well: Mindfulness, Experiential Acceptance, Cognitive Defusion, Self as Context, Values, and Committed Action.

Books

I've read and enjoyed all three, especially the last, which is dense but is one of my favorite books of all time and significantly changed my overall understanding of what mental health really is.

- [A Liberated Mind: How to Pivot Toward What Matters](#) (2019) by the main ACT creator Steven C. Hayes is a thorough self-help book that teaches you a lot about ACT (448 pages)
- [The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living](#) (I linked to the 2008 1st ed. 240 pages which I read, or you can get the 2022 [2nd ed.](#) 308 pages) is more of a quick read, focusing on self-help exercises
- [Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change](#) (2011 2nd ed., 402 pages) by Kirk Strosahl, Kelly Wilson, and Steven C. Hayes is the foundational ACT book, which I recommend to psychologists, therapists or others who want to get precise and in-depth on the theory



Top reasons I think ACT is great

1. In my opinion (and this is a small minority opinion, not a scientific consensus in any way), ACT is the psychotherapy **best supported by science**.
 - a. More than any other therapy, it has a science-compatible and highly useful underlying model of the psychology of mental health problems and psychological health. With 1,400 randomized experiments or trials ([source](#)) (and 8,000 title hits [on Google Scholar](#)), researchers have convincingly validated specific, broken-down components of its underlying model, specific stripped-down ACT treatment interventions, and its full-package psychotherapy in practice
 - b. Other therapies just don't have this kind of research support. (Traditional CBT does have vastly more studies and data, but it's not built for and tested in research validation, and high-quality CBT "breakdown" component studies are few and often [unsupportive](#).)
2. For practical purposes in your life or in therapy, ACT offers a way out of the psychiatric disorder model or way of describing people.
 - a. Medical disorder concepts that predominate today (like PTSD or Major Depressive Disorder) are rigid and are taken far too seriously
 - b. The prevalent idea that mental health problems are due to "chemical imbalances" only fixable by medications is wrong. ACT provides alternative answers, like lack of psychological flexibility as a general way to conceptualize mental health problems
3. Its treatment methods can be simple and specific
 - a. The methods work even when simplified, as shown in randomized trials of [single-session experiments](#)

- b. The simplicity and single-session validations are extremely helpful for (1) good science, (2) good training for therapists, and (3) good self-help
- c. (Note also that they *can* be very in-depth, nuanced and developed over many sessions or a lifetime)

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