

Letting go, creating meaning: The role of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in helping people confront existential concerns and lead a vital life

Joseph Ciarrochi, Louise Hayes, Gareth Quinlen, Baljinder Sahdra, Madeleine Ferrari, Keong Yap

Abstract

We all must confront existential crises such as sickness, death of loved ones, loss of job, mistreatment from others, and relationship breakdown. These crises can shatter our sense of meaning. How can we face that moment with honesty and courage, embrace the distress, and create new meaning? This chapter provides a theory of how language and self-awareness can lead us into existential crisis and loss of meaning. It then provides an evidence-based account of how the DNA-V model of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can help people to answer “Yes” to Camus’ most important philosophical question, “Is life worth living?”. ACT can help people recreate coherence after a coherence-shattering event, overcome alienation from the body, overcome inertia, overcome a sense of self that is self-destroying or feels “empty” , and bridge the gulf between self and others and create genuine connection.

Keywords: Existentialism. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Mindfulness. Acceptance. DNA-V

Each of us will experience dramatic change in our lifetime: Relationship breakdowns, loss of job or career, life threatening illness, adverse transitions (e.g., moving to a nursing home), and the finality of death. Because we are hardwired to anticipate danger and avoid pain, we can torture ourselves not just by the experiences of actual crises as they occur, but by the very *thoughts* of having future crises.

the resourceful creatures see clearly
that we are not really at home
in the interpreted world ----Rilke

How can we prepare ourselves for that life defining moment, when we can no longer pretend that everything will always be ok? This is even more difficult as we know deep down that we ourselves and all those we love will die. What will we do in **that** moment? How will we engage with this existential crisis? We could push our fear of powerlessness away by making it external.,e.g., some blame others, such as those with different skin colour or culture, or different political views. Others blame the people closest to them: partners, family, and friends. Still others try to escape existential fear through overconsumption, work, drugs, or opting out of everything risky in life. We can also choose to live courageously in the present moment. The awareness that all things pass, that we suffer and die, need not lead to avoidance, paralysis, and blame, but instead can lead to a renewed focus and vitality for the things that matter in life.

This chapter will explore how Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) helps people to meet existential crises. ACT does not offer the promise of a stress-free life where we eliminate existential crises or interpret them positively; rather, ACT helps people to acknowledge and accept the distress inherent in life. It shows us how our ability to use language along with self-awareness can trap us in existential crises, and ways that we can take concrete steps to escape the trap.

Language, self-awareness, crisis

ACT is a behavioral approach, which means it is grounded in precise behavioral principles such as operant and classical conditioning (Hayes et al., 2012). However, it went beyond traditional behavioral approaches, because it has successfully tested a behavioral theory of language and symbolic activity, Relational Frame Theory (RFT) (Hayes et al., 2001). Therefore, it is useful to begin by explaining RFT.

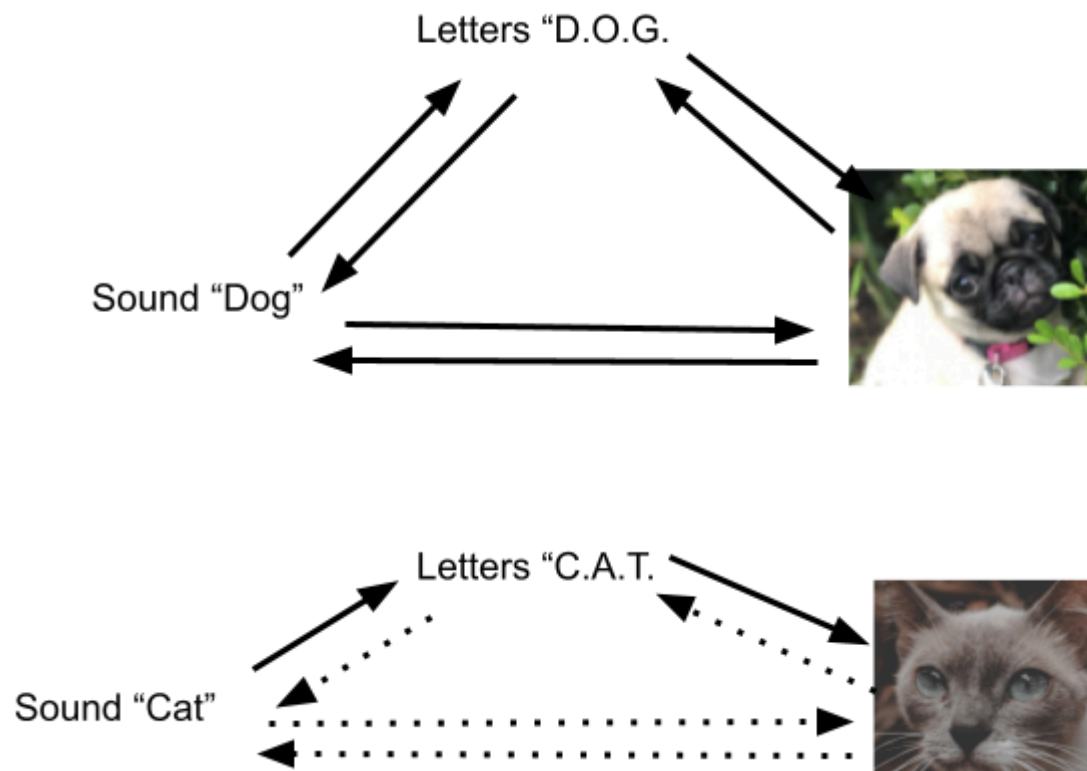
RFT's potential value for practitioners lies in its focus on the manipulable context, and in particular, in how practitioners can alter context to influence complex symbolic processes (Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008), such as those involved in the nausea of alienation (Sartre, 2013) and the terror of death (Yalom, 2008). Here we review the implications of RFT for practice. If the reader is interested in exploring the substantial evidence-base behind RFT, we encourage them to explore the citations that follow (Barnes-Holmes &

Barnes-Holmes, 2020; Dymond et al., 2010; Kissi et al., 2017; Montoya-Rodríguez et al., 2017).

We explain RFT by starting with the simplest symbolic process and working our way up to complex existential processes. In RFT, symbols (like words and thoughts) are not “things” in the head, but “behavior” that are controlled by learning context (Barnes-Holmes & Barnes-Holmes, 2020). People teach us to engage in symbolic activity in our childhood years. For example, a caregiver might point at a dog and say, “dog.” If the child says “dog”, the parent reinforces with “good.” The caregiver teaches the child to name thousands of things and to explicitly look for the thing when the name is said out loud. Thus, the caregiver will say ‘dog,’ and if the child points at a dog, the caregiver will reinforce the association. In this way, the relations between a dog, the letters “D.O.G.”, and the sound “Dog” are explicitly taught to a child. We illustrate this in the figure below by the solid lines.

After some time of reinforcing young people to name things, something interesting happens. Young people start to engage in the naming process, and the deriving, as a matter of habit (Dermot Barnes-Holmes & Barnes-Holmes, 2000). Thus, you can teach a young person to relate the sound, “cat” with the letters “C.A.T.” and the letters “C.A.T.” with the visual image of a cat (Bottom image, figure 1). The young person will then derive all other relations. If you point at the animal, the child will know to spontaneously say “cat”, even though the child was never explicitly taught to say cat.

Figure 1: the develop of relational framing



Note: Solid lines are trained; dotted lines are derived

We have used a very simple example here, but the reader might imagine a child beginning to derive, or verbally relate everything to everything else. A child can even eventually derive, “I am like a cat” or “Cats are magical” or “Cats have a secret life underground.” Note that all this verbal behavior is based on deriving, rather than on direct experience. In this way, our symbolic life can run far from reality. Existential crises come when we become able to make ultra-complex derivations such as “life is meaningless” and “God has abandoned me.”

One of the key principles of RFT is “transformation of stimulus function (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2004).” People teach children to respond to symbols, whether sound or visual, as they would to the object to which the symbol points.



Figure 2: “The moon is black tonight” People respond to symbols as if they are the “real” thing.

For example, if you say “doggy” to children who love dogs, those children may respond with excitement, even before they see the dog. They are responding to the symbol in the same behavioral and physiological way that they would respond to an actual dog. In the same way, adults can display emotional reactions to words like “death”. We don’t have to experience death to experience the fear of death and dying or the terror at having ‘wasted our life’. The research suggests that this process only occurs in verbal humans, with other animals lacking the capacity to engage in transformation of stimulus function. Without this ability, non-humans will never fear the word “death” - unless we pair the word with some painful stimulus like a shock (Joseph Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2008).

We have focused on simple verbal relating, because simple relating is the building block for the most complex verbal behavior, including that behavior involved in existential angst. Rule-governed behavior is one example of complex verbal behavior and involves relations nested within relations (Törneke et al., 2008). For example, some people believe, “If God is not real, then life has no meaning.” Consider the complexity of the symbolic activity here. First the sound “God” has acquired many stimulus functions due to a person’s particular history of relating ideas to it. Perhaps, a person has been taught that God is

equivalent to an all-loving father who protects and cares for you and tells you what is right or wrong. Imagine a person believes this. When this person thinks of their god, they feel life is meaningful. Now imagine they have some experience that seems to negate the belief, e.g., the death of their young child. In an instant the verbal relation “god is not real” powerfully transforms their world. It is as if the person has lost an all loving protector. If the verbal conclusion is believed, then their life can be rapidly transformed from purposeful to dead and meaningless.

Research suggests that verbal beliefs and rules can lead to rigidity and insensitivity to context (Törneke et al., 2008). Consider the rule, “if I lose my job, I will no longer be a real man. I will have no use or purpose”. This is a rather complex relation where all meaning is caught up in a symbolic attachment to a job role. Thus, the loss of their job can rapidly transform the person’s view of their life from meaningful (“I am a provider”) to meaningless (“I am useless”). If the person believes this verbal rule (real men provide), they will become insensitive to times when the rule is wrong. For example, when he loses his job, he may have an increased opportunity to participate in family functioning and child rearing. His partner may reassure him and describe the lost job as an opportunity. Still, he might hold on to his self-rule, ‘men are providers’ and this leads to significant angst. Just like this example, research suggests rules can make us insensitive to new contingencies of reinforcement (Törneke et al., 2008).

To summarize this section: RFT is the theoretical foundation of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and has shown us three basic things: 1) We relate words to everything we touch, smell, hear, feel, and think. 2) Verbal relating transforms how we experience and respond to events. Words take on the power of the thing they point to. 3) Verbal relating, and especially self-rules, can make us insensitive to context.

Verbal relating has given humans great power, but it also has a downside. Language lies at the heart of our existential crises. There is no such thing as an existential one-year old. Without verbal behavior, the child cannot feel the terror of death, the anguish of responsibility, or the alienation of an indifferent world. Each of the phrases in this sentence, so simple for us to construct and understand, has been made possible only by years of deriving and transforming symbols. A 1-year old girl inhabits the same physical world as you and I, eats the same chocolate cake, but she experiences that cake far more purely than we will ever be able to again. Our spontaneous verbal evaluation of the cake will transform how we experience it (e.g., “will I put on weight?”). Such is the downside of language.

The ACT approach to existential crises

Let’s consider ACT, the practical application of RFT, and see how it helps people confront and grow from existential crises. There are now over 300 clinical trials that have examined the efficacy of ACT (ContextualScience, n.d.; Walder, N, Levin, M., Twohig, M., Karekla, M., Gloster, A., 2019). There is strong evidence that ACT is beneficial for chronic pain, and moderate evidence that ACT is beneficial for depression, mixed anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and psychosis. There is also evidence that ACT does better than wait-list control and treatment as usual (Bai et al., 2020; Hughs et al., 2017), and is effective in real-world clinical settings (Pinto et al., 2017). It is, at present, uncertain whether ACT is better than CBT or an active control (A-Tjak et al., 2015; Atkins et al., 2017; Bluett et

al., 2014; Hacker et al., 2016; Jiménez, 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Walder, N, Levin, M., Twohig, M., Karekla, M., Gloster, A., 2019).

ACT focuses on therapeutic processes to create change, rather than following standard protocols. There are many different frameworks and names for ACT processes, such as those found in the popular “Hexaflex” (Hayes et al., 1999), DNA-V (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2015), and “the matrix” (Polk & Schoendorff, 2014). What is important here is the function of processes, not the particular label. Different named processes may have similar functions (e.g., “noticing” and “mindfulness”), and similarly named processes may have different functions (e.g., two different variants of “mindfulness”). The use of labels for processes has become extremely complex and confusing. To simplify things, Hayes et al (2019) have proposed an Extended Evolutionary Meta-Model that provides a “periodic table” of processes that all researchers, regardless of therapeutic orientation, might use.

We use the DNA-V framework here, but define each process and show how we map the processes to the hexaflex framework and the Extended Evolutionary Meta-model. Table 1 provides this mapping.

Table 1: *Mapping ACT process labels to function*

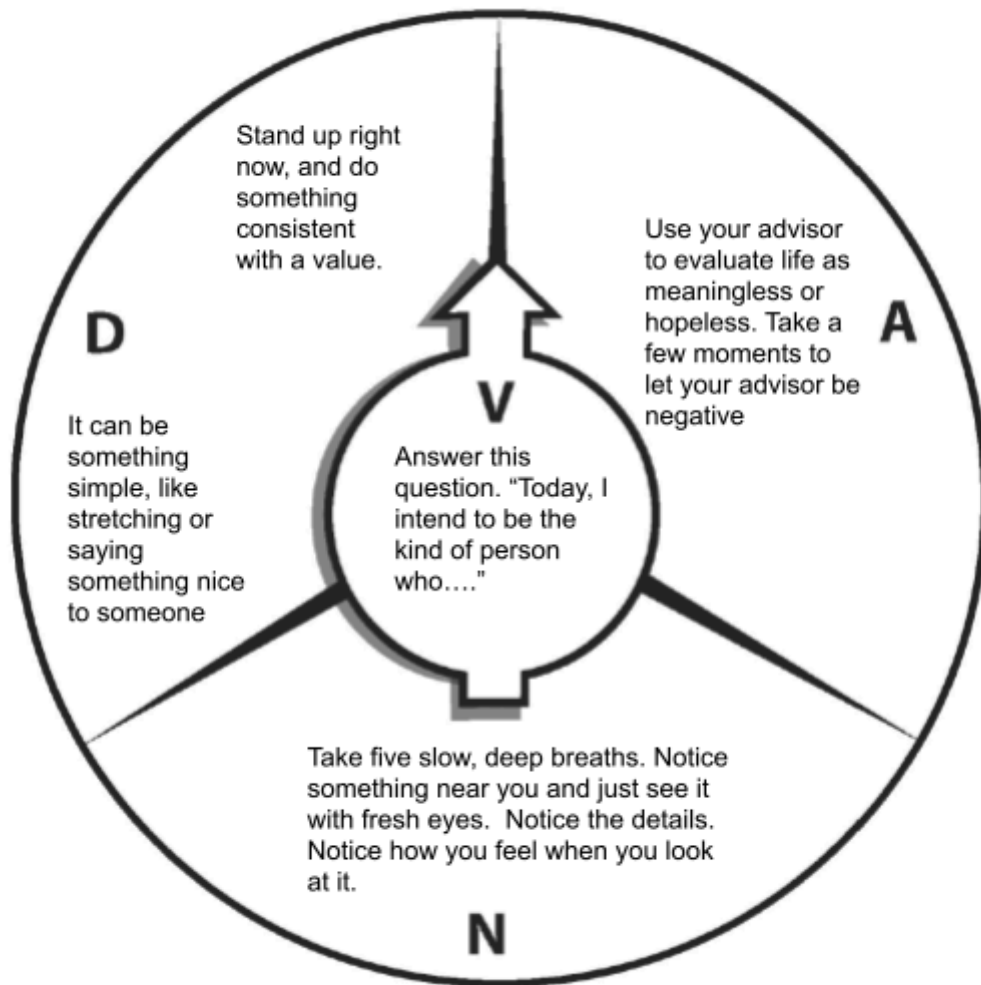
DNAV process label	Hexaflex process label	Extended Evolutionary Meta-model	Purpose of intervention
Discoverer	Committed action	Overt Behavior	Use trial-and-error learning. Help people willingly engage in new or nontypical behavior, to develop their skills and resources, and expand their context.
Noticer	Present moment awareness; Acceptance	Attention Affect Physiological states and responses	Help people notice inner and outer experience, and have the capacity to accept rather than avoid or cling to it. Help people attend to the present context
Advisor	Defusion	Cognition	Help people to navigate their context with language, and disengage from unhelpful language processes..
Values	Values	Motivation	Create contexts that empower people to clarify what they value ,choose value-consistent action, and sustain action across time and hardship
Self-view	Self-as-process Self-as-context	Self	Help people take perspective on themselves, overcome self-limiting rules or beliefs, view self with compassion, and take actions towards

			self that are self-enhancing rather than self-destroying
Social-view	All six processes at the social level	All six dimensions above	Help people take perspective on others, to recognize social interdependence and the value of others, and to behave effectively in social situations

A quick DNA-V overview

Before we link the DNA-V framework of ACT to existential concerns, we provide a quick overview of how one might use DNAV to understand the core goal of ACT, which is to promote psychological flexibility, or the ability to mindfully experience thoughts, feelings, and sensations, in the service of persisting in behavior that builds value and changing behavior that is inconsistent with value. DNA-V seeks to build this flexibility by helping people to shift between different psychological spaces. The DNA-V exercise below will allow the reader to experience this “space shifting” rapidly (and perhaps the reader will notice that space is merely a relational frame, there is no physical space). If the reader is interested in completing the exercise, we recommend starting with A and working your way around the disk clockwise -- A, N, D and then V.

Figure 3: An example of modelling ACT psychological flexibility



We have placed value in the center of the disk, to highlight how value is central to all ACT processes. The core goal of ACT is to develop the ability to flexibly shift, or “pivot” (Hayes, 2019) between different spaces, always in the service of meaning and value. “Inflexibility” occurs when a person does not pivot, for example by staying stuck inside the advisor (e.g., ruminating, dysfunctional beliefs), noticer (e.g., excessive focus on escaping feelings), or discover (e.g., impulsive acting). The components of the DNA-V model can be viewed as varying on a continuum, from low skill to high skill. The goal of the practitioner is to help identify skill weakness, or presenting problems, and help people develop those weaknesses into strengths (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2015; Hayes et al., 2012).

Valuer: Crisis of meaning

Camus argues that the most important question in philosophy is, “Is life worth living?” or the corollary, “Should I commit suicide?” (Camus, 2013). Although ACT doesn’t aim to answer this existential question directly, it assumes that engagement in valued action creates meaning and makes life ‘worth living’. A key intervention in ACT is helping people to choose valuing, or meaningful actions by which to live. Valuing guides us like a compass, helping us to choose what to do at any given moment. Examples of valuing include “being a

loving parent”, “being active”, “supporting disadvantaged youth”, “challenging myself”, and “connecting with my friends”.

Values are choices we can make without having to justify them with language. For example, we can declare, “I love to care for animals”, and there is no need to justify this preference. As we will see in the advisor section, the “need” to justify with language is a verbal trap that can accelerate the existential crisis. Living things choose without verbal justification. We might say even flowers “choose” to grow towards the sun rather than the shadows.

That values are a choice leads to an existential dilemma: If we can choose anything, why not choose evil action? This issue is illustrated in Dostoyevsky’s classic book, *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky, 2017). The chief character, Raskolnikov murders an elderly pawn-broker, a “free choice.” What follows is Reskolnikov’s relentless internal struggle, guilt, and anxiety about being caught. He made a “free choice” but discovered via his verbal behaviour, his own deriving, that the choice did not bring meaning and vitality. Eventually he confesses to the crime, accepts the punishment, and only then ends his alienation from society. Values are not abstract or lofty ideas, but guiding principles which inform and direct ways of acting that have consequences in the world.

The general assumption in ACT is that when we encourage people to freely choose, they will choose prosocial actions, or at least actions that won’t harm others. We humans are, by nature, social and interdependent (see social-view section). If we were to choose to enact antisocial values, we would fail to satisfy our fundamental need for social connection. There is now good evidence that antisocial behavior is linked to worse mental health and lower self-esteem (Ciarrochi et al., 2019).

Generally, research suggests that helping people to choose valued action will lead to them experiencing higher satisfaction of their basic needs for competence, connection, and autonomy (Chen et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). There is also evidence that having people affirm their values can help them overcome stereotype or ego threat, and perform at a higher academic standard (Bancroft et al., 2017; Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Advisor: Crises involving incoherence and a shattering of “reality”

Humans spend much of their lives inside an “interpreted” reality which can shatter when it no longer matches physical reality. We can think we are immortal and important, until the moment the world confronts us with death and indifference.

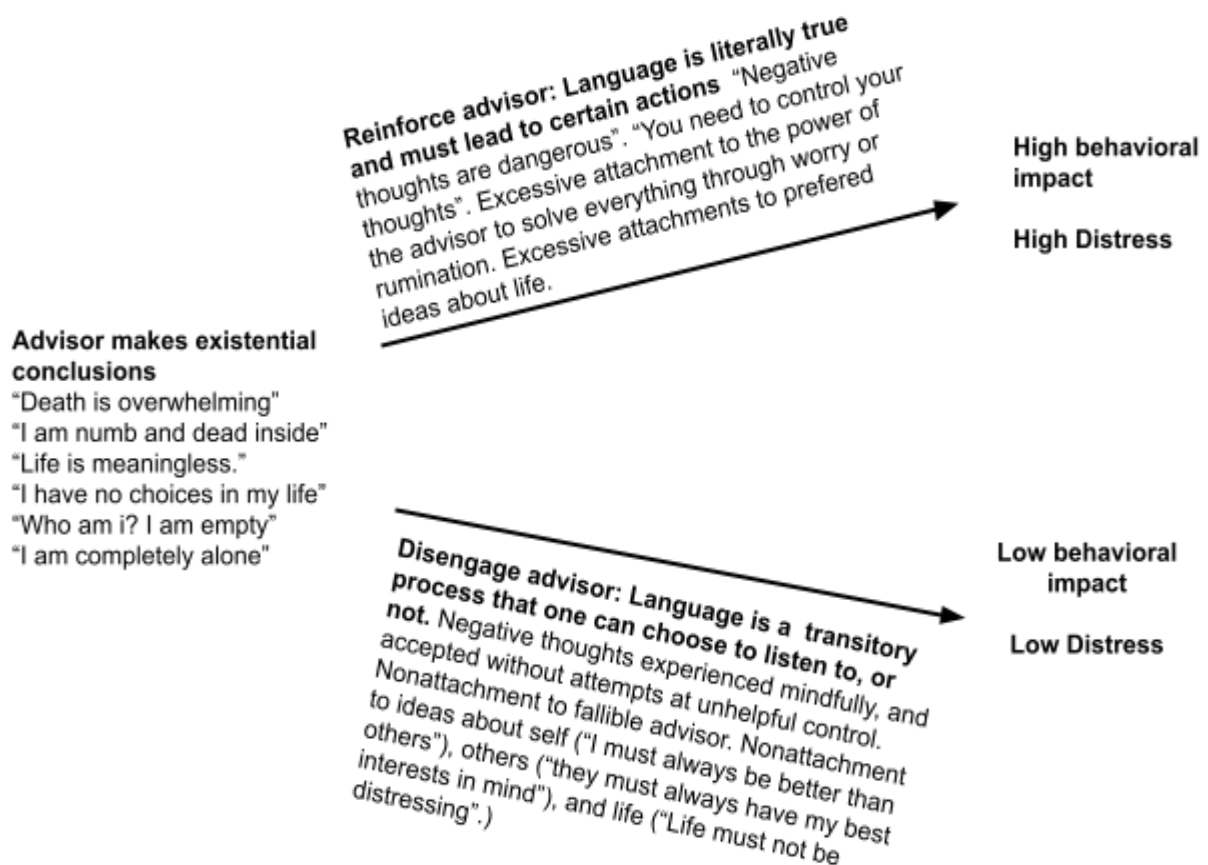
Our ‘advisor’ is a label to describe our inner voice, our learned verbal behaviour that allows us to predict and plan. It is constantly shaping our symbolic and physical reality. It is relentless and never turns off. We offer ourselves advice like “You’ve got to try harder”, and, more unhelpfully, “You are so broken that no-one can ever love you.” When the advisor is working well, it helps us to navigate our physical environment efficiently and to avoid trial and error learning. An adaptive advisor allows us to benefit from advice communicated from others experiences, without us needing to suffer the consequences of a poor decision. If I say, “Avoid that tree. There is a poisonous snake living under it,” you know what advice to give yourself when you approach the tree: “Stay away!”

Our advisors are so useful that we use self-talk not only to interpret reality, but also to “build” preferable realities in our head. We use it to try to make all future threats disappear (worry), to make the past seem more palatable (rumination), to symbolically

dominate another or to win their approval (resentment, reassurance seeking), and to fix the parts of our self that the advisor has evaluated as broken (self-criticism). We often fail to notice when our advisor strategies are failing us and our interpreted reality is becoming more and more disconnected from physical reality.

As the figure below illustrates, there are two pathways we can take in response to our own unhelpful advice. We can take the top pathway and respond to our advisor's conclusions by staying with our self-talk and engaging in problem solving and reasoning. When this becomes excessive, it is termed "fusion" in the hexaflex model, as in a fusion between words, the person, and action -- they become one. Fusion increases the impact of the unhelpful conclusions on our behavior. When fused, we believe that "Life is meaningless" is a literal truth and we must act accordingly.

Figure 4: The two ways of relating to the advisor



The top pathway involves seeking "coherence" between our thinking and our external world. We experience a shattering of coherence when the physical world contradicts our understanding. For example, we might want to believe, perhaps unconsciously, that "people must always have my best interests in mind." And then, when a lover betrays us, we may be shocked and our world seems destroyed. "If this person can betray me, anybody can

betray me.” Then we create new self-advice, “I must never trust anybody again”. These verbal statements cohere with each other, to some extent, and perhaps help the person feel a sense of control, even though they often have long term costs.

When our advisor is not being helpful, the remedy for this is to lessen such advisor activity and to shape and reinforce the second path (figure 4). We help a person disengage from their advisor, and move into their noticer, valuer, or discoverer space. That is, we encourage people to experience their thoughts mindfully (noticer), or to think about what brings vitality and meaning (valuer), and/or to engage in new, value-consistent action (discoverer). We invite people to make space for advisor incoherence, for the possibility that our advisor has spun a story that is useless. This opens the way for a new kind of coherence, one that is not based exclusively within an interpreted world. Rather, it is based on functional coherence, which is a clear link between advisor content and effective, real world action. The question shifts from, “Is my reasoning right?” to “Is my reasoning useful?”

Disengaging from our advisor is not always easy. Our advisor is such a constant companion that we fail to notice it in the background restructuring our world. In fact, the advisor is so ubiquitous that we are often completely unaware of it and then we believe that the content of our thoughts are the unquestionable truth. ACT helps to increase awareness through structured mindfulness, curious observing of thoughts, and homework that involves noticing unhelpful thoughts as they occur in daily life (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2015; Hayes et al., 2012).

People are sometimes reluctant to disengage from their advisor because they are attached to its seeming power. We worry, ruminate, judge others and judge ourselves because we think it helps. For example, we often value worry, because we believe it will help us avoid problems and disastrous situations (Cartwright-Hatton & Wells, 1997). Worry can also feed into the illusion of control and can encourage a mistaken belief that the act of worrying is adaptive; for example “if I worry about every possible worst case scenario, I will be better prepared when one does occur” (Wells, 2006). Unfortunately, our advisor is rarely helpful for existential questions like, “What is the meaning of life?” because if we depend on reason for an answer, we will become despondent and give up, for words are unable to solve this problem. The advisor is not in charge of meaning, it is the servant.

Advisor attachment also occurs when we cling to an idealized version of life . where we convince ourselves that we should always be treated fairly, be better than others, have pleasant lasting experiences, or have a life without regrets. When reality inevitably violates these false ideas, we suffer unnecessarily (Ciarrochi et al., 2020; Ellis & Harper, 1961; Sahdra, Shaver & Brown, 2010;) and become less effective at achieving our goals (Sahdra, Ciarrochi, , & Parker, 2016). For example, imagine someone is given an unfair job promotion overlooking you. You will not only experience distress at the lost opportunity (“clean discomfort”). You might be attached to the idea that things should have never been this way and should not be unfair. You might ruminate about the problem, resent the coworker, and become increasingly distressed and distracted at work (“dirty discomfort” ;Hayes et al., 1999).

When we are attached to an idea about how the world “should” be, we may use our advisor in an attempt to magically transform the world (Sartre, 2000). In the above example, we may seek to deal with the unfair promotion by engaging in rumination: “The coworker will fall on his face eventually. The promotion was not that good anyway.” Unfortunately, both rumination and worry only add to our distress and rob us of the opportunity to face realities

and cope with or manage them. Magical thinking is the beginning of what Sartre calls “Bad faith”, or the tendency to deceive ourselves and deny we have choices and freedom (Sartre, 1967). The ACT solution to this problem is typically not to argue with people, or reinforce advisor behavior, but rather help people to experience life from less verbal “spaces”.

Noticer: Crisis involving emotions and alienation from the physical body

Language allows us to create verbal labels for our emotions, like “anxiety”, “sadness”, and “guilt”. Then we learn to evaluate these states as good or bad. We can magnify the aversiveness of anxious sensations, with thinking like, “I can’t stand feeling anxious”, “If I feel sad, something is wrong with me”, or “guilt is horrible” (Ciarrochi & West, 2004). Once emotions are “horrible”, we use our advisor to solve the “emotion problem” through a vast array of experiential avoidance strategies, such as drinking, avoiding situations, and thought suppression. Most experiential avoidance strategies are ineffective and lie at the heart of clinical disorders (Hayes et al., 1996).

Experiential avoidance alienates us from our own bodies and leads us to avoid contact with how we are feeling from moment to moment (Lindsay & Ciarrochi, 2009). When we derive sensations as an enemy, we must, by necessity, see our bodies as the enemy, because it holds and generates the sensations. We seek escape from this “enemy” by fighting, fleeing, or freezing in the presence of the bodily signals, just as we would in the presence of a dangerous foe. We become strangers in our own bodies. Not only can this body alienation be a source of fear and angst (Ciarrochi et al., 2008), it can interfere with our ability to form supportive relationships (Rowell et al., 2016), which typically require identifying and sharing emotions.

Noticer interventions typically involve three components: normalizing, awareness and accepting (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2015). Concerning normalizing, ACT practitioners help people to see that all feelings are merely signals, and are not inherently good nor bad. Attacking one’s body because it sometimes holds unpleasant experiences is as misguided as attacking one’s phone because it sometimes receives unpleasant text messages. Once people begin to view emotions as normal, they are more willing to accept that some of their experiential control strategies have not been working, and are more willing to allow and accept bodily sensations. They learn to notice emotion-related sensations with curiosity, without reacting to them.

Noticer interventions have much in common with those found in mindfulness-interventions and emotion focused interventions, especially those that emphasize observing, identifying, describing and non-reactivity to feelings (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006; Gu et al., 2015; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016) and have been shown to improve our connection with our emotions (Cooper, Yap, & Batalha, 2019). By helping people to end their war with their body, we believe noticer interventions reduce the feeling of emotional alienation and promote visceral, emotional connection to meaning. Meaningful lives are not based merely on thought, but also on feeling, on visceral connection to gravity and other people.

Discoverer: Crises of action

Low skill in recognising and engaging with advisor, noticer, or valuer can lead to a crisis in action. For example, low skill valuers may refuse to act because they can find no external justification for their action, can not make sense of their life, or can not generate the “right” feelings for action, such as enthusiasm or hope.

We overcome these barriers by first agreeing with Sartre (Sartre, 1967): existence precedes essence. We are not defined by what we think (advisor) or feel (noticer), but rather by what we overtly do (discoverer). Indeed, it is in the doing and discovering of life, that we improve our thinking and feeling skills.

We can understand the discoverer by contrasting it with the advisor. When we are in advisor space, we are seeking to avoid trial-and-error mistakes; when in discoverer space, we are seeking trial-and-error, monitoring consequences, and embracing mistakes as a way of learning. Discoverer is the ultimate get out of jail card. Even when we feel completely stuck and don't know what we feel or care about, we can still act and see what happens next.

Many interventions, including the Hexaflex versions of ACT, promote discoverer skills, even if they don't use this label. Positive psychology interventions also encourage people to explore to “broaden and build” their skills, social connections, and resources (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). CBT promotes behavioral activation, even in the presence of sad feelings (Dimidjian et al., 2006), and behavioural experiments to explore and experience new behaviours and evaluate beliefs (Bennett-Levy et al., 2004). Many clinical interventions engage in functional analysis to help people see and track the consequences of their behavior (Hurl et al., 2016). Exposure is perhaps the most validated clinical intervention (Feske & Chambless, 1995), and can be seen as a broadening and building, or discovery process. Through exposure, people discover new ways to relate to their feared object and new ways of viewing the object.

Self-view: Crisis of identity

Let's return to Sartre's quote: “Existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1967). This is such a profound idea because many people believe the exact opposite: “Essence precedes existence”. They believe that some aspect of their genes, personality, or character dictate how they must act. This way of thinking is a trap. If we believe that our essence dictates what we do, then we cannot develop beyond our self-beliefs.

We cling to our self-evaluations and stories, even when that story is negative. People will defend the idea that they are really “not good enough.” We attach to self stories for two reasons. First, the story seems to protect us. For example, If we believe, “I am useless at math”, then we will not try to learn math and avoid the disappointment of failing. If we believe “I am unlovable”, we will avoid seeking love and risking rejection. Second, the self-story becomes equated with our essence. We don't think, “I'm having the **evaluation** that I am unlovable”; we think “I **am** unlovable.” We think unlovable is our essence, in the way that ceramic is the essence of a cup. Then, we can not challenge “unlovable” without seeming to destroy ourselves.

The ACT/DNA-V way of handling this issue is to encourage perspective taking directed at the self (Foody et al., 2013) and to see that our self-evaluations are just one aspect of us that we hold or carry. The verbal “I” which is experienced as *here*, learns to “look” at selfing behavior, which is experienced *there*. For example, “I see that I am

evaluating myself as broken.” Once “I” is experienced as an observer that is separate from the evaluation, we are then free to listen to the evaluation, or disengage from it.

We help people to develop a sense of self-as context (Dermot Barnes-Holmes et al., 2001), to see themselves as the holder of the DNAV processes. We are noticers, advisors, discoverers, and valuers at different times. We are also the ones who shift between these spaces. Therefore, we are more than our ineffective behavior, unhelpful thoughts, or unpleasant feelings. We hold them all. To use a metaphor, we are the sky, and our experience is the weather (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The core idea behind this kind of intervention is that if people can identify with their observer self or self-as-context, they will more easily let go of unhelpful self-concepts. They are not real things that define our essence.

Research supports the value of self-as-context interventions. The tendency to experience self-as-context is linked to well-being and mindfulness (Zettle et al., 2018). Further, ACT creates self-as-context and this predicts improvements in functioning (Yu et al., 2017). Though not explicitly discussed in ACT, we might also classify growth mindset interventions as promoting a flexible self-view (Dweck, 2008). These interventions teach people to view themselves as changing and growing and not fixed. There is reliable evidence that growth mindset interventions have at least a small effect on well-being and performance (Burnette et al., 2020; Miller, 2019; Yeager et al., 2019). Similarly, we classify self-compassion interventions as promoting self-view. These interventions ask people to see themselves as someone who sometimes suffers and deserves kindness. Self-compassion interventions have been showing promising effects (Ferrari et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019).

Social view: Crisis of isolation and loneliness

Humans need others as much as they need clean air. Chronic loneliness can make us as sick as smoking ten cigarettes a day or being chronically obese (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). In contrast, social connections give us physical and emotional support, help in reaching goals, greater access to ideas and knowledge, and the ability to accomplish things that we could not accomplish by ourselves (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Ciarrochi et al., 2017). If relationships are so important to us, why is it so hard for us humans to get along? 15 to 30% of people experience chronic loneliness (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

There is an existential tension between our individual needs and group needs, between selfishness and cooperation. For example, if we give our time to helping others, we may give them the advantage over us, or we may allow them to take advantage of us. However, if we fail to support others, we may develop a bad reputation and lose people’s trust. Research clarifies that the best social strategy often depends on context. For example, people are less likely to cooperate in contexts where cooperation payoff is low, where it is unclear who is cooperating and who is cheating, or where the environment comprises a high percentage of people using noncooperative strategies (Dal Bó & Fréchette, 2019; Grant, 2013). The “solution” to this problem, if we want to increase cooperation, is to create environments in which we reward cooperation (Biglan, 2015).

ACT targets strategies that destroy social relationships, such as refusing to take another’s perspective and avoidance of social situations. But why would we avoid social situations unnecessarily?

We have argued that the advisor's job is to keep us safe. If we look to our evolutionary past, we discover the greatest danger to humans was not tigers or bears: It was other humans. War and murder were one of the most common causes of death in prehistoric times, and our advisor adapted to this (Pinker, 2012). Thus, our advisor has evolved to keep us safe *from others*. We are constantly seeking to infer people's intentions and assess their trustworthiness. When we are chronically lonely, we become stressed, hypervigilant to social threat, and more likely to see people's behavior as negative (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Our language skills give us the ability to verbally transform any human into an uncaring person or a monster. If we are not careful, we will end up inside a verbally interpreted world with nothing but monsters.

Making matters worse, we can become addicted to self-enhancing consequences (ego' see self-view above). We see life as a zero-sum game, where the only way I can enhance myself is by bringing you down or not letting you shine. Research suggests that people who are able to let go of self-enhancing feelings and thoughts, that is, those who are non-attached, are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior (Sahdra et al., 2015).

All the ACT interventions described previously can be used to target ineffective social behavior. If people are addicted to self-enhancement, we can help them to let go of the ego (self-view), in the service of building relationships (valueer). If people have an overactive advisor who distrusts everybody, we can help them to be aware of this bias and to disengage from the advisor sometimes and use discovery to find out what a certain person is like. We can also help them notice the feelings of distrust without automatically reacting to them. If experience teaches us that a person can't be trusted, we can use discovery processes to find the best social strategy for managing this person. Finally, we teach people to take perspective, which often has the effect of transforming someone from an inhuman monster to a merely human one, or perhaps no monster at all.

Conclusion

Humans make the same life journey. We all start in the physical world of sun, wind, and rain; and rely on safe and reliable physical contact with our caregivers. We travel along this path for about one or two years, touching the earth with our senses, and connecting and depending on others for our needs without using words. Then, gradually, we develop language. We start verbally "touching" and transforming the earth and our relationship with others. Soon, we don't just see sun and rain, we see "good", "bad", "terrible", "lovely", "meaningless", "right", "wonderful", "intolerable", "mine", "theirs", and "can't." We use words to gain power, to learn complex skills from books, to build social alliances, and to persuade others. Our words are so useful that soon we think they can solve everything. We think we can use words to make death disappear ("I will live through my work"), to make everybody respect us ("She knows I am better than her"), to make all those who don't love us into villains ("They have no heart"), and to make life fair ("People deserve what they get"). But the physical world does not care about our words. The physical world breaks through the walls of our interpreted world when we experience loss, unfair treatment, social exclusion, sickness, and death. If we react to these existential crises with denial, we can become lost in our verbal mazes, searching for a way out.

O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? --Wolfe, Thomas

Words don't lead to the unfound door. They lead away. How far have we strayed from that preverbal world of sun, wind and rain, and from a connection with another person that is beyond words? Not far. This world is still here, now. Meaning is here, now, if we awaken.

ACT seeks to promote this awakening in six ways. First, ACT helps people to become aware of values and choose to organize their lives around them (valuer). Second, ACT seeks to increase awareness of verbal processes (advisor), and teaches people to use these processes when useful, and disengage when not useful. Third, it promotes present moment awareness and acceptance of all experiences, both internal and external, good and bad, so that people are no longer at war with unpleasant sensations and their own bodies. Rather, through their body, people learn to let the nonverbal back into their lives. Fourth, ACT helps people engage in exploratory action. Through trial and error experience, people can learn to discover meaning (discoverer). Fifth, ACT helps people to recognize self-limiting thoughts as they occur, to see that they are the observer of these thoughts and not the same as the thoughts, and to take a kind, compassionate view of themselves (self-view). Finally, ACT teaches us to take perspective of others, and to recognize our fundamental interdependence (social view). Together, these processes help people to confront existential crises with courage and acceptance, break through the delusion of wishful thinking, and create a life that is meaningful and deeply connected to others.

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