

Functional Contextualism

Remember, ACT is based on functional contextualism. In ACT we are interested in the *function* of thoughts, rather than the *form* of them.

The *function* of a cognition means ‘the effects it has’ – in other words, the way it influences our behaviour.

The *form* of a cognition refers to its content: the words/images that comprise it.

Form Versus Function

Cognitions can be positive in *form* (e.g. the actual content of the thought may be very optimistic, or self-praising) but negative in *function* (i.e. the way the thought effects our behaviour actually makes our life worse)

For example, think of clients with narcissistic traits, or delusions of grandiosity, or inflated self-confidence, or blind optimism etc. They all have cognitions that are very positive in *form* – i.e. the actual thought content is positive – but very often these thoughts *function* negatively.

More on Form Versus Function

Cognitions can also be negative in *form* (e.g. the actual content of the thought may be very pessimistic or negative in other ways) but positive in *function* (i.e. the thought effects our behaviour in ways that help us live richer, fuller lives.)

For example, think of the many thoughts you've had that were negative in actual content but nonetheless *functioned positively* – i.e. influenced you to act authentically, treat yourself or others well, take life-enhancing action, behave in ways that made life richer, be prudent, avoid reckless risks etc.

How Does This Thought *Function*?

So in many models of therapy, the therapist is primarily interested in the *form* of the thought: in whether the thought content is positive or negative, true or false, rational or irrational, optimistic or pessimistic, etc. Such models often judge ‘positive thoughts’ as better than ‘negative thoughts’

But in ACT, the therapist is primarily interested in the *function* of the thought: in how it effects behaviour. Specifically, if you let this thought guide you, does it help you to act effectively, living by your values, doing things that make life richer and fuller? Or does it pull you into ineffective action, incongruent with your values?

Defusion

Defusion techniques aim primarily to change the *function* of a thought, far more so than the *form* of it. This contrasts with cognitive disputation or thought challenging, which focuses primarily on the *form* of the thought (i.e. trying to change the actual content of the thought), far more than on the *function*.

E.g. when we defuse from the thought “I am an idiot” it affects us very differently from when we are fused with it; the *form* of the thought (the words “I am an idiot”) doesn’t change, but the *function* changes dramatically.

Changing Form

Having said all of that, ACT does also at times, emphasise changing the *form* of a thought (i.e. the content). For example, a popular defusion technique is to add the phrase “I’m having the thought that ...” to any type of cognition with which one is fused. So, if I am fused with “I’m stupid”, I might defuse from it by adding in the above phrase: “I’m having the thought that I’m stupid.” This changes both the form and the function.

However (in stark contrast to traditional CBT), ACT does not ever try to change the form of a thought through disputing, challenging or invalidating its content on grounds of truth or falsehood.

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Don't Get It?

If by the end of week 2 of this course you are still unclear or confused about the ACT emphasis on 'function' over 'form', and how defusion primarily alters the function of cognitions - please ask on the forum. It's essential understanding if you wish to do ACT well.