

Role of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in Addressing Depression: A Promising Approach for Sustainable Mental Health

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Sir,

I am writing to emphasize on the important role of Acceptance and commitment therapy in the treatment of depression, one of the most prevalent mental disorder affecting millions of people across the globe. Currently, the annual prevalence of depression is around 6% worldwide and around 18% of people are at risk for depressive disorders due to their lifestyle choices. Depression has been ranked as the third-largest contributor of global disease burden according to World Health Organization's 'Global Burden of Disease Survey'. Depression not only causes emotional distress but leads to issues in all aspects of life, impacting social relationships, work performance, productivity and overall well-being.^{1,2}

Depression leads to disruptions in social, occupational and academic life. Individuals with depression withdraw themselves from social connections which result in social isolation and strained relationships. It causes significant economic loss due to lost productivity and higher healthcare costs, with estimated global cost of USD 1.03 trillion and USD 326.2 billion in the United States alone.³ If left treated it can lead

to cycle of worsening of health issues like increase the susceptibility of physical illness i.e. heart diseases and increase the risk of substance abuse. This vicious cycle of intensification of depressive symptoms, highlights the need for finding effective treatment intervention.⁴

Understanding these consequences highlights the importance of coming up with effective treatment options. Traditional therapeutic approaches address to eliminate the negative thoughts whereas Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is third wave behavioural therapy that focuses on increasing the psychological flexibility among the patients. The main purpose of ACT is to help the individuals to accept the difficult painful experiences and move towards committed actions to live a meaningful life.⁵ Main psychological concepts that play a major role in the development of depression are experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion. Experiential avoidance refers to the tendency of individual to avoid or escape from the painful or unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or feelings. In depression, individuals experience intense sadness, guilt, isolation, hopelessness, worthlessness which leads them to adopt expe-

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ritional avoidance as a method to cope. On the other hand, cognitive fusion refers to getting entangled in one's thoughts and considering them as facts. Acceptance and commitment therapies addresses these two core processes in the individuals with depression by substituting them adaptive behaviours to promote their emotional well-being.^{6,7}

ACT cultivates psychological flexibility which refers to the ability of an individual to live in the present moment without being overwhelmed by the difficult or painful thoughts and emotions. People with depression have less psychological flexibility and become overwhelmed in response to difficult thoughts or emotions which altered their coping in response to negative thoughts or emotions. ACT is based on the concept that challenges or sufferings are a part of a human life, trying to avoid these can lead to increased distress. ACT on other hand promotes the acceptance of these thoughts or feelings which in turn can reduce the depressive symptoms and improve the daily functioning of the individual.^{5,7,8}

Research indicates that the individuals with depression engage in experiential avoidance which can worsen their symptoms. ACT teaches the individuals to directly confront their emotions and respond in a way that is consistent with their values without becoming overwhelmed. ACT helps in reducing the influence of avoidance behaviours on their lives.⁹ The other contributory factor for maintenance of depressive symptoms is cognitive fusion, in which people become fused with their thoughts and consider them as the absolute truth. ACT helps the individuals to learn the cognitive defusion which help them view thoughts just as thoughts. The common thoughts in depression are "I am worthless" or "I can never be happy", ACT helps to reduce the impact of these negative thoughts by cognitive defusion.¹⁰ It is evident from the latest research that ACT presents a viable strategy for not only reducing depressive symptoms but also promoting a purposeful and engaged life.^{6,11} ACT provides long-lasting effects by decreasing depressive symptoms and preventing relapse.

ACT has some limitations in treating depression. It may be difficult for certain patients to comprehend abstract concepts like self-as-context and cognitive defusion. It can be troubling to motivate someone to confront difficult feelings. Accessibility is limited since ACT requires therapists with advanced training. Deficits in motivation can make it difficult to engage in activities with one's values.²

ACTs core principles are universal and adaptable to different cultural contexts despite being founded on Western concepts. By educating mental health professionals on the concepts and practices of ACT, current mental health system can successfully implement it. It can complement traditional therapies, like cognitive Behavioural Therapy by focusing on acceptance and mindfulness in addition to cognitive restructuring. The flexibility of ACT makes it suitable

for treating depression in community mental health centres. Accessibility can be increased by training mental health professional on ACT techniques through supervision and workshops. Integrating ACT into primary care settings can help practitioners provide early psychological support.^{7,12}

Thank you for considering this important topic. I look forward to your thoughts on further advancing our understanding and treatment of depression through ACT.

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