

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY FOR COUPLES

BRINGING AN ATTACHMENT-INFORMED APPROACH TO WORKING WITH COUPLES

Problem

When couples are in distress, it is often because they are unable to connect and feel securely attached to one another in the moments when they most need it- when the world feels uncertain or unsafe. In such highly evocative situations, how we relate to our thoughts and emotions can help or hinder our ability to reconnect with our partner and create a secure base from which to face life's inevitable ups and downs. People often strive in a pathological way to control their thoughts, their emotions and their subjective experiences. In relationships, these types of reactions can fundamentally interfere with people's ability to reconnect with their partner.

Need

The therapist must be able to offer the clients the means to reconnect in the presence of internal obstacles (including strong emotions or unhelpful thought patterns) in order to foster a more secure attachment for both partners.

Trainers

Benjamin Schoendorff, MA, MSc, is a clinical psychologist and director of the Contextual Psychology Institute in Montreal, Canada. A renowned ACBS-peer reviewed international Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) trainer and a certified FAP

trainer he has facilitated over 250 workshops the world over. He is the author and coauthor of several ACT books in French and English, coedited The ACT Matrix, and coauthored The ACT Practitioner's Guide to the Science of Compassion and, most recently The Essential Guide to the ACT Matrix.

Kathryn Palmer M.Ed, RP, C.C.C. is a Registered Psychotherapist working in private practice in Ottawa. She has 5 years experience working with adults in an individual and couples context. She is an ACT therapist and has completed extensive training in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy with renowned ACT trainers. She also obtained a graduate diploma in Couples Therapy and Spirituality from Saint Paul University..

Course clientele

Psychotherapists interested in learning how to apply processes of the third wave of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and intervention in a couples context. Psychotherapists interested in learning a framework for working with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Processes and Attachment-based interventions in a couples context. The group will be limited to 30 participants.

Duration of training: 14 hours over two days.

Objectives:

1. Describe ACT for couples from an attachment-informed perspective.
2. Conceptualize cases using the ACT and matrix model.
3. Apply three ACT-derived clinical strategies to help couples reconnect.
4. Use the "5-steps" model to guide and structure clinical sessions and conversations.

Description

Day 1

Session 1: Introduction

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

- A presentation of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2012)
- ACT Models of psychopathology and health. Hexaflex, Pillars (Strosahl, Robinson, Gustavsson, 2009), Matrix (Polk & Schoendorff, 2014; Polk, Schoendorff, Webster & Olaz, 2016)
- Goals of Couples therapy: Connection/reconnection. Role of psychological flexibility processes. Tools of behavioural shaping and psychological flexibility training.
- ACT for couples (Lev & McKay 2017; Harris, 2009, Walser & Westrup, 2009)

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988).

- Attachment styles (Ainsworth, 1978)
- Attachment as it relates to intimate relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Attachment-informed clinical approaches to couples distress: Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples-EFT (Johnson, 2004)

Pursue Withdraw as attachment-driven unworkability. The pursue-withdraw cheat-sheet.

Session 2 - Why attachment-informed ACT for Couples?

Attachment-informed psychological flexibility can increase efficiency of couples work as ACT offers novel ways of dealing with inner obstacles that previously existing couples approaches do not cover: fusion, lack of contact with the present moment and unclear values.

Comparing ACT and EFT. Different mechanisms of change.

Session 3 Conceptualizing a couple's difficulties and treatment plan

Intake and structuring individual sessions.

Case conceptualization : Using the “Stuck Loops” worksheet to uncover unworkable attachment-driven patterns of conflict

Complete Couples Assessment (consider attachment history, strengths and weaknesses of both partners with processes)

Measures for assessment

Case conceptualization exercise

Session 4: Three strategies to guide clinical practice

The structure of a clinical session: the 5-steps to a successful clinical conversation as an ACT-informed variation of an EFT intervention (Johnson, 2004)

- Three RFT-based strategies (Törneke et al, 2016). A brief overview of RFT and the clinical strategies that stem from it.
- Uncovering unworkable patterns of conflict
- Rising above conflict
- Reconnecting and behaving like the partner you want to be
- The “If..., then” formula
- Demonstration of the three strategies in action
- Feedback on day one and filling-in a bridging form

Day 2

Session 1: Processing Feedback from day 1

Demonstration

Session 2: Strategy one processes: Uncovering unworkable patterns of conflict

Strategies and interventions helping clients uncover and recognize unworkable cycles:

- Uncovering the pattern

YOUR VALUES IN ACTION

- Identifying the consequences of the pattern
- Naming the pattern
- Identifying the attachment fears that activate the pattern
- Identifying and expressing deeper vulnerabilities

Home practice exercises

Working with the patterns as they appear in clinical practice

Demonstration

Session 3: Strategy two processes: Rising above conflict

Strategies and interventions helping clients rise above conflict:

- Perspective-taking, Identifying a partner's vulnerabilities
- Noticing hooks
- Noticing toward and away moves
- Mindfulness strategies
- Noticing bodily sensations
- Sorting with the ACT matrix and verbal aikido

Home practice exercises

Working with strategy two as clients get stuck in clinical conversations

Demonstration

Session 4: Strategy three processes: Reconnecting and behaving like the partner you want to be

Strategies and interventions to help clients reconnect and behave like the partner they want to be

- Behavioral shaping strategies:
 - Expressing vulnerabilities
 - Responding to a partner's expressions of vulnerability
 - Modelling expressing and receiving
 - Using shaping principles to adapt flexibly to clients' varying levels of skill
 - Asking for connection

YOUR VALUES IN ACTION

- Working with values
 - Helping clients uncover the partner they want to be
 - Who or what is important?
 - The partner's values exercise
 - Putting couples' values in action
 - Supporting a partner's attempts at being the partner they want to be

Home practice exercises

Working with strategy two as clients get stuck in clinical conversations

Demonstration

Session 4: bringing it all together: the 5-steps of a clinical interaction

An ACT-informed version of the 5-steps of EFT (Johnson 2004)

- Detailing each of the steps
- Applying the steps in practice

Demonstration

Wrapping up with Question and Answers

Prerequisites

None.

Learning methods

- Didactic presentation and PowerPoint
- Videos

- Role play
- Small group experiential practice

References:

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. New York: Basic Books.

Harris, R. (2009). *ACT with Love*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Hayes, S.C, Strosahl, K.D., & Wilson, K.G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change (2nd edition)*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 52(3), 511.

Johnson, Susan M. (2004) *The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy: creating connection*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Polk, K. L., & Schoendorff, B. (Eds.). (2014). *The ACT Matrix: A New Approach to Building Psychological Flexibility Across Settings and Populations*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Polk, K. L., & Schoendorff, B., Webster, M., & Olaz, F. (2016). *The Essential Guide to the ACT Matrix*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2002). Attachment-related psychodynamics. *Attachment and Human Development*, 4,133–161.



YOUR VALUES IN ACTION

Strosahl, K., Robinson, P., & Gustavsson, T. (2012) Brief Interventions for Radical Change: Principles and Practice of Focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Walser, R., & Westrup, D. (2009). The Mindful Couple: How Acceptance and Mindfulness Can Lead You to the Love You Want. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Attendance certificate and CE credits

An attendance certificate stating the number of hours attended will be given to participants at the end of the workshop.

Evaluation

Participants are invited to fill-in an online questionnaire to assess the quality of the training, facility and trainer as well as the stated learning objectives, followed by a 3-months and 6 months follow-up questionnaire on the learning objectives.