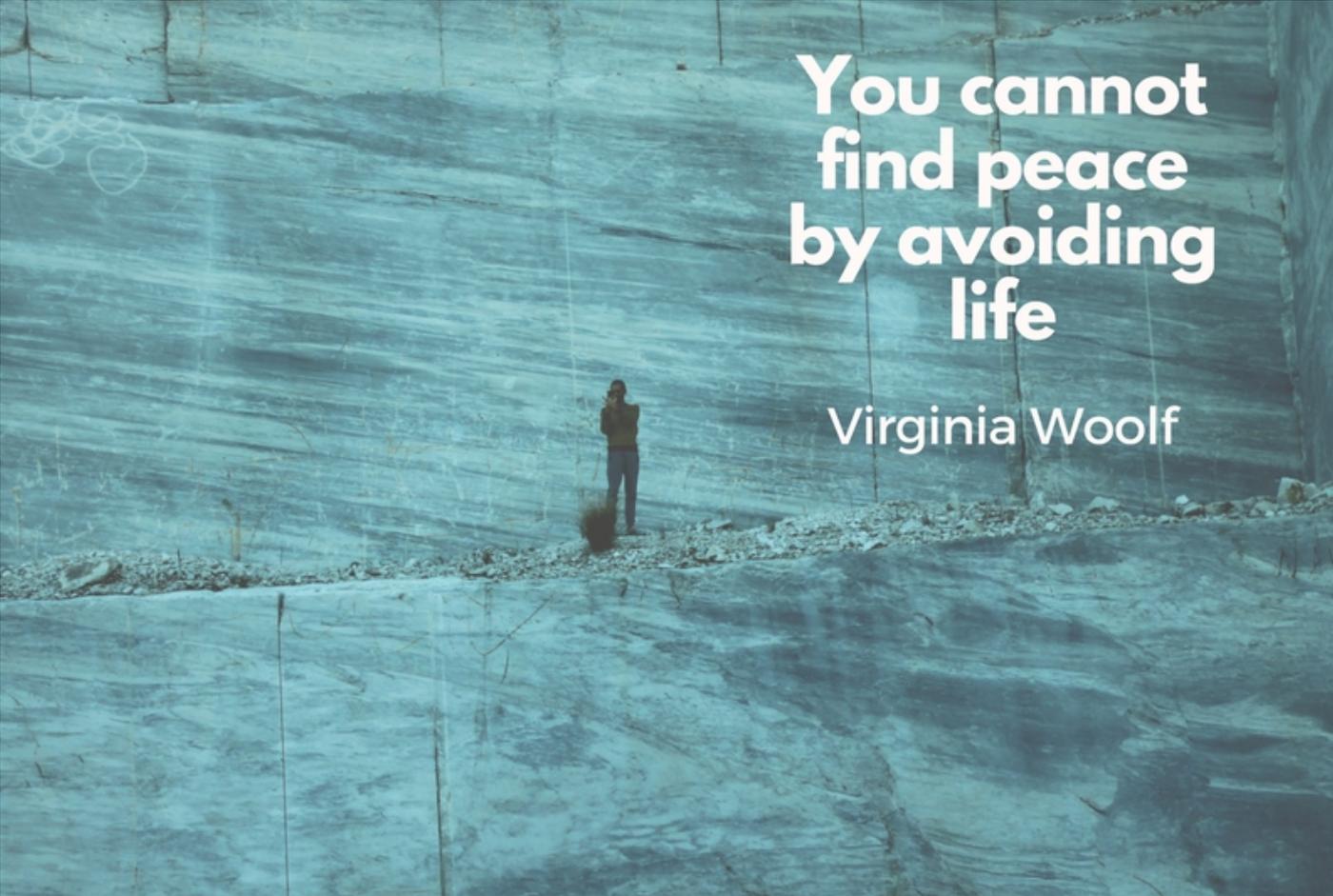


The
ACT
Therapist
Guide to
SELF - CARE

HELENA COLODRO
JOE OLIVER



**You cannot
find peace
by avoiding
life**

Virginia Woolf

This e-book is for you if:

- ✓ You are a therapist
- ✓ You struggle with feelings and thoughts in session sometimes
- ✓ You get stuck with clients sometimes
- ✓ You don't know what to do with all this mess

For us, being therapists is an absolute privilege. To join people on their journey, to be trusted with intimate secrets, to be in a position to help another person craft a meaningful life, is incredibly satisfying. **At the same time, it demands a lot.** The sense of responsibility weighs heavy at times. The desire to help when help can't be offered. Needing to be psychologically flexible when sometimes the rest of our lives doesn't allow much breathing space.

For those of us who have that perfectionistic streak (aka - I'm not good enough/ useless/ terrible - must work harder, faster, better!) along with a healthy dose of the imposter syndrome, **being a therapist can be a tricky role.** Our ever busy, fixing-addicted minds love to find things wrong (especially with us), and what better place to start than in the messy, unpredictable business of therapy!



This book is written from the perspective of **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)**. This just happens to be the method of therapy we both use. It's one perspective among many useful ones available, and we hope it may be of use whatever your professional background.

If you already are an ACT therapist or are on your way, you might have some ideas of how this "should be" so far.

A better ACT therapist **would...**

- Be less avoidant
- Be practicing mindfulness at least once a day (probably twice).
- Wouldn't get so fused with their thoughts Know their values. Work to their values.
- Not be caught up in self-as-content (or just have a halfway decent understanding of self as context)
- Be all compassionate, wise and loving to everyone AT ALL TIMES!!

Phew. It's hard being an ACT (or any other) therapist at times...

This e-book is written by the two of us who are ACT psychologists. We are passionate about our work, love what we do and help make real, genuine changes in people's lives. And sometimes we both think we are the worst therapists EVER. We make mistakes. We screw things up.

And, in our own humanity, we continue with our work. Because it's important. Because it matters to us.



In doing this, slowing down and pausing, accepting that this is the case, and easing up on the desperate struggle for it to be different, we (in that odd, paradoxical way) can allow for purposeful change to occur. Change that recognises the commonality in this experience as a therapist. Changes that allow for a mindful acceptance of these thoughts and feelings. ***Changes that allow for a deep and healing self-compassionate stance towards ourselves in this work.***

We will go through some basic concepts that come from the Contextual Science model * itself, and weave this in with our own experience of what we do when we get lost in session.

This e-book seeks to outline ideas, thoughts and strategies that are personally helpful to us in our work and we hope it may be helpful to you.



*: If you want to know more about Contextual Behavioural Science and its clinical applications there are loads of materials and info available, we encourage you to visit the ACBS page or to get in touch with a good ACT therapist who can give you some advice (www.contextualscience.org)



2

Our Stories

This is not at all written from a place where we've got our sh*t sorted. Nope, not at all. Turns out we make mistakes and screw things up, say stupid things right up there with the best of us. And as much as our minds scream at us not to tell you any of this ("they'll lose respect for you; what if someone you're working with read this?!; they will judge you **NEGATIVELY!**". Ahem - thanks mind...), **here are our personal Top Stories that get us stuck when we're in the therapy room.**

Joe's



*You're not creative/ fun/ engaging/ interesting enough as a therapist.
It's not enough. You're not enough.
You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know anything.
You're lazy – a proper therapist would be doing more.*

Helena's



*He does not understand the therapy.
She doesn't want to change, she will leave.
You don't know how to continue with the session, this job is not made for you.
You feel very sick and confused. Stop the session. Go home.*

When we decided to write this e-book, we started with a premise: **like us, you are someone who has had such thoughts, or similar ones, over and over again.** You've felt lost and confused in session, and you might also have thought that this means that you are a very bad professional, because "good therapists shouldn't think/feel that way!"

Well, if you have all that thoughts, IT IS OK.

We are convinced that having these beliefs does not make you a better or worse therapist and that having those thoughts and feelings is normal and unavoidable for anyone and for any psychology professional. For us too!

The reality is that, on a daily basis, many health professionals continue struggling with all these ideas. Unfortunately, there is still a certain taboo about the issue and there is not much material out there that addresses the question in a practical, contextual and applied way for helping us, the therapists.

While these thoughts and fears may actually be factual, the key is not so much about the presence of these stories. You guessed it; **it's about how we respond to these stories when they show up.** And that's what we want to focus on here.

What do we do when we get lost in our thoughts and feelings (**some real examples**) *:

The client looked across the room at me, over the top of her glasses.
She was dressed in a sharp suit and looked like she had stepped out of a very high-powered meeting with very high-powered people, which in fact she had just done.

"You want me to do what?!" This was in response to my suggestion we do a values exercise, taking the perspective of a retirement party to reflect on what was important to the client. "Ridiculous, who comes up with this rubbish?". "Um, well, we don't have to of course. We can go back to debriefing on your stressful week if you like".



*Meanwhile, my mind kicked into overdrive, reminding me how I could never offer anything useful to someone so competent. And the anticipated anxiety of having a frank discussion about therapy interfering behaviours was off the charts. **Better to stay nice and quite. Which was what I did for the rest of the session.***

Joe

I remember one of the first sessions I had with a client some months ago. I was working on the functional behavioural analysis with her and I started having some thoughts and uncomfortable feelings that told me the client was not understanding her own inflexibility and experiential avoidance patterns as "it was supposed to be" (in my mind it usually sounds like "she does not get it, she doesn't understand it, I'm failing!").

By that time I was so full of impatience and frustration...I could feel that big urge to react, explaining to her about her behaviour patterns and their consequences essentially me telling her how doing what she did was making things get worse...



Instead of making certain therapeutic movements, asking the right questions, keep myself quiet and gently allow her to come up with her own answers, I just did what my mind wanted me to do and told her, straight away, "you're doing this doing wrong".

I remember me talking a lot, explaining everything about her behaviour, about human behaviour... and I kept asking her again

and again "do you see it? do you get it?", insisting until she, resigned, had to say "yes ..I get it".

My anxiety and frustration decreased, yes, she said she understood what was going on, but my interactions as a therapist didn't help the client to discriminate her behavioural outcomes by herself. **I did what I thought I "had" to do, not what I really had to do in terms of the client's needs.**

Helena

**We've changed some details here to keep things confidential.*



3

Basic attitudes

So, we've told you about some of our own "passengers" (to borrow from our ever favourite 'Passengers on the Bus' metaphor) - those stories that emerge within the course of a therapy process, those "mental visitors" that show up in our sessions (and in our daily life) and how we experience them. We wanted to introduce ourselves with a big "hello, you are not alone!" But this is not just about sharing our "dark secrets" as therapists! **We are writing this in a way that we hope is useful for you.**



We believe that there are a number of ***basic starting attitudes that could make a real change in how we relate to our stories and to our work in session. Key ideas that we apply in our own practice when we lose ourselves and we need to find the way again.*** You can use them as "mantras" or easy reminders to be able to come back to the session. If you really like it, place it in your office or therapy room..

Welcome to our 5 Top Tips section...

Top Tips for ACT Therapists

Recognise your own
barriers

AWARENESS

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Practice
Self-compassion

You are not alone

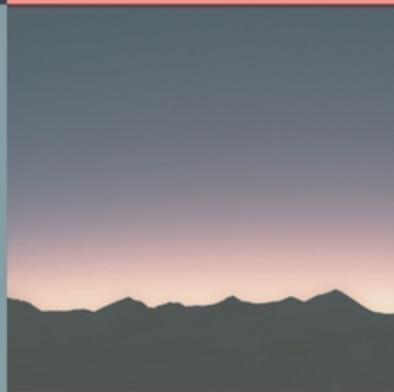
COMMON HUMANITY

CONTINUE LEARNING

Update Knowledge
Build Skills
Practice
Get Supervision

BE GRATEFUL

Barriers can tell you about
what's important to you and
what you care about



In session

Remember...

N O T I C E
A C C E P T
C O M M I T

These top tips are some of our own thoughts and we find useful to hold in mind and we appreciate you might know these already yourself but nothing like a helpful reminder, right? Perhaps **treat them as gentle suggestions to be held lightly, and not orders that must be obeyed.**

Recognise your own barriers



It's important for us each to recognize your own barriers that show up when working with clients. This requires a degree of honesty as we look in the mirror and notice our faults, flaws and defects. But doing so allows us the best opportunity to respond most helpfully for our clients and also ourselves. We get to step out of automatic pilot, where are thoughts and feelings to the driving. By recognizing your own barriers you place your hands firmly on the wheel and set the course.

Being willing to notice my own barriers was initially a painful honesty exercise. I was deeply attached to the belief that the "therapist should have everything under control". I kept thinking "I can't feel any anxiety while seeing a client. I am the therapist, for God sake!" Since then, I have continued taking further steps in ACT training and supervision. Noticing what shows up is still painful, but now it is also a liberating experience. I do not need to hide from what arises, I just can notice it and keep on working. Meanwhile, I still hear some stories from colleagues who claim not to feel or suffer while in session...

Helena

Be kind to yourself

Of course doing the above is likely to be more successful if we treat ourselves with the big old dose of kindness. Recognising our barriers doesn't mean we need to beat ourselves over the head with them. Perhaps as you meet your own barriers that you don't start a battle against them, nor yourself for having them. Just simply that we approach them with honesty and a degree of warmth. Self-care is meant for you too.



I'm not going to pretend I've personally got this self-compassion business nailed down. Far from it. My favourite go to strategy is to worry things going horribly and terribly wrong. And hands up, it's not like I don't get something out of all this worry. I get stuff done, I'm organised, I plan – and there's no doubt that I worry that if I don't ceaselessly worry, I'll somehow need to let go

of this. For me, being kind is hard. But deeply helpful. It's not a feeling– it's a stance I take with myself that's an action. At its heart it boils down to a message that's something like "It's OK, Joe, you can trust yourself that you've got this one." This allows me to slow down, not drive myself so hard and let things fall into accord as they will.

Joe

Common humanity

One of the key ingredients for kindness is the recognition that we are not in this all alone. It can feel at times like a lonely journey, so much more so when we believe we are the only one who struggle with barriers. It easy to look around friends and colleagues believe them to be successfully striding through their professional lives with grace and confidence. As we pause carefully and mindfully look around, it's useful to catch this as a story and remember that chances are others are struggling at times, just as we sometimes do.



One of the things we love about being ACT psychologists is that our community supports us to openly share our own stuff, as we are doing now with you. Knowing we all struggle sometimes and getting to talk about it really helps and makes us feel emotionally supported and connected. Our aim is take this further though. It is not just about what we feel as individual therapists; it is also about what we do outside the context of therapy so we can look for solutions together, as a community of practitioners.

Continue Learning

Of course, just by recognizing the fact that we all screw up at times, doesn't get us off the hook for continuing this learning journey. There will be plenty of opportunity to update our knowledge, build our skills, continue to practice, or get supervision by people further down the journey than us. And this is a wonderful thing.

The day you think you've reached the end of the journey, is probably the day that it's time to hang up your hat and think about retiring.



Be grateful

It's important to bring a flavour and feel of gratefulness to your barriers. Your fears, worries, anxieties, doubt are easy to treat these as the enemy. In fact very often it's the opposite that is the case. These so-called flaws are the very thing that allows us to connect deeply with our clients. They are a product of the inevitable uncertainty of therapy work. Or are genuine reflections of the fact that you're not yet at the end of the road. Admittedly barriers are not always easy to welcome but it's useful to mindfully reflect on what they do bring to the work and take a stance on gratefulness towards them.



In session

Here are three things we believe are super helpful for each of us to remember just at the moment before we enter into a session. ***We can remind ourselves to pause and notice whatever it is the shows up. We can take a stance of accepting the stuff that arrives. And lastly as we pull out our values compass, we can remind ourselves what in fact we would like to take action towards and make a small commitment to take steps in that direction.***

Write these on your diary, on your screen saver or get a tattoo! Three simple things to remind yourself of:



**Notice
Accept
Commit**



4

The journey

Open, aware and willing to meet your own barriers

Research shows that 90% of our fears and anxieties about being therapists have to do with two major concerns: **the “lack of skills” worry and the “lack of knowledge” worry** (and by research we mean a survey N = 2. But you get the point). Often, these concerns are products of our self-stories busily whirring away, and we can do well to simply notice it as that.

But of course, sometimes, these concerns are legitimate! The fear of not knowing where to start a piece of work, not knowing what to do or having no idea on how to proceed is a very sensible sign to say more learning is needed. It could be pointing us down a new ACT path: to seek out specific theoretical knowledge, applied and experiential training, experience with clients and supervision.

I moved away from psychology for a few years because I felt I had no idea how to act in front of a client, and I did not know anything! In my case, all those fears and insecurities worked as a red traffic light that was telling me "do not do what you don't know how to do".

*After a few years away from the world of psychology and psychological therapy, and thanks to being an ACT therapy client, I realised that my true vocation still was to become a therapist. **All those fears and doubts continued there with me (talking loud!) but I learned how to take some action and do what I needed in order to be a therapist.** I looked for the best ACT training available in my country and, after almost two years of study and practice, I knew I was ready to start, even though my mind has never stopped telling me that I am a disaster ever since. **The difference is not whether my mind has stopped telling me stories, or not, but what I have done to get to the point where I am now. And what I need to keep doing.***

Helena

Our happy feel-good society invites us most of the time slap a smile on our face, act like we're in control, pretend we do not feel anything "negative" and hiding it from clients, colleagues and, sadly, to ourselves. As the verbal context tells us "a vulnerable and fearful psychologist can't be a good psychologist" we spend our days trying to prevent any hint of insecurity or fear by multiple mechanisms, all this seasoned with big doses of self-criticism and frustration.



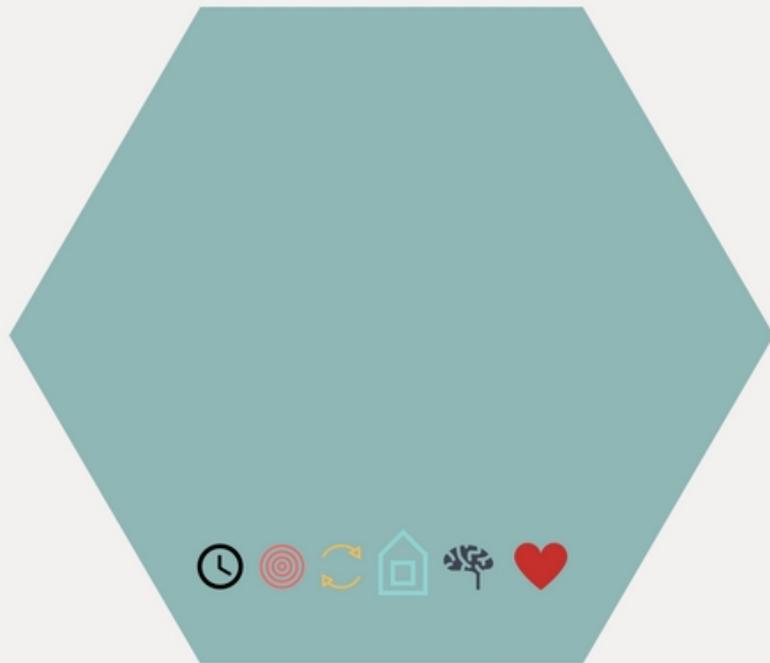
*I originally trained as a cognitive behavioural therapist (heavy on the 'C'; light on the 'B') and moved gradually into using ACT. **After a number of years using ACT, I was struggling to flexible adapt ACT techniques, particularly with complex clients. I would get anxious and stressed that I wasn't able to effectively formulate with clients and properly unpack issues.***

*The "I'm a rubbish therapist" story was louder than ever. Eventually, I realized that as much as I needed to hold that story lightly and be kind to myself, I also needed to go back to basics and learn behavioural principles and how they could be integrated with ACT. This meant lots of reading along with tough specialist supervision that I found very challenging. For months I felt like I did when I was a trainee psychologist – lots of anxiety and worries. But gradually things settled into place and the new skills and knowledge came online. This isn't to say the "I'm a rubbish therapist" stories have disappeared but my relationship to it has changed a lot. **I was glad I was able to listen with kindness beyond the story, and recognize the call to action.***

Joe

Many therapists will spend a lifetime hiding their fears in session, to others, and to themselves (pretending to know how to do everything well in front of others, not letting others see their work, or going from here to there in sessions just reacting to their barriers). **But there is another pathway available, which invites us to respond differently. The driving force for the second road, curved but much more meaningful, is the values structure that, as therapists, is guiding our own itinerary.**



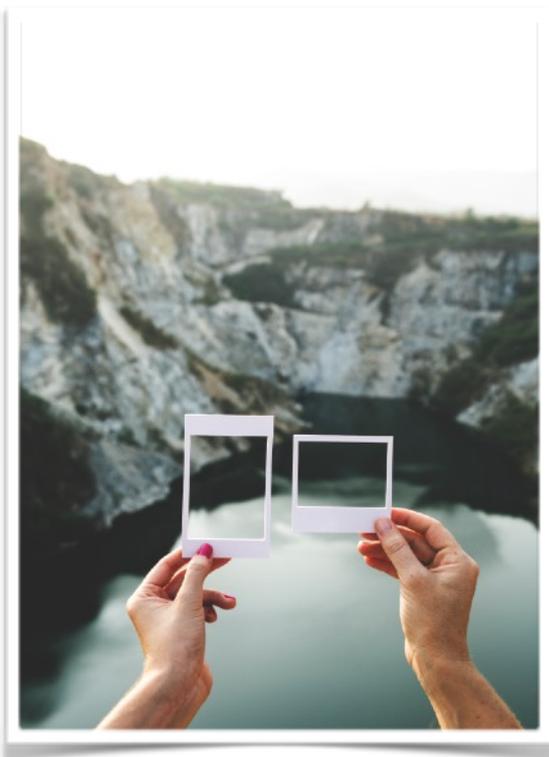


5

Therapists' Flexibility

Given the many emotional states we "navigate" in session with our clients, **contextual therapists have the extraordinary opportunity to apply the model's main therapeutic principles in our own life.** Of course, with healthy doses of compassion and acceptance and doing our best not to beat ourselves over the head with our values.

Possibly, many of you are already familiar with the Psychological Flexibility concept and its popular hexagon: the Hexaflex. Certainly, the psychological flexibility model is the essential framework through which we understand the nature of clients' interactions within their context, and beyond, there is also an interesting parallelism with the main psychological processes present in the course of a therapy, so we have adapted and related it to the therapeutic process in a simple and visual way as you'll see below.



These are equivalent processes that need to be thought through, that of the client and that of the therapist. A values focused learning, the acceptance of private events and the development of new, more flexible behaviour repertoires.

With the help of the model's main features and with good practical training and supervision, **we can learn how to come back to session with the client's needs at the forefront. And in a way to make sure we don't get lost in a sea of anxiety, insecurity or shame driven action.**

Basic behaviour principles (behaviour analysis; relational frame theory) give us a method when we go into the therapy "kitchen" – they help us develop good recipes and pick the best utensils for the dish. They help us to be experimental and creative in how we mix together key ingredients to get the best outcome in our clients' lives.

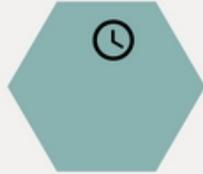
If you want to understand more about it and learn how to use it on your sessions, you can find some good Relational Frame Theory (RFT) material on the ACBS website. Also, if you can get to a good workshop, it'll worth your time and the effort!

We also love how Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP) approaches all these processes and meaningful client - therapist interactions. The development of deep, strong therapeutic relationships is one of the most powerful challenges we face as therapists (don't miss the chance of finding out more of what Mavis Tsai and Bob Kohlenberg and their team have - and still are - showing us about this issue).



Here are some infographics made for you to better understand how you can use the Hexaflex principles to your own practice as a therapist, we hope you find it useful.

HEXAFLEX FOR THERAPISTS



Be **PRESENT** in session



Your **VALUES** as a therapist are important



Act toward **ACT**



OBSERVE the process



NOTICE thoughts and feelings



ACCEPT with compassion





TOOL N° 1

BE PRESENT

BEFORE YOUR SESSION

- Choose being here and now.
- Find the pre-session routine that best suits you
- Keep 15-10 minutes before your client arrives to connect with the present moment.
- Consider putting everything away that could move you out of the present (phones, social media...)



IN SESSION

Consider starting with a "being present" exercise. This can help you and your client feel grounded



Every time you notice your mind is anywhere else than in the room, gently choose to come back. Repeat as many times as you need.

WHEN YOU FINISH...

Stay present. Take some session notes and write down the main clues or commitments. Keep distractions away so you can conclude your session efficiently.





TOOL N° 2

CLARIFYING VALUES

YOUR VALUES AS A THERAPIST: POINTS TO CONSIDER

- *Can I reconnect with what moved me into this profession?*
- *Remember the values that keep me inspired and motivated*
- *What sort of qualities and strengths do I want to cultivate as a therapist?*



VALUES ARE DESIRED, GLOBAL QUALITIES OF ONGOING ACTIONS

ACT therapy aims to help clients live
by their freely chosen values

EXPLORE CLIENT'S VALUES

Therapist can help the client to:

- Clarify values
- identify barriers
- Differentiate values from goals or avoidance behaviours
- Develop flexible and valued-based actions





TOOL N° 3

COMMITTED ACTIONS

TOWARD OR AWAY

- Committed actions happen in every session
- Act toward ACT therapy values and principles
- Don't just react to feelings and thoughts



YOUR MOVEMENTS IN SESSION

Choose ACT consistent interactions as a therapist

- *What I am trying to avoid by doing/ saying this?*
- *Which are the "rules" I am following by acting like this?*
- *Are my interactions helping the client build new and flexible repertoires?*
- *Considering my values and client's needs, instead of just reacting to my thoughts and emotions, what are my next steps/ moves?*

COMMITMENT IS THE EXPRESSION OF
PERSONAL VALUES THROUGH ACTIONS



TOOL N° 4

SELF AS A CONTEXT

MAKE ROOM, IT ALL FITS



Am I able to let emotions, thoughts and sensations be there with me as they show up in session?

Thoughts, feelings and sensations are just one part of the whole experience

Self as a context is the point of view from which we observe thoughts and feelings and we accept them



Therapy needs both client and therapist connect with their inner experiences and let them be there while they work together



TAKE SOME PERSPECTIVE

- *I am the context where all this happens, not just one particular feeling or thought.*
 - *I am more than my thoughts and feelings*
 - *These experiences will pass too*
-



TOOL N°5

DEFUSION

IN THE SAME BOAT

- Just as the client, you are also thinking and feeling many things in session.
 - See if you can use this with the client as a sample of an equivalent process
 - How old is this story? How does it work for you? What does it protect you from?
-

I'm Anxious

Not enough

I'm
Shame *I don't know what
to do next*

disappointment

My Pain &
Sickness shouldn't
be here

Fear

Insecurity

Judgements *I am a fraud*
They don't get it

WATCH, NOTICE,
ALLOW your stories to
come and go...



TOOL N°6

ACCEPTANCE

IT'S OK

Emotions,
feelings,
thoughts,
memories,
images...will
come and go



Acceptance is
the alternative
to controlling
and fighting

THE CHOICE TO FEEL

- Allow yourself to feel
- Stop fighting
- Let it be
- Keep on moving
- Help client to do the same



Which emotions and feelings am I willing to experience as they are while I work with the client?

SELF-COMPASSION



Being caring to
yourself is important
too. This work can be
hard and a kind
stance is important



6

One last thing

We believe contextual behavioural science needs to progress by evidence based knowledge, from basic and applied research. We also need cool, simple and comprehensive materials to use on a daily basis within our clinical settings. This is the aim of this e-book: **bridging theory and reality from our experiences**. Our career as psychologists and therapists is exciting and challenging, however, our experience is that we spend much of our time trying to become reliable, effective and helpful therapist for our clients, but sometimes we overlook our own self-care needs. It's hard to be there for others when we are not there for ourselves too.

We hope you won't take these words as factual statements or obligations of any kind - we wouldn't like to be that kind of person to you. We just know that we do not yet have a lot of material that supports us, as therapists. So we wanted to contribute with some brief and inspiring ideas to help you approach your sessions with some more perspective, whether you are a beginner or an experienced therapist.

There is still much to be done on understanding the therapist's barriers.

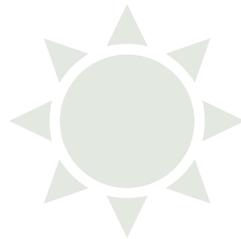
Research on contextual therapy approaches has come a long way in the last ten years, but we still need to know more about the mechanisms that underlies the therapeutic process from the therapist's perspective. Some professionals have already started working it out and we are closely following the advances of many colleagues who are sharing their findings and reflections on this topic through basic and applied research, conferences, workshops, free resources, books, guides, protocols, etc.



Thanks to all those colleagues with whom we have shared ideas, and have worked with through these years - they keep us motivated and supported. Being aware of your own barriers can be tough but sharing it with others can make it meaningful. We are committed to the advance of our profession through learning, practice and sharing knowledge. This is why we are **proud to be part of this big ACBS community that embraces curiosity, life-long learning and support between us.**

A big thank you to all the people who have shared knowledge and experiences with us by many different ways thought all that years. Thank you all of them because they first built the "bus" we are driving as therapists and many others keep making engineering works for a wider, stronger "highway" with their contributions. Thanks to our professors Carmen Luciano and Marisa Paez, Steven Hayes, Kelly Wilson, Yvonne and Dermot Barnes-Holmes, Jason Luoma, Russ Harris, Bob Kohlenberg and Mavis Tsai. Thanks to Maria Fornet (www.mariafornet.com), writer, blogger and psychologist, and Marina Díaz, from the blog Psicosupervivencia (www.psicosupervivencia.com), because their blogs are inspiring and fresh.

And a big thanks to our clients because they choose and trust in us as engineers of their buses too.



There will be a "The ACT Therapist Guide to Self-care. Part II" with more tips and worksheets. We would love to hear your opinions and to know what you would like to read in further therapist ebooks, we are open to suggestions, ideas and discussion.



Who are we?

Helena Colodro is qualified counselling psychologist and founder of "Inspira Psychology", a psychotherapy and training center in Granada, Spain. She is a multi-passioned entrepreneur who gets involved in all kinds of messy and appealing projects available, like working in different public and private settings, giving training to other psychologists, collaborating in cool things with other fellows and developing new ideas in psychotherapy. She holds a Master Degree in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), an incredible training programme that definitely made her recover the interest and trust on psychology and therapy. She loves music, going to concerts, cheese toast, coffee, more coffee, travelling as much as she can and spending time in London.

Joe Oliver is a consultant clinical psychologist, originally from New Zealand, now a long way from home, living in London. He is director of Contextual Consulting, an ACT based consultancy, doing things like ACT training, ACT research, seeing clients for ACT, providing ACT supervision, writing ACT books – you may see a pattern. Joe does have a life outside of ACT - he is also a massive Star Wars nerd (happy times to be alive) and a Zombie geek.



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For more information please visit:

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