

HANDOUT 5-E

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT)

Mindfulness: This is the ability to be an observer of your inner life (thoughts, feelings, physical sensations) without being overly entangled with them or distressed by them. Thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations are things we experience, but they do not define who we are. We are not the victims of our inner experiences. We recognize that thoughts and feelings come and go. Whatever we might be feeling one moment, we are likely to be feeling something different a short time later.

For example, suppose I make an unfortunate social blunder. My automatic thoughts would probably include, "They think I'm an idiot," and I would feel quite embarrassed. At that point, I have a choice. I can internalize these thoughts and feelings, dwell on them, and continue to suffer. Or, I can be aware of them and let them pass. Perhaps I could ask myself what I could learn from the experience, and then let go of my self-critical and judgmental thoughts.

Acceptance: Not only do we want to be mindful of our experience, we want to approach it with an attitude of kindness, compassion, and self-acceptance. We want to embrace experience rather than struggle against it. This concept is particularly helpful in dealing with anxiety. What do you do when you first notice feelings of anxiety? Do you criticize yourself for your feelings and struggle to suppress them? If so, you might have noticed that this only makes your anxiety worse. However, if you can accept and embrace your anxious feelings, they are less of a problem for you.

Commitment: Thoughts and feelings come and go. We do not have much control over our automatic thoughts or the initial feelings that they trigger. However, we always have control over our behavior. No matter how anxious, angry, or sad I am, I can always choose how I will respond to these feelings. Will the feelings themselves dictate what I do, or will I choose to behave in ways that are consistent with my values?

A basic premise of ACT is that, as much as possible, we want to make behavioral choices based on our values. We want to be guided by the commitments that we have made to ourselves and others.

For example, let's say that you feel anxious at social gatherings. In spite of this, you have been invited to a birthday party for a very close friend. Your anxiety will tell you not to go. However, you deeply value this relationship and know that it will mean a lot to your friend if you attend. So, how do you decide? Do you let fear dictate what you do, or do you act in accordance to how you value this relationship?