

LIFE



**GARDENING**  
Rewards for small green thumbs – Page 26



**BARGAIN HUNTER**  
Melissa Penfold's savvy sales tips – Page 28

# The therapist's therapy

A new treatment works as well for those delivering it as receiving it.

**WELLBEING**  
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HEARING about your hairdresser's relationship woes is one thing – snipping and sniping have always gone hand in hand.

But what about your therapist's problems? Do you really want to know about the deep, dark nights of his or her soul?

A new wave of psychotherapists – and their clients – are exploring this possibility. Followers of acceptance and commitment therapy believe stress and suffering – rather than true happiness – are a natural and integral part of the human condition and the best route to contentment is by embracing our negative feelings, rather than struggling to control them. With this comes a caring-and-sharing therapeutic relationship.

Or, as Wendy Brigden, a former therapy patient says of the model's practitioners: "These are the people I'm paying \$180 an hour and they're just as screwed up as me."

Brigden, a 51-year-old nurse from the Central Coast, says she "lost 10 years" due to anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts, initially sparked by feelings of inadequacy at her job and exacerbated by shame over her inability to cope. She initially sought help through psychologists, psychiatrists, religious retreats, reiki and electro-shock therapy, among other treatments. But it was only when she discovered acceptance and commitment therapy 18 months ago, and its techniques based on mindfulness – the meditation-inspired exercise of observing thoughts without becoming entangled in them – that she finally found peace.

"Whereas I've literally sat in a psychiatrist's office sobbing, saying, 'I just want to be better. I just want to be better,' and they're sitting there with their notebook saying, 'Well, time's up, I felt less like an insect to be studied but more like [there was] a commonality between us,'" says Brigden, adding that her therapist's disclosure of her own struggles (panic attacks and anxiety) freed her from the stigma of feeling "mentally ill" and isolated in her suffering.

Dr Russell Harris, a Melbourne acceptance



Accepted wisdom ... therapist Russell Harris and his son Max.

Photo: Eddie Jim

and commitment therapist, trainer and author of *The Happiness Trap*, says the commonality of human anxiety results from our brains being hardwired – since caveman days – to anticipate and continually ward off both real and imagined danger. Whereas once it was "sabre-toothed tigers or 200-kilogram wolves" and ensuring we fit in with a small clan lest we be isolated and vulnerable to attack, now the modern world provides us with countless more triggers (getting speeding tickets or cancer; embarrassing ourselves in public or losing our job) and points of comparison (from magazines, television, radio) to cause stress.

The World Health Organisation, Harris says, estimates that depression is the fourth most

common disease in the world and by 2020 will be the second.

Established in the US in the 1980s by psychologist and former chronic panic attack sufferer, Steven C. Hayes, the therapy teaches patients to "defuse" painful thoughts through techniques like singing them to the tune of *Happy Birthday* or reciting them in a character – say, Mickey Mouse.

The point is to illustrate that they are merely a "string of words" that can be taken lightly rather than inalienable truths we invest with the power to control our feelings.

The result? The therapy has been called "gaggingly self-help" by *Time* magazine and divided the American psychological community by alienating many practitioners of

cognitive behaviour therapy – the most popular therapeutic model – who encourage patients to challenge negative thoughts and turn them into positive ones.

In contrast, here, where the therapy is taught at only a handful of universities, including the University of Wollongong, it has been greeted with open arms.

The Australian Association of Cognitive and Behaviour Therapy has held workshops on it, and CBT Australia director Dr Monica O'Kelly says the local take is that it's "not really that new; it's just a different spin on the cognitive behaviour therapy".

Perhaps it's because local champions such as Harris have toned down some of the therapy's more "touchy-feely" elements.

Whereas some American acceptance and commitment therapy workshop leaders have each attendee announce their core values to the group and make a pledge as to how they will live according to them – the "commitment" part of the therapy – Harris has his attendees do this one-on-one.

"I just assumed that Aussies would shrink from that," says Harris, who originally trained as a GP. "Certainly, Aussies that I met in America felt very uncomfortable with that."

Otherwise, its local acceptance could just be because the therapy works.

One study showed that of 70 hospitalised psychotics (half given standard medication and counselling; the other half provided with four, 45-minute acceptance and commitment therapy sessions), the therapy patients were rehospitalised 50 per cent less often than the other group when revisited four months later. It has also been shown to ease drug addiction and even epilepsy (reporting fewer and shorter seizures than those using a placebo treatment).

For many, its success comes down to escaping the tyranny of painful thoughts by learning to let them flow in and out of one's mind without trying to avoid them.

Acceptance and commitment therapy believers boast about its ability to treat virtually any problem. Harris has used it both to cope with perennial self-esteem struggles, a one-time battle with obesity, and, now, to remain "present", rather than frustrated, with his 2½-year-old autistic son.

It's certainly more accessible than other therapies, with a refreshing absence of intimidating jargon and easy modes of delivery (Harris recently started an online course to supplement his book).

Not to mention that we're-all-in-it-together culture. It erases what is possibly an even more powerful social divide these days – that between celebrities and ordinary folk.

As one Facebook group of acceptance and commitment therapy users asks of its members: "What would an ACT therapist do with Britney?"