

Applications of ACT to Adolescents and University Students

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Components: Didactic presentation, Experiential exercises, Literature review, original data

Categories: Prevention and Community-Based Interventions, Clinical Interventions and Interests, Adolescents, functional analytic psychotherapy, Inpatient Psychiatry, Narrative Therapy, Performance contexts, Group-therapy

Target Audience: Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced

Chair: Melissa Miller, M.S., Wichita State University

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Adolescents and young adults have unique stressors, generally and in the context of the pandemic. The current symposium describes four ACT interventions specific to this population, across clinical and nonclinical settings. The first paper presents outcomes of a rapid stabilization program for adolescents in an inpatient setting. The second paper presents the framework and outcomes of a school-based program to help adolescents thrive during the pandemic and increased uncertainty and social isolation. The third paper reports on a program integrating ACT and Group Empowerment Education to help university (postsecondary) students in China cope with stressors unique to this developmental period and rapid urbanization. A fourth paper describes the use of focused ACT to improve adolescent mental health before their final exam period. A final paper describes the current state of the evidence for ACT process measurement in youth.

(1) The Rapid Stabilization Pathway: An ACT-based treatment for adolescents hospitalized on an acute inpatient psychiatry unit

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The development of a written safety plan to identify warning signs and coping skills is a generally accepted standard of care in inpatient psychiatry; however, the effectiveness of such plans in reducing length of stay, post-discharge suicidal behavior and readmissions is largely unknown.

The Rapid Stabilization Pathway (RSP) pilot project integrates Acceptance and Commitment Therapy with a narrative family therapy approach on an acute adolescent psychiatric unit. RSP is hoped to facilitate stabilization as soon as possible (target 3-4 days) via intensive therapeutic engagement with the patient and family. To date, we have used the RSP pathway for n =24 adolescents. During the same timeframe adolescents who also met criteria were not offered RSP due to therapist availability. Preliminary results of this feasibility pilot show that the intervention is well accepted among acute inpatients and their families, and patients who received RSP were discharged, on average, 2 days sooner than those who were not.

(2) Facilitating Adolescents' Ability to THRIVE: Promoting Resiliency Through Times of Uncertainty

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Adolescence is a time of much transition for youth, requiring flexibility and strategies to cope with change. This is particularly true in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in which adolescents faced a sudden surge of uncertainty in their lives, leading to increases in depression, anxiety, social isolation, and general mood-related behaviors (Loades et al., 2020). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, authors developed a novel framework, grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which aims to increase coping with stress and engagement in values-based activities for adolescents. The THRIVE framework has been adapted for and implemented in school-based mental health clinics as a four-session, small group therapy option for adolescents. The purpose of this presentation is to describe components of THRIVE and share promising data from pilot implementation in three school-based mental health clinics. Participants will gain an understanding of (1) adolescents who may benefit from the novel framework; (2) strategies for assessing symptoms and monitoring progress; (3) and materials necessary for implementation.

(3) Building Capacity to Promote Mental Health of University Students in Jinan, China using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Group Empowerment and Psychoeducation (GEP)

Kenneth Fung, MD, University of Toronto

Alan Tai-Wai Li, MD, Regent Park Community Health Centre

Shengli Cheng, Ph.D., Shandong University

Miao Yu, Ph.D., Shandong University

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Isabella Huang, Ryerson University
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Rapid urbanization, academic pressures, and developmental life transitions all contribute to mental health stress for postsecondary students in China. Mental health promotion responses are challenged by stigma, misconceptions and inadequate interdisciplinary collaboration. Acceptance and Commitment to Empowerment – Linking Youth and ‘Xin (hearts)’ (ACE-LYNX) is an evidence-informed intervention designed to promote mental health literacy and resilience of university students in Jinan, China. ACE-LYNX integrates processes of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Group Empowerment Psychoeducation (GEP) to build individual psychological flexibility and collective committed action to reduce stigma. To date, 90 service providers in 6 universities and a mental health centre have completed ACE-LYNX and are expected to train 630 service providers and university students over the next two years to become mental health ambassadors. We anticipate that the train-the-trainer approach will reach over 10,000 students. Our program adds to a growing body of literature in implementation science that identifies strategies, challenges, and solutions in enhancing the uptake of evidence-based interventions to improve community mental wellbeing and drive systems change from the ground up.

(4) Focused acceptance and commitment training to improve adolescent mental health before their final exam period

Karoly Schlosser, Goldsmiths, University of London
Juanjo Macias, University of Malaga
Frank Bond, Goldsmiths, University of London

While the utility of ACT in the educational context is still largely unexplored, students could benefit from support during the pandemic more than ever. In this study, a total of 120 final year secondary school students from Hungary volunteered to be randomly selected into a focused ACT training or study control group, only two weeks before they took their final exams. The experimental group participated in a 3x2 hours ACT training, where the trainers taught students alternative ways of relating to their private experiences using strategies based on mindfulness, functional-analytic psychotherapy and acceptance and commitment therapy. The experimental group had significantly improved mental health, quality of life and the ability to observe private events (FFMQ observe subscale) compared to the control group. Findings show that applying ACT as a rapid and brief intervention for groups in the educational sector has promising mental illness prevention and mental health promotion possibilities, even in particularly stressful contexts. To our knowledge, this may be the first RCT using a focused ACT training in the education sector.

(5) Measuring Processes of Change in ACT: Current State of the Literature with Youth

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Jonathan Larson, M.S., Wichita State University

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While there is growing evidence for the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in children and adolescents, there is less clarity as to how theoretically proposed process variables (e.g., psychological flexibility) are measured and may be associated with changes in therapy. In this review paper, we narratively summarize the current state of the literature of process variable measurement and change in ACT youth treatment studies. Of the 29 articles that met inclusion criteria, there were 16 different process measures used, with measures of psychological flexibility being the most common (in 82.1% of studies). The majority of studies (73.3%) used some sort of inferential statistic to examine change in process variables, and a few completed a formal mediational analysis (6.7%). Taken together, there is strong evidence to suggest that ACT is associated with improvement in psychological flexibility in youth. However, there is a dearth of evidence for the interrelated processes that relate to psychological flexibility (e.g., self-as-context), and for evidence that these processes contribute to improved outcomes. Implications for future research will be discussed.

Educational Objectives:

1. Discuss how ACT may be applied to the unique stressors of adolescents and young adults.
2. Describe the implementation of ACT interventions with adolescents and young adults in inpatient, school and community settings.
3. Report outcomes of unique applications of ACT with adolescents and young adults.