

# Case Conceptualization in ACT

A Practical Introduction to Formulating, Planning & Explaining  
Successful Treatment Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Kelly Wilson & Troy DuFrene

# In the Spirit of Full Disclosure...

Kelly Wilson

- Author receiving royalties for relevant books
- Private trainer, consultant

Troy DuFrene

- Author receiving royalties for relevant books
- Private clinician and consultant



# Learning Objectives

1. Demonstrate ability to use the process-based conceptualization model to formulate cases from an ACT point of view quickly and consistently
2. Describe case formulations in succinct and effective ways in language useful to both clients and supervisors
3. Identify challenges to consistent and accurate case conceptualizations in a variety of clinical settings (private practice, community mental health, hospitals, and so forth)

# It is you that I love

Not the you that you fear I will see  
Not the you that you might become  
It is not the you that you think you must be to  
earn my company

It is the you that you conceal with anger or  
distance or sarcasm or disdain or woundedness  
or with great competence

That you that you have been hiding so long that  
you can't even recall what it was you were  
hiding  
maybe even forgetting that you were hiding at  
all.

“All of us have special ones who have loved us into being.”



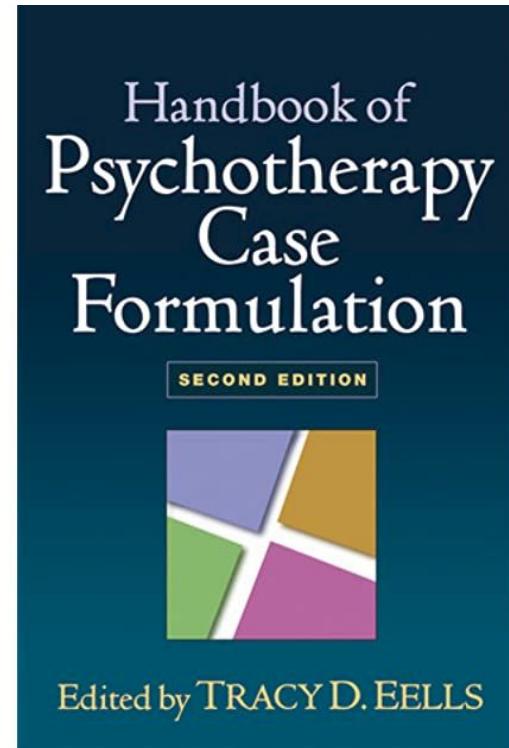
“ ... become patient zero in an outbreak of human goodness ... ”



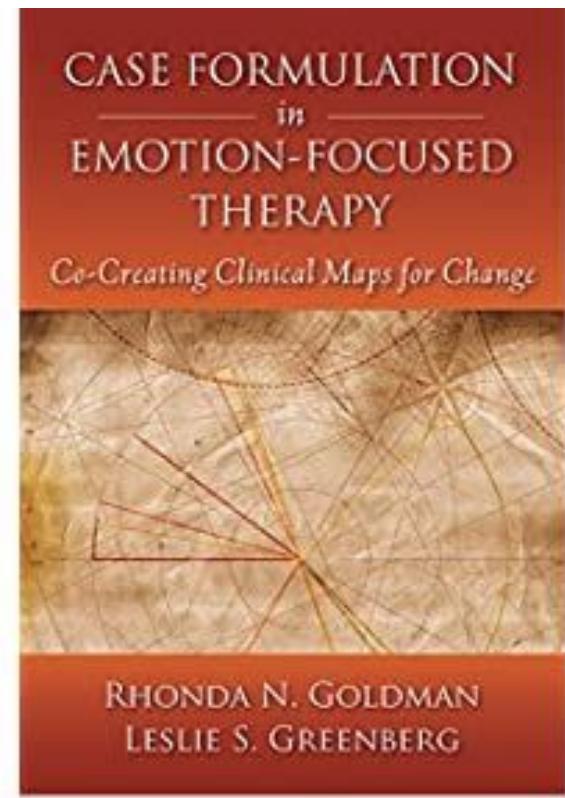
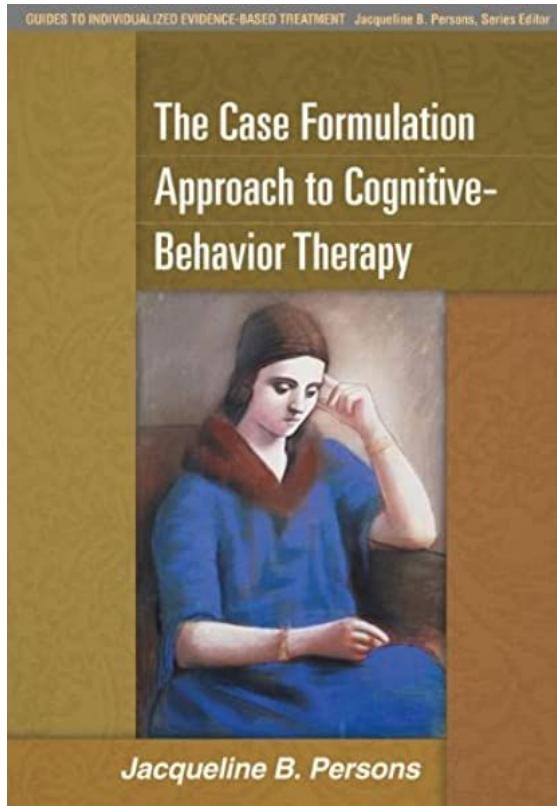
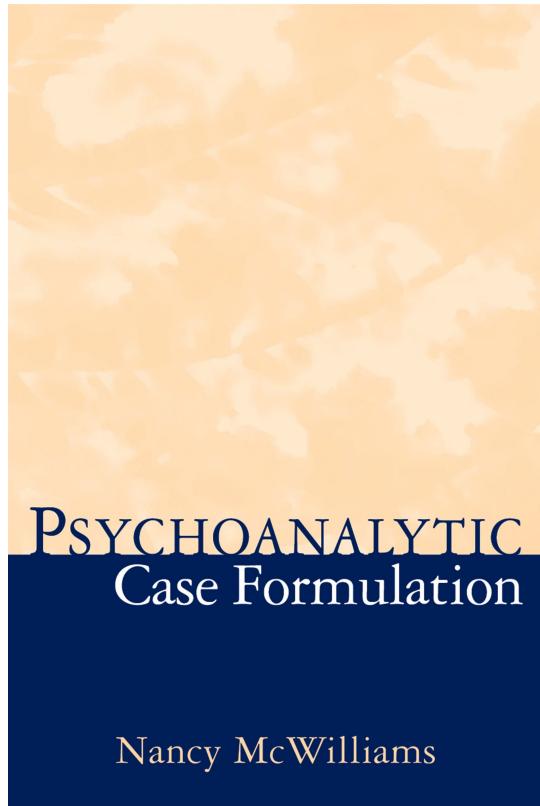
What is case  
conceptualization?

*Handbook of Psychotherapy Case Formulation, 2d* (Ells, 2007)

“A psychotherapy case formulation is **a hypothesis about the causes, precipitants, and maintaining influences** of a person’s psychological, interpersonal, and behavioral problems. A case formulation **helps organize information about a person, particularly when that information contains contradictions or inconsistencies** in behavior, emotion, or thought content … A case formulation also **serves as a blueprint guiding treatment** and as **a marker for change**” (p. 4)

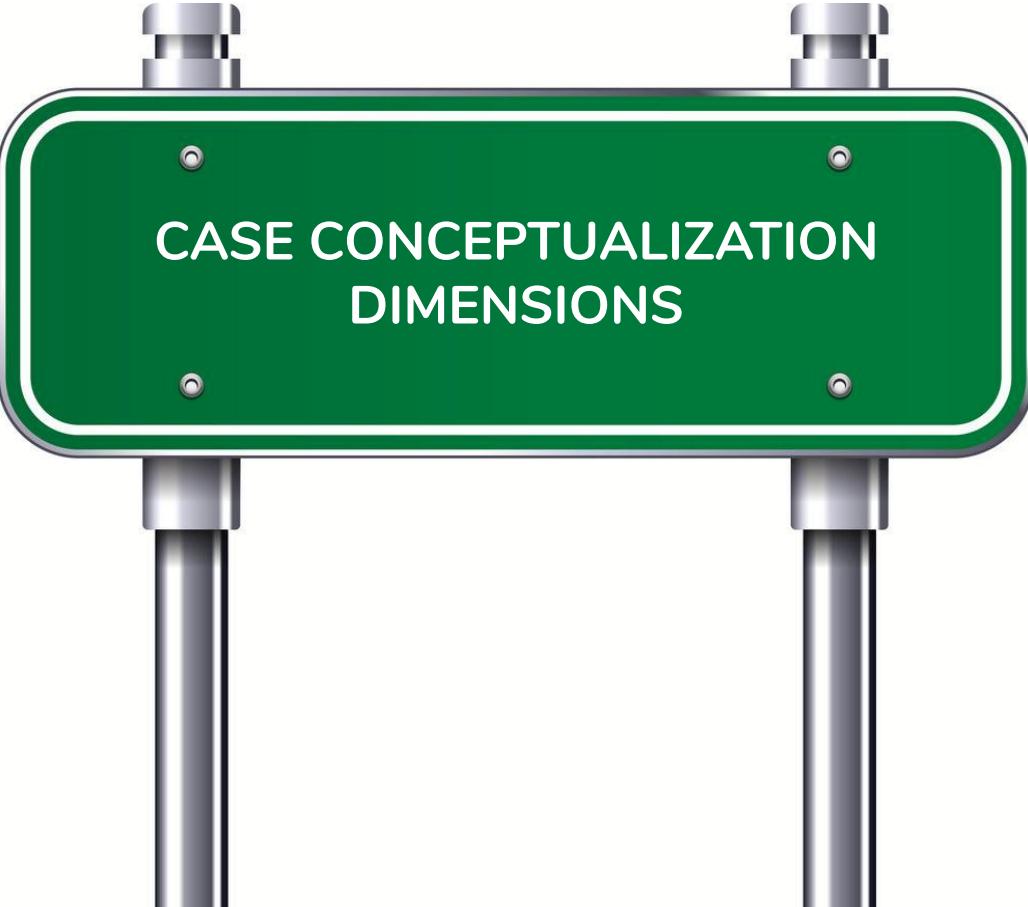


# Everyone's Favorite Pastime!



# Conceptualization vs. Formulation: An Arbitrary Distinction

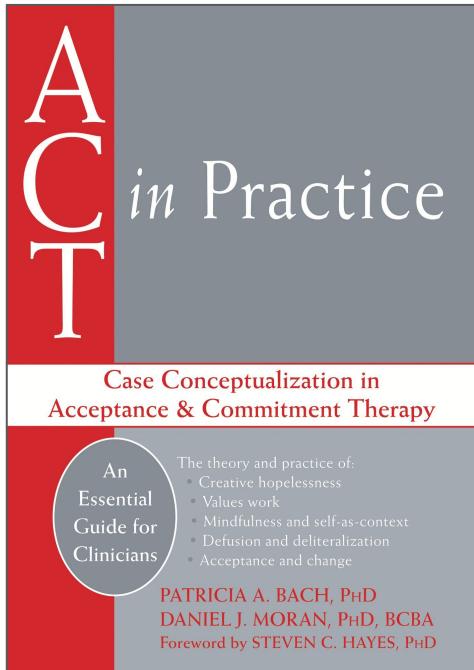
- Conceptualization
  - Assessment
  - Case formulation & diagnosis
  - Treatment-plan development
  - Outcome assessment
- Formulation
  - Functional assessment
  - Diagnosis (functional and/or DSM categorical, as needed)
  - Hypothesis generation



## CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION DIMENSIONS

- Functional assessment & diagnosis
- Case formulation
- Treatment-plan development
- Outcome-measure selection

# *ACT in Practice* (Bach & Moran, 2008, ch. 5)

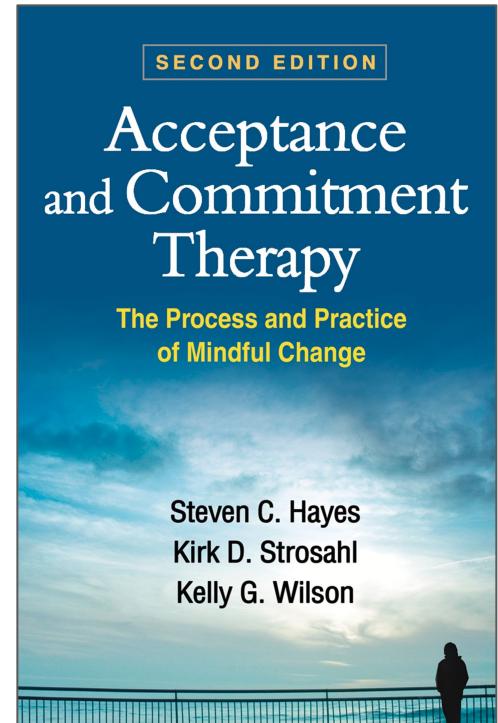


- Information regarding the client's problem
- Past situations that shaped the person's problem
- Current situations that maintain this problem
- Short- and long-term goals for therapy
- Developing an evidence-based treatment plan

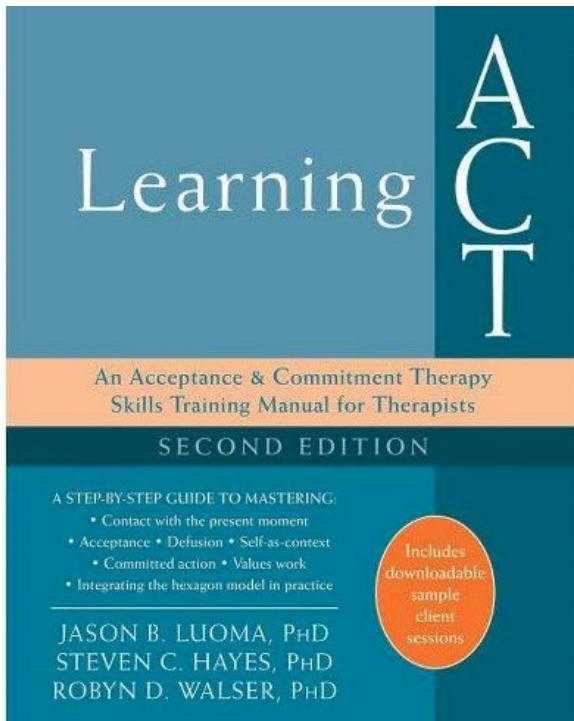
# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

(Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson & Sandoz\* 2011, ch. 4)

- Information gathering on presenting problems and their context
- Functional assessment: time, trajectory, and context
- Values interview: Love, work, and play
- An assessment of process function



# *Learning ACT* (Luoma, Hayes & Walser, 2017, ch.8)



“...understanding client behavior in terms of ... processes ... that either detract from psychological flexibility ... or promote it” (p. 272)

“...using this understanding ... to guide the selection of treatment interventions and evaluations of their outcomes” (p. 273)

“What unique factors in a particular client’s life have given rise to her particular problems and led to her specific version of psychological inflexibility and life constriction?” (p. 273)

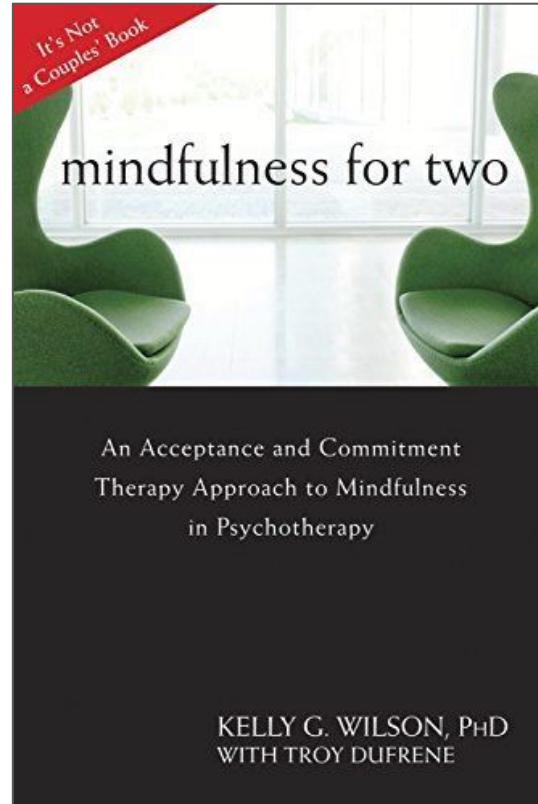
# *Learning ACT: Scope of Case Conceptualization*

- Case conceptualization is both a formal and informal, ongoing activity (p. 274)
  - **Overt content:** Literal report of psychological distress
  - **A sample of client's social behavior:** Client's in-session behavior may reflect out-of-session patterns
  - **In terms of the therapeutic relationship:** In-session behavior may give clues to how the client is experiencing therapy
  - **As a functional process:** In-session behavior as a gauge for process function
- Benefits:
  - “Learn ACT theory in a deeper, more nuanced way”
  - “[Provide] more focused, consistent, and thorough interventions”
  - “[Develop] your understanding of and approach to cases across time” (p. 275-6)

# *Learning ACT: Case Conceptualization Steps*

- Identify the presenting problem as understood by the client
- Detect rigidity related to private experience (left side)
- Detect insensitivity to the present moment and limited perspective taking (center)
- Detect disengagement (right side)
- Consider factors that may limit motivation to change
- Consider client's cultural, social, and physical environments
- Identify client's strengths
- Describe a comprehensive treatment plan
- Re-evaluate the conceptualization throughout the treatment; revise functional analyses, targets, and interventions as appropriate

## Mindfulness for Two (Wilson, DuFrene & Sandoz\*, 2008, ch. 7)



# Questions?



**FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT  
& DIAGNOSIS**

# Hexaflex Functional Dimensional Interview (HFDEI)



# HFDEI

- Introduce HFDEI
- Complete Valued Living Questionnaire-II (VLQ-II)\*
- Sitting Inside Significant Questions exercise\*
- Experiential Writing exercise\*
- Therapist using rating scales and worksheets
- Therapist completes working case (and ongoing) formulation

# Valued Living Questionnaire (versions 1 and 2)

1. Family (not intimate or parental)
2. Intimate, couples, marriage
3. Parenting
4. Friends and social life
5. Work
6. Education and training
7. Recreation and fun
8. Spirituality
9. Community life
10. Physical self-care
11. The environment
12. Art, literature, music, beauty



1. How possible is it that something very meaningful could happen in this area of your life?
2. How important is this area at this time in your life?
3. How important is this area in your life as a whole?
4. How much have you acted in the service of this area during the past week?
5. How satisfied are you with your level of action in this area during the past week?
6. How concerned are you that this area won't progress as you want?

# Sitting Inside Significant Questions

- An eyes-closed exercise that parallels the VLQ
- Brings the idea of values close
- Orients the client toward the idea of meaning, richness, and deliberate choice

# Experiential Writing Exercise

- Give the client a chance to record anything that came up in the exercise
- May be done alone
- Therapist can read the output or not
- Serves as a jumping-off point to conversation

Or...

- This activity can be done as a semi-structured interview

# Questions?



CASE FORMULATION

# Practices for Psychological Flexibility

## PRESENT MOMENT

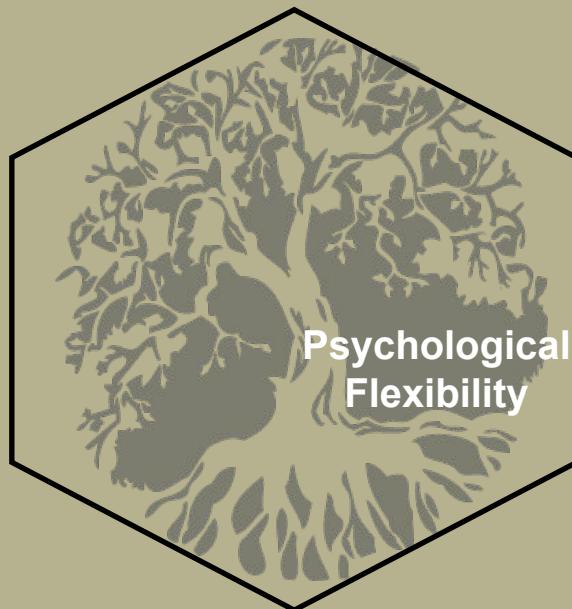
ACCEPTANCE

VALUES

DEFUSION

COMMITMENT

SELF



# A formula for stuck, checked out, burnt out

LOSE CONTACT with the  
present moment

AVOID anything  
confusing,  
difficult, or  
painful

HOLD TIGHT to  
stories of  
judgment,  
evaluation, and  
limitation

FORGET what  
really matters in  
life

SETTLE into  
inaction,  
impulsivity, and  
fearful  
persistence



NARROW VIEW to one perspective  
HOLD TIGHT stories of your limits

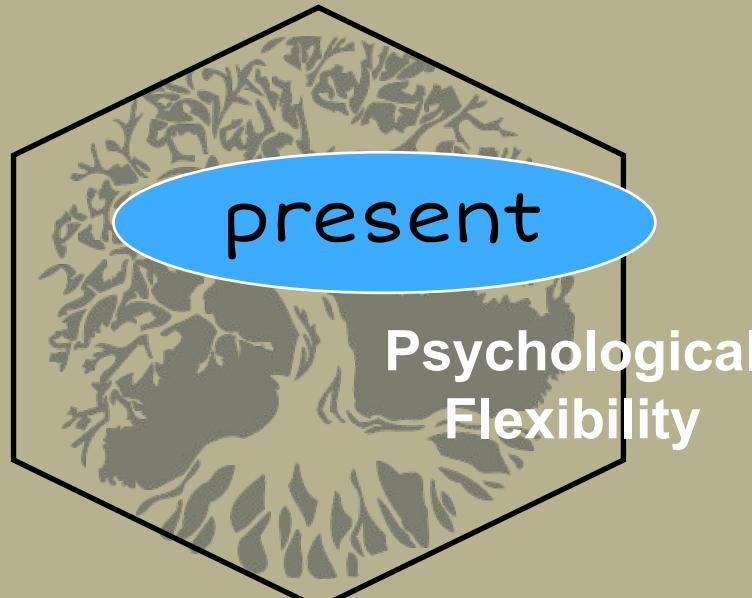
# Practices for Abundant Living

PRACTICE contact with the richness of this moment

PRACTICE an open heart

open

PRACTICE HOLDING LIGHTLY judgements, evaluations, and limitations



PRACTICE growing valued patterns

engaged

PRACTICE noticing and returning to valued patterns

PRACTICE MANY perspectives

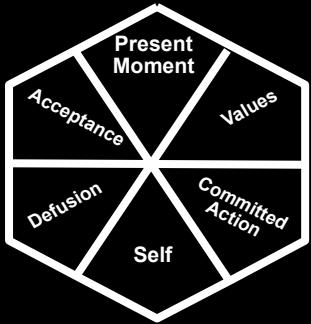
# Formulation: Left Side Processes

## Defusion Processes

1	2	3	4	5
Single aspect of experience dominates without choice	1	←	→	5
No single aspect of experience dominates, except by choice				
Frequently judges, justifies, or explains	1	←	→	5
Rarely judges, justifies, or explains				
Frequently uses must/can't, should/shouldn't, right/wrong, and so on	1	←	→	5
Rarely uses must/can't, should/shouldn't, right/wrong, and so on				
Expectations and rules limit perspective	1	←	→	5
Expectations and rules held lightly				
Stories repeated rigidly	1	←	→	5
Stories seldom repeated rigidly				
Little or no sense of workability of thoughts	1	←	→	5
Chooses assumptions strategically, with a focus on workability				

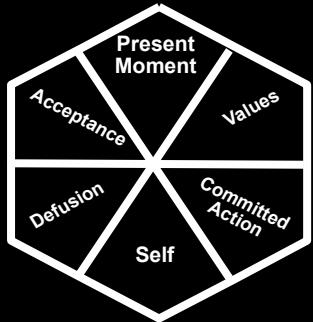
## Acceptance Processes

1	2	3	4	5
Attempts to change experience common	1	←	→	5
Attempts to change experience rare				
Minimizes or rationalizes difficult events in session	1	←	→	5
Describes and experiences difficult events in session				
Implicit requests for social exchange	1	←	→	5
No implicit requests for social exchange				
Many avoided events	1	←	→	5
Few avoided events				
Fights, tolerates, or resigns to difficult experiences	1	←	→	5
Chooses difficult experiences in service of valued living				
Does not notice when avoiding	1	←	→	5
Notices when avoiding				
No change or more avoidant with direction	1	←	→	5
More open with direction				



# Defusion

- Words about the world stand in for the world
  - repetitive
  - inflexible
  - insensitive to changes in context
- Assess stories out in the context of limitation
- Practice stories in the context of possibility



# Acceptance

- Acceptance of difficult aspects of experience when valued living calls for it?
- Avoided content (internal/external)?
- Avoidant repertoire?
- \*Assess/Shape experiential acceptance?  
(not liking, wanting, agreeing)

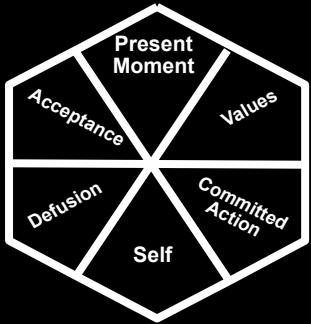
# Formulation: Center Processes

## Present Moment Processes

	1	2	3	4	5	
Speech stereotyped and insensitive to instruction for pace and content	1	←	→	5	Speech fluid and sensitive to instruction for pace and content	
Physical presentation takes away from connection	1	←	→	5	Physical presentation adds to connection	
Worry and rumination common	1	←	→	5	Worry and rumination rare	
Perseverates and shifts abruptly	1	←	→	5	Shifts attention easily and gently	
Categorical speech common, details difficult to elicit	1	←	→	5	Categorical speech uncommon, details readily elicited	
Doesn't notice when not present	1	←	→	5	Notices when not present	
No change or less present with direction	1	←	→	5	More present with direction	

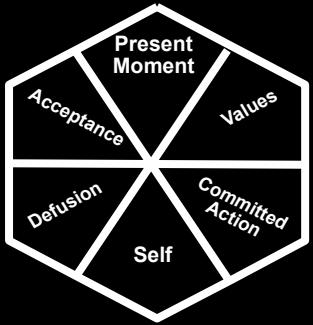
## Self Processes

	1	2	3	4	5	
Experience of self constrained and in only limited domains	1	←	→	5	Experience of self flexible and broad	
Frequently gets stuck in content areas	1	←	→	5	Transitions easily among content areas	
No experience of self apart from content	1	←	→	5	Experiences self apart from content	
Rarely able to shift perspectives	1	←	→	5	Readily able to shift perspectives	



# Present Moment

- Can the clients bring flexible, focused attention to bear, on purpose, in the PM?
- (but not necessarily about the PM)
- \*Assess/Practice PM capacity



# Self

- Can the client move freely among contents and perspectives
- Assess/Shape defusion with “self” stories
- Assess/shape flexibility in perspective taking

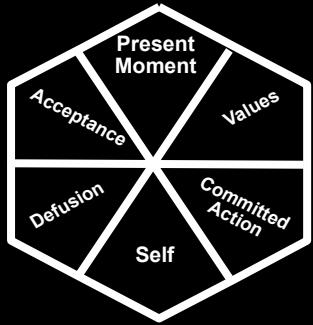
# Formulation: Right-Side Processes

## Values Processes

	1	2	3	4	5	
Single aspect of experience dominates without choice	1	←	→	5	No single aspect of experience dominates, except by choice	
Frequently judges, justifies, or explains	1	←	→	5	Rarely judges, justifies, or explains	
Frequently uses must/can't, should/shouldn't, right/wrong, and so on	1	←	→	5	Rarely uses must/can't, should/shouldn't, right/wrong, and so on	
Expectations and rules limit perspective	1	←	→	5	Expectations and rules held lightly	
Stories repeated rigidly	1	←	→	5	Stories seldom repeated rigidly	
Little or no sense of workability of thoughts	1	←	→	5	Chooses assumptions strategically, with a focus on workability	

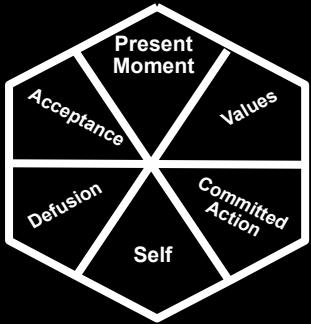
## Commitment Processes

	1	2	3	4	5	
Attempts to change experience common	1	←	→	5	Attempts to change experience rare	
Minimizes or rationalizes difficult events in session	1	←	→	5	Describes and experiences difficult events in session	
Implicit requests for social exchange	1	←	→	5	No implicit requests for social exchange	
Many avoided events	1	←	→	5	Few avoided events	
Fights, tolerates, or resigns to difficult experiences	1	←	→	5	Chooses difficult experiences in service of valued living	
Does not notice when avoiding	1	←	→	5	Notices when avoiding	
No change or more avoidant with direction	1	←	→	5	More open with direction	



# Values

- Valuing Weak, Absent, Confused, Restricted, Burdensome
- Narrow development
- Many fusion and avoidance obstacles
- \*Assess/Practice flexibly constructing elaborated patterns



# Commitment

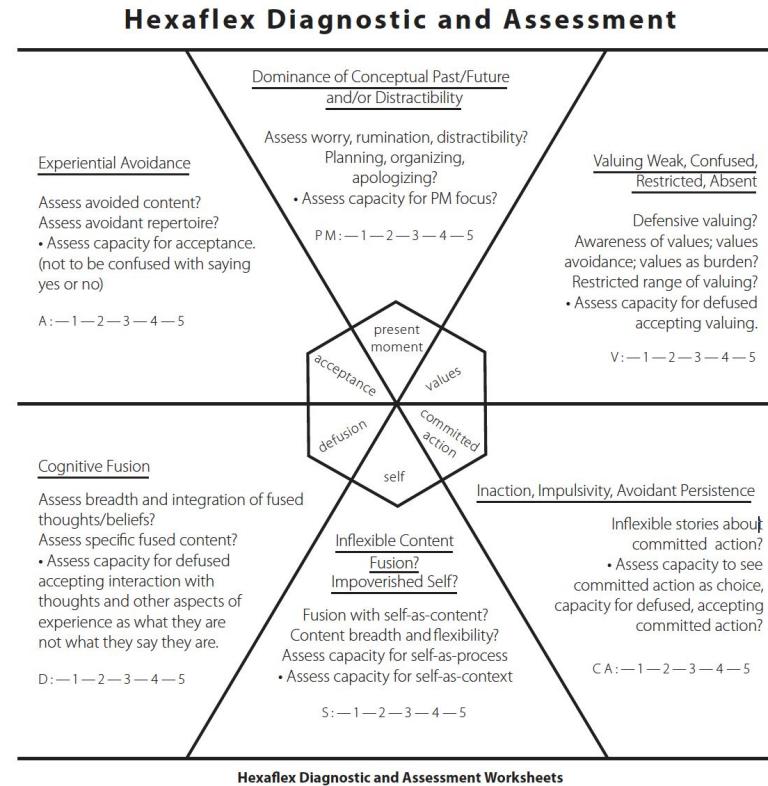
- Inaction, Impulsivity, Avoidant Persistence
- Assess fusion and avoidance obstacles
- \*Assess/Shape capacity to actively and flexibly generate action menu
- \*Assess/Shape values-consistent actions

# Questions?



**TREATMENT-PLAN  
DEVELOPMENT**

# Treatment-Plan Development



# Questions?



**OUTCOME-MEASURE  
SELECTION**

# Outcome Measures

- Measures?
- Behavioral goals
- Mutual agreement

# Questions?

# Resources and References

<https://tinyurl.com/ACTCC2020>