

Case Conceptualization Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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Abstract

This paper delves into a case conceptualization of PA, a 22-year-old woman whose significant anxiety has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation, and unemployment. Drawing upon an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) framework, this study reframes PA's anxiety not merely as a set of symptoms, but as a manifestation of psychological inflexibility, largely stemming from her attempts to control or avoid distressing internal experiences. The conceptualization digs into PA's avoided private experiences, both her overt and covert avoidance behaviors, and the environmental factors that contribute to her struggles. Crucially, it also highlights her protective factors and motivation for change. This paper proposes a comprehensive, ACT-based treatment plan that outlines specific interventions, metaphors, and homework assignments for the initial sessions. This plan centers on fostering acceptance, defusion, values clarification, and committed action. The anticipated outcomes include increased psychological flexibility, a reduced impact of anxiety symptoms, enhanced values-driven living, improved social functioning, and greater self-efficacy, all aimed at promoting sustainable change and a more meaningful life for PA. The purpose of this case study is to make the process of case conceptualisation using ACT comprehensible.

Keywords: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Psychological Inflexibility, Anxiety.

Introduction

Anxiety disorders are a major global health concern, affecting millions and causing considerable personal distress and functional impairment (Kessler et al., 2005). Defined by excessive worry, apprehension, and physical symptoms, anxiety manifests in various forms, including generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and panic disorder. The pervasive nature of anxiety frequently disrupts daily life, impacting relationships, academic or professional performance, and overall quality of life. Traditional therapeutic approaches have historically concentrated on symptom reduction and cognitive restructuring to manage anxiety. However, the emergence of third-wave cognitive behavioral therapies, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), introduces a distinct framework by emphasizing psychological flexibility as a central mechanism for change (Hayes et al., 1999).

ACT, a contextual behavioral therapy, suggests that psychological suffering often stems not from the presence of challenging thoughts and feelings themselves, but from the struggle to control or avoid them. Rather than aiming to eliminate unwanted internal experiences, ACT encourages individuals to mindfully accept these experiences, detach from unhelpful thoughts, and commit to actions aligned with their deeply held values. This approach shifts the focus from merely eradicating symptoms to fostering a rich, full, and meaningful life, even when discomfort is present. The six core processes of ACT—acceptance, defusion, contact with the present moment, self-as-context, values, and committed action—work together to cultivate psychological flexibility, enabling individuals to adapt to changing situational demands and persist in behaviors that serve their long-term goals (Harris, 2019).

This paper presents a detailed case conceptualization of PA, a 22-year-old woman who has experienced significant anxiety over the past year. PA's situation underscores the intricate interplay of precipitating factors, perpetuating behaviors, and the profound impact of anxiety on her social life,

productivity, and sense of self-worth. Her experience of abruptly leaving university due to COVID-19 and subsequent challenges with employment and social isolation have intensified her anxiety, leading to feelings of overwhelm and tearfulness. This conceptualization will use the framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to understand PA's presenting problem, identify the mechanisms contributing to her psychological inflexibility, and outline a tailored treatment plan aimed at enhancing her psychological flexibility and promoting values-driven living.

By applying an ACT lens, this paper aims to reframe PA's anxiety not simply as a collection of symptoms to be eliminated, but as a manifestation of her efforts to control or avoid internal experiences, which inadvertently steer her away from a life consistent with her values. This paper will explore the specific private experiences PA avoids, her overt and covert avoidance behaviors, and the costs associated with these strategies. Furthermore, the conceptualization will examine PA's motivation for change, considering the unworkability of her current coping mechanisms and the potential for clarifying her values to ignite a desire for meaningful action. Environmental barriers and factors contributing to her psychological inflexibility, such as cognitive fusion and being out of contact with the present moment, will also be discussed.

Ultimately, this paper will propose a comprehensive ACT-based treatment plan for PA, detailing specific interventions, metaphors, and homework assignments for initial sessions. The plan will focus on building rapport, introducing ACT principles, fostering acceptance and defusion, clarifying values, and facilitating committed action towards a life that truly matters to PA. Both short-term and long-term treatment goals will be articulated, emphasizing the development of psychological flexibility, a reduction in anxiety symptoms, improved social functioning, and overall enhanced well-being. This case conceptualization illustrates how ACT can provide a holistic and empowering framework for addressing anxiety, moving beyond symptom suppression to cultivate a life of vitality and purpose.

Literature Review

Anxiety disorders are among the most widespread mental health conditions globally, impacting a substantial portion of the population and placing a considerable burden on individuals and healthcare systems (Kessler et al., 2005). These disorders are marked by excessive and persistent worry, fear, and apprehension, frequently accompanied by a variety of physical symptoms like an elevated heart rate, shortness of breath, and muscle tension (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The effects of anxiety extend beyond personal suffering, often leading to impaired social functioning, reduced productivity, and a diminished overall quality of life (Wittchen et al., 2011). Traditional cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has long been the gold standard for treating anxiety, primarily focusing on identifying and challenging unhelpful thought patterns and gradually exposing individuals to feared situations to reduce avoidance (Beck et al., 1985). While effective for many, some individuals continue to grapple with chronic anxiety or find symptom-focused approaches insufficient for lasting well-being.

In response to the limitations of purely symptom-reductive approaches, third-wave cognitive behavioral therapies have emerged, offering a broader perspective on psychological health. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) stands out among these, shifting the therapeutic goal from symptom elimination to the cultivation of psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 1999). Psychological flexibility is defined as the ability to fully connect with the present moment as a conscious human being, and to either change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends (Hayes et al., 2006). This framework proposes that human suffering often arises from attempts to control or avoid unwanted internal experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations) rather than from the experiences themselves. This phenomenon, known as experiential avoidance, can paradoxically increase the frequency and intensity of distressing internal states and narrow an individual's behavioral repertoire, pulling them away from activities that align with their personal values (Hayes et al., 1996).

The ACT model consists of six core processes that work interdependently to foster psychological flexibility: acceptance, defusion, contact with the present moment, self-as-context, values, and committed action (Harris, 2019). Acceptance involves actively and non-judgmentally embracing private experiences, rather than fighting against them. Defusion refers to the process of disentangling from unhelpful thoughts, seeing them as mere words or mental events rather than literal truths or commands. Contact with the present moment encourages individuals to fully engage with their current experience, reducing rumination on the past or worry about the future. Self-as-context helps individuals develop a sense of self as an observing perspective, distinct from their ever-changing thoughts and feelings. Values clarification involves identifying what truly matters to an individual, serving as a compass for life direction. Finally, committed action entails taking effective steps, guided by one's values, even in the presence of discomfort or obstacles.

Research consistently supports the efficacy of ACT across a range of psychological conditions, including various anxiety disorders (Ruiz, 2012; Powers et al., 2009). Studies have shown that ACT interventions lead to significant reductions in anxiety symptoms, alongside improvements in psychological flexibility, quality of life, and overall functioning. For instance, a meta-analysis by Powers et al. (2009) found ACT to be effective for anxiety and depression, with effect sizes comparable to traditional CBT. Furthermore, ACT's emphasis on values-driven living provides a robust framework for long-term behavioral change and resilience, empowering individuals to pursue meaningful lives irrespective of internal struggles (Hayes et al., 2012). This literature review underscores the relevance and potential effectiveness of applying an ACT framework to understand and address cases of anxiety, such as that of PA, by focusing on the underlying processes of psychological inflexibility and promoting a life of vitality.

Case History

Name: PA

Sex: Female

Age: 22

Socio-economic Status: Not mentioned

Informant: PA

Chief Complaints: Anxiety **Duration:** Over the past year

History of Present Illness: PA, a 22-year-old woman, is seeking help primarily for anxiety that has notably intensified over the past year. She describes her anxiety as unpredictable, often surfacing in social situations or even at the mere thought of interacting with others, yet at other times appearing without any clear trigger. A significant aspect of her experience is anticipatory anxiety, where she finds herself constantly worried about when her next anxious episode will occur. This pervasive anxiety has profoundly affected her daily life, particularly her productivity and her ability to enjoy social outings, activities she once deeply valued.

A crucial factor contributing to the worsening of PA's anxiety was the abrupt end to her university studies last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This unexpected disruption led to a period of social isolation, which she identifies as a key contributor to her current struggles. Since leaving university, PA has faced considerable difficulty securing employment, a challenge that has, in turn, negatively impacted her mood and sense of self-worth. Her anxiety has since intensified, manifesting as feelings of being overwhelmed and frequent tearfulness.

Precipitating and Perpetuating Factors: The onset and escalation of PA's anxiety can be directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced an abrupt halt to her university education and subsequently led to social isolation. This period of isolation appears to have eroded her previous coping mechanisms and support systems, leaving her more susceptible to anxious thoughts and feelings.

Several factors are actively perpetuating PA's anxiety. A critical one is her tendency to suppress or "push down" her anxious feelings rather than processing them. This avoidance strategy, common in anxiety disorders, often leads to a buildup of emotional pressure and hinders genuine emotional regulation. Furthermore, her current unemployment status and continued social isolation significantly contribute to her distress, reinforcing negative self-beliefs and a sense of stagnation. Her internal dialogue seems heavily dominated by self-critical thoughts, further entrenching her anxiety.

Protective Factors and Premorbid Personality: Despite the considerable challenges, PA possesses inherent strengths that can be utilized in her treatment. Her willingness to attend therapy is a crucial protective factor, indicating a desire for change and an openness to seeking professional help. This proactive step suggests a level of self-awareness and motivation that can be instrumental in her therapeutic journey.

Regarding her premorbid personality and habits, PA describes herself as having been "carefree and outgoing" throughout her life prior to the recent escalation of anxiety. During her university years, she tended to downplay any nascent anxiety symptoms, attributing them to typical nerves associated with acting performances, a field she was presumably involved in. This suggests a history of resilience and a capacity for social engagement that can be re-cultivated through targeted interventions. Her previous ability to navigate social situations with ease provides a valuable baseline and a potential source of motivation for recovery.

Case Conceptualization

This section provides a detailed explanation of the nine steps involved in case conceptualization using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), specifically applied to the case of PA. This structured approach helps in understanding the client's struggles from an ACT perspective and guides the development of a targeted intervention plan.

1. Reformulating the Presenting Problem

From an ACT perspective, the presenting problem (e.g., anxiety, depression) is not viewed as an illness to be cured, but rather as a manifestation of psychological inflexibility. For PA, her chief complaint of anxiety is reformulated as: "PA is struggling to live a life consistent with her values due to attempts to control or avoid her anxiety." This reformulation highlights the core ACT principle that suffering arises not from having difficult thoughts and feelings, but from the struggle against them. In PA's case, her efforts to suppress anxiety and avoid social situations are inadvertently preventing her from engaging in behaviors that align with her deeper desires for social connection, productivity, and emotional well-being. This step is crucial as it shifts the focus from symptom reduction to understanding how avoidance strategies impact a client's ability to live a valued life.

2. Private Experiences PA Avoids

This step identifies the internal experiences (thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, memories) that the client actively tries to avoid or escape. For PA, these likely include:

- Negative emotions: Anxiety itself, sadness, fear, and shame (particularly related to her perceived lack of productivity and unemployment).
- Negative thoughts: Self-critical thoughts such as "I'm a failure," "I'm worthless," "I'm not good enough," and anticipatory judgments like "People will think I'm weird if I'm anxious."
- Physical sensations: The uncomfortable physiological manifestations of anxiety, such as a racing heart, sweating, and tightness in the chest. By identifying these avoided private experiences, the therapist gains insight into the specific targets of PA's experiential avoidance, which is a key component of psychological inflexibility.

3. Avoidance Behaviors

This step details the overt (observable actions) and covert (internal mental strategies) behaviors the client employs to avoid or control their private experiences.

- **Overt Behavioral Avoidance:** PA might be actively avoiding social situations, withdrawing from friends, or refraining from seeking new employment opportunities due to her anxiety. She may also experience difficulty initiating or completing tasks, leading to procrastination and further impacting her productivity. While not explicitly stated, excessive social media use could also serve as a form of overt avoidance, providing a distraction from difficult emotions or real-world engagement.
- **Internally Based Emotional Control Strategies:** PA engages in negative self-talk, which reinforces her self-doubt and low self-esteem. She also attempts to "push down" or suppress her anxious feelings, which, paradoxically, often intensifies them.
- **Behaviorally Focused Emotional Control Strategies:** The case does not suggest the use of substances or self-harm, indicating that her control strategies are primarily cognitive and behavioral.
- **In-Session Avoidance:** PA might avoid discussing particularly anxiety-provoking or shameful topics during therapy sessions. Understanding these behaviors helps the therapist identify how PA's attempts to control her internal world are limiting her life.

4. Motivation to Change

This step assesses the client's readiness and reasons for engaging in therapy.

- **Cost of Avoidance Behaviors:** PA's anxiety has led to significant negative consequences, including difficulty maintaining friendships (social isolation), impaired productivity, and persistent low mood and tearfulness. These tangible costs highlight the "unworkability" of her current strategies and can serve as a strong motivator for change.
- **Unworkability of Current Strategies:** PA's past coping mechanism of "downplaying" anxiety through acting is no longer effective, suggesting an openness to exploring new strategies. However, the extent to which she fully recognizes the unworkability of her current suppression and avoidance is a key area for therapeutic exploration.
- **Clarity and Importance of Values:** While PA's values are inferred rather than explicitly stated, clarifying them (e.g., social connection, productivity, emotional well-being) can increase her motivation by showing how anxiety is preventing her from living a life aligned with what she truly cares about.
- **Therapeutic Relationship:** A strong, supportive therapeutic relationship is a crucial foundation for fostering motivation and engagement in ACT.
- **Beliefs about Feared Events:** PA fears social judgment. Exploring these fears and how they drive avoidance can help her see the benefits of facing them.

5. Environmental Barriers to Change

This step considers external factors that might impede the client's progress. For PA, potential barriers include:

- **Social media:** The idealized portrayals often found on social media platforms could exacerbate PA's anxiety and low self-esteem, creating an unrealistic standard and fostering comparison.

- Lack of social support: If her friends have distanced themselves due to her anxiety, this could further hinder her motivation to re-engage socially.
- Unstructured time: Having too much unstructured time, especially given her unemployment, can lead to increased rumination and anxiety-provoking thoughts. Addressing these environmental factors, or helping PA navigate them, is important for sustained change.

6. Factors Contributing to PA's Psychological Inflexibility

This step delves into the specific ACT processes that are contributing to the client's psychological inflexibility.

- Cognitive Entanglement/Fusion: PA is highly fused with negative self-beliefs ("I'm a failure," "I'm worthless") and anxious thoughts ("I'm going to be judged"). She treats these thoughts as literal truths, which dictates her behavior and perpetuates her anxiety.
- Out of Contact with the Present Moment: PA frequently worries about the future ("when will I feel anxious next?") and ruminates on past events (leaving university). This indicates a lack of present-moment awareness, keeping her "stuck in her head" and disconnected from her current experience.
- Fused with Self-as-Content: PA desires to be perceived as "confident and fun," suggesting an attachment to a rigid self-image. This fusion with a conceptualized self can make her vulnerable to anxiety when her internal experiences don't align with this ideal.
- Out of Contact with Values: PA's avoidance behaviors (e.g., social withdrawal, procrastination) are likely misaligned with her core values of social connection and productivity.
- Ability to Build Patterns of Committed Action: Her difficulty initiating tasks due to anxiety suggests a struggle in consistently taking steps towards her goals, indicating a deficit in committed action.

7. Treatment Implications for PA

Based on the conceptualization, this step outlines the specific ACT interventions that would be most beneficial for PA.

- Defusion Strategies: To help PA disentangle from negative self-beliefs and anxious thoughts.
- Mindfulness Techniques: To increase present-moment awareness and reduce rumination.
- Values Clarification: To help her identify what truly matters and motivate values-driven action.
- Behavioral Activation: To help her break down goals and take consistent action despite anxiety.
- Acceptance of Emotions: To foster a willingness to experience anxiety without trying to control it.
- Exposure Exercises: Gradual exposure to social situations to build coping skills and reduce fear.

8. Factors Contributing to PA's Psychological Flexibility

This step identifies the client's existing strengths and resources that can be leveraged in therapy.

- Prior Attempts at Coping: PA's past use of acting to manage anxiety, even if no longer effective, indicates a willingness to try new strategies and a capacity for "detaching" from internal experiences to perform a role.
- Seeking Therapy: Her proactive decision to seek therapy demonstrates a desire for improvement and a willingness to take action, which are significant assets. The therapist can build upon these strengths, linking them to ACT principles and empowering PA to apply them to her current struggles.

9. Treatment Procedures for PA using ACT

This step outlines a structured, phased approach to therapy, integrating the ACT processes.

- **Building Rapport and Establishing Context:** Creating a safe, collaborative environment and providing psychoeducation on ACT.
- **Assessment and Strength Identification:** Comprehensive assessment, including ACT measures and identifying existing strengths.
- **Initial Focus (Creative Hopelessness & Emotional Control as the Problem):** Helping PA recognize the unworkability of her current avoidance strategies.
- **Targeting Psychological Inflexibility:** Implementing exercises for willingness (acceptance), experiential exposure, self-as-context, and contact with the present moment.
- **Values Clarification and Committed Action:** Helping PA identify core values and set behavioral goals aligned with them.
- **Social, Financial, and Vocational Resources:** Exploring and connecting PA with external support systems.
- **Life Skills Training:** Incorporating compatible techniques like relaxation or social skills training if needed.
- **Modifications to ACT Protocol:** Tailoring the approach based on PA's progress and individual needs.
- **Outcome Measures:** Monitoring progress using standardized ACT measures and self-reported anxiety levels. This comprehensive plan ensures a systematic and client-centered approach to fostering psychological flexibility in PA.

Tentative Treatment Plan

This detailed treatment plan for PA is formulated based on the case conceptualization using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), aiming to enhance her psychological flexibility and enable her to live a life consistent with her values despite the presence of anxiety. The plan is structured across several sessions, with each building upon the previous, and includes specific goals, interventions, metaphors, homework, and next steps. The applicability of each component to PA's specific challenges is highlighted.

Session 1

Building Rapport, Introducing ACT, and Creative Hopelessness

Goals

- Establish a warm, collaborative, and safe therapeutic environment.
- Introduce PA to the basic concepts of ACT, particularly the idea that struggling against anxiety can paradoxically increase suffering.
- Begin exploring the impact of anxiety on her life and values, and gently introduce the concept of "creative hopelessness."

Metaphors

- *Mind as Velcro*: To illustrate how thoughts and feelings can "stick" and how attempts to forcefully remove them often make them adhere more strongly. This helps PA understand that her attempts to suppress anxiety might be counterproductive. Applicability: PA's tendency to "push down" her anxious feelings aligns well with this metaphor, providing an accessible way to introduce the unworkability of her current strategies.
- *Tug-of-War with a Monster*: To depict the struggle against anxiety. The more she fights, the more entangled she becomes. The solution is to drop the rope, not defeat the monster. Applicability: This metaphor directly addresses PA's "struggle to control or avoid her anxiety," showing her that her efforts to escape it are exhausting and ineffective.

Interventions

- *Welcome and Introductions*: Focus on active listening and empathic validation of PA's experiences to build rapport.
- *Psychoeducation on ACT (Brief)*: Explain that ACT is not about eliminating anxiety but about changing her relationship with it so she can live a fuller life. Use the metaphors to illustrate core concepts.
- *Exploring the Impact of Anxiety*: Ask PA to describe her anxiety in detail: its triggers, physical sensations, thoughts, and how it affects her daily life, productivity, and social interactions.
- *Creative Hopelessness*: Gently inquire about her past and current strategies for managing anxiety (e.g., "downplaying," pushing feelings down, social media use). Explore whether these strategies have been consistently helpful or if they might be inadvertently contributing to the problem. The aim is to help PA realize the unworkability of her control agenda. Applicability: This directly targets PA's perpetuating factors, particularly her tendency to "push her anxious feelings down rather than processing them."

Homework

- *Anxiety Observation Journal*: Provide PA with a simple journal or worksheet to track instances of anxiety, noting the situation, associated thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and her typical reactions. Emphasize observation without judgment. Applicability: This promotes initial present-moment contact and helps PA begin to notice her internal experiences without immediately trying to change them.
- *Mindful Moment*: Encourage PA to choose one daily activity (e.g., brushing teeth, drinking coffee) and practice focusing on the present-moment sensations during that activity for a few minutes. Applicability: This introduces a basic mindfulness skill, addressing her "out of contact with the present moment" factor.

Next Steps

- Briefly discuss the next session's focus on exploring values in more detail and introducing defusion.
- Encourage PA to bring any questions or observations from her homework.

Session 2

Values Exploration and Defusion

Goals

- Build upon the first session by exploring PA's core values in depth.

- Introduce the concept of "psychological inflexibility" more explicitly and its relation to her anxiety.
- Introduce defusion techniques to help PA detach from unhelpful thoughts.

Metaphors

- *Life Compass*: To help PA identify her values as a guiding compass for her life, rather than external rules or expectations. Applicability: This helps PA connect with what truly matters to her, providing a direction for committed action and addressing her "out of contact with values" factor.
- *Passengers on the Bus*: PA is the driver, and her thoughts/feelings are passengers. She can choose where the bus goes, regardless of the passengers' demands. Applicability: This metaphor reinforces the idea of not letting anxious thoughts dictate her actions, directly addressing her "cognitive entanglement/fusion."

Interventions

- *Review and Recap*: Discuss PA's experience with the homework from Session 1, focusing on any insights gained from observing her anxiety and practicing mindful moments.
- *Values Exploration*: Use an ACT values exercise (e.g., "Life Compass" worksheet, values card sorting activity, or asking "What do you want your life to stand for?") to help PA identify her core values across different life domains (e.g., relationships, personal growth, health, work). Encourage her to identify specific behaviors that would reflect living according to those values. Applicability: This directly addresses her inferred values (social connection, productivity, emotional well-being) and lays the groundwork for values-driven committed action.
- *Psychoeducation on Psychological Inflexibility*: Explain how attempts to control or avoid thoughts and feelings can sometimes make anxiety worse, using the "quicksand" metaphor (the more you struggle, the deeper you sink).
- *Defusion Techniques*: Introduce techniques like "labeling" thoughts ("I'm having the thought that...") or "thanking your mind" for the thought. Practice labeling some of the anxious and self-critical thoughts PA identified in her journal. Encourage her to see thoughts as "passing clouds" or "words on a screen," not literal truths. Applicability: This directly targets her "cognitive entanglement/fusion" with negative self-beliefs and anxious thoughts.

Homework

- *Values-Based Goal Setting*: Ask PA to choose one core value identified in the session and identify a specific, achievable goal that aligns with it (e.g., Value: Connection, Goal: Send a text message to reconnect with a friend).
- *Defusion Practice*: Continue practicing labeling anxious or self-critical thoughts throughout the week. Notice how labeling can create a space between PA and her thoughts, allowing her to observe them rather than being consumed by them. Applicability: Reinforces the defusion skills learned in session.

Next Steps

- Discuss how the identified goal relates to overcoming anxiety and living a values-driven life.
- Briefly preview the focus of the next session, which will involve exploring willingness and planning a gentle exposure exercise.

Session 3

Acceptance and Willingness, Gentle Exposure Planning

Goals

- Build upon previous sessions by exploring PA's willingness to experience anxiety.
- Introduce the concept of "acceptance" as an active process of making room for difficult internal experiences.
- Begin planning a gentle exposure exercise based on PA's chosen value-based goal.

Metaphors

- *Struggling Against a Wave*: Illustrates how fighting against a wave (anxiety) is exhausting and ineffective, whereas allowing it to flow through you (acceptance) allows you to move forward. Applicability: This directly addresses PA's tendency to "push down" her anxious feelings and introduces a more effective way of relating to them.
- *Swamp/Quicksand (revisited)*: Reinforce how struggling (avoidance) makes things worse, while letting go (acceptance) allows for movement. Applicability: This reinforces the unworkability of control and highlights the benefit of acceptance.

Interventions

- *Review and Recap*: Discuss PA's experience with the homework, focusing on challenges with defusion and her chosen value-based goal.
- *Willingness and Acceptance*: Introduce willingness as being open to experiencing anxiety without judgment or trying to control it. Explain acceptance as actively making space for difficult feelings.
- *Acceptance Exercise*: Guide PA through a brief mindfulness activity, such as observing her breath or body scan, to help her experience present-moment sensations associated with anxiety in a non-reactive way. Encourage her to "make room" for any discomfort that arises. Applicability: This directly addresses her "out of contact with the present moment" and fosters acceptance of physical sensations.
- *Exposure Planning*: Based on PA's chosen value-based goal (e.g., reconnecting with a friend), collaboratively brainstorm a small, manageable exposure exercise that involves facing some level of anxiety. For example, sending a text message to reconnect with the friend, or making a short phone call. Discuss the potential benefits (living her values) and any fears associated with the exposure exercise. Applicability: This directly addresses her "social avoidance" and "difficulty building patterns of committed action," providing a concrete step towards her values despite anxiety.

Homework

- *Acceptance Practice*: Encourage PA to practice accepting anxious thoughts and feelings throughout the week. This could involve silent observation, labeling them without judgment, or actively "making room" for them.
- *Exposure Exercise*: Ask PA to complete the planned exposure exercise (e.g., sending the text message) and observe her thoughts and feelings before, during, and after the interaction. Encourage her to record her observations in a journal, noting any shifts in intensity or new insights. Applicability: This is a crucial step for behavioral change, allowing PA to experience that anxiety can be present without controlling her actions, and that feared outcomes may not materialize.

Next Steps

- Discuss how the exposure exercise went and any insights PA gained from it.
- Based on her experience, the therapist might decide to adjust the exposure exercise for the next session or move on to a slightly more challenging one, continuing the process of committed action.

Considerations in Treatment Plan

Continued Focus on Psychological Flexibility

Self-as-Context: Introduce exercises to help PA separate her "self" from her thoughts and feelings, fostering a sense of an observing self that is stable amidst changing internal experiences. This addresses her "fused with self-as-content" factor.

Deepening Values

- Continuously revisit and refine PA's values, exploring how they can guide her actions in various life domains.
- Expanding Committed Action: Gradually increase the complexity and challenge of exposure exercises and other value-driven behaviors, addressing her "ability to build patterns of committed action."

Addressing Environmental Barriers

- Discuss strategies for managing social media use to reduce comparison and negative self-talk.
- Explore ways to increase social support, perhaps by re-engaging with old friends or finding new social groups.
- Help PA structure her time, especially given her unemployment, to reduce rumination and increase engagement in meaningful activities.

Life Skills Training

If needed, incorporate compatible techniques such as relaxation exercises for stress management or social skills training to improve communication and confidence in social interactions.

Outcome Monitoring

- Regularly monitor PA's progress using standardized ACT measures (e.g., Acceptance and Action Questionnaire - AAQ-II) and self-reported anxiety levels.
- Track her engagement in value-driven behaviors and her subjective sense of well-being.

Possible Outcomes of this Case Study

- *Increased Psychological Flexibility:* Its anticipated that a significant increase in PA's psychological flexibility as a primary outcome. This would manifest as a greater willingness to experience anxious thoughts and feelings without resorting to avoidance behaviors, a reduced tendency to fuse with negative self-beliefs, and an enhanced ability to stay present and engaged in her activities.
- *Reduced Impact of Anxiety Symptoms:* While her anxiety may not completely vanish, PA is expected to report a noticeable decrease in the distress and interference caused by her anxiety symptoms. She'll learn to respond to anxiety with acceptance and defusion, hereby diminishing its power to dictate her actions and limit her life.

- *Enhanced Values-Driven Living:* As PA clarifies her core values and commits to actions aligned with them, she's likely to experience increased purpose and satisfaction. This could involve re-engaging in social activities, actively pursuing employment opportunities, and dedicating time to personal growth, even when anxiety is present.
- *Improved Social Functioning:* Through gradual exposure exercises and a renewed commitment to her value of social connection, PA is likely to experience a significant improvement in her social interactions. This might include reconnecting with old friends, forming new relationships, and feeling more confident and at ease in social situations.
- *Greater Self-Efficacy and Well-being:* As PA successfully navigates challenging situations using ACT skills, her sense of self-efficacy and confidence will likely grow. This will contribute to an overall improvement in her mood, a reduction in tearfulness, and a greater sense of psychological well-being.
- *Sustainable Change:* Unlike approaches that solely focus on symptom suppression, ACT aims to build fundamental psychological skills that are applicable across various life challenges. This suggests that the changes PA experiences will be more enduring, and she'll be better equipped to handle future stressors.
- *Potential for Setbacks:* It's crucial to acknowledge that the therapeutic journey is rarely linear. PA may experience setbacks or moments of increased anxiety. The treatment plan accounts for this by emphasizing the acceptance of difficult experiences and continuously reinforcing the learned skills, allowing for a flexible response to such challenges.

Conclusion

The proposed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) treatment plan for PA is thoughtfully designed to address her anxiety by targeting the underlying mechanisms of psychological inflexibility. By guiding PA through the core processes of ACT—acceptance, defusion, present moment contact, self-as-context, values clarification, and committed action—the goal isn't to eliminate her anxiety, but rather to fundamentally change her relationship with it. This shift aims to empower her to engage in life-affirming behaviors, even when discomfort is present, thereby fostering a more meaningful and vital existence. This case study provided a blueprint for conceptualization of cases of Anxiety using ACT.

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