

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):

Implications for Health Psychology

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Third Wave Behaviour Therapies

- ▶ **ACT** (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)
- ▶ **DBT** (Dialectical Behaviour Therapy)
- ▶ **MBCT** (Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy)
- ▶ **FAP** (Functional Analytic Psychotherapy)

Assumptions for Behaviour Change

- ▶ It's not the content of your experience that matters, but its function (i.e. the way thoughts and feelings control behaviour)
- ▶ These functions are altered by changing the context (not by tackling psychological content directly) in a way that maximises the flexibility of behaviour in all contexts

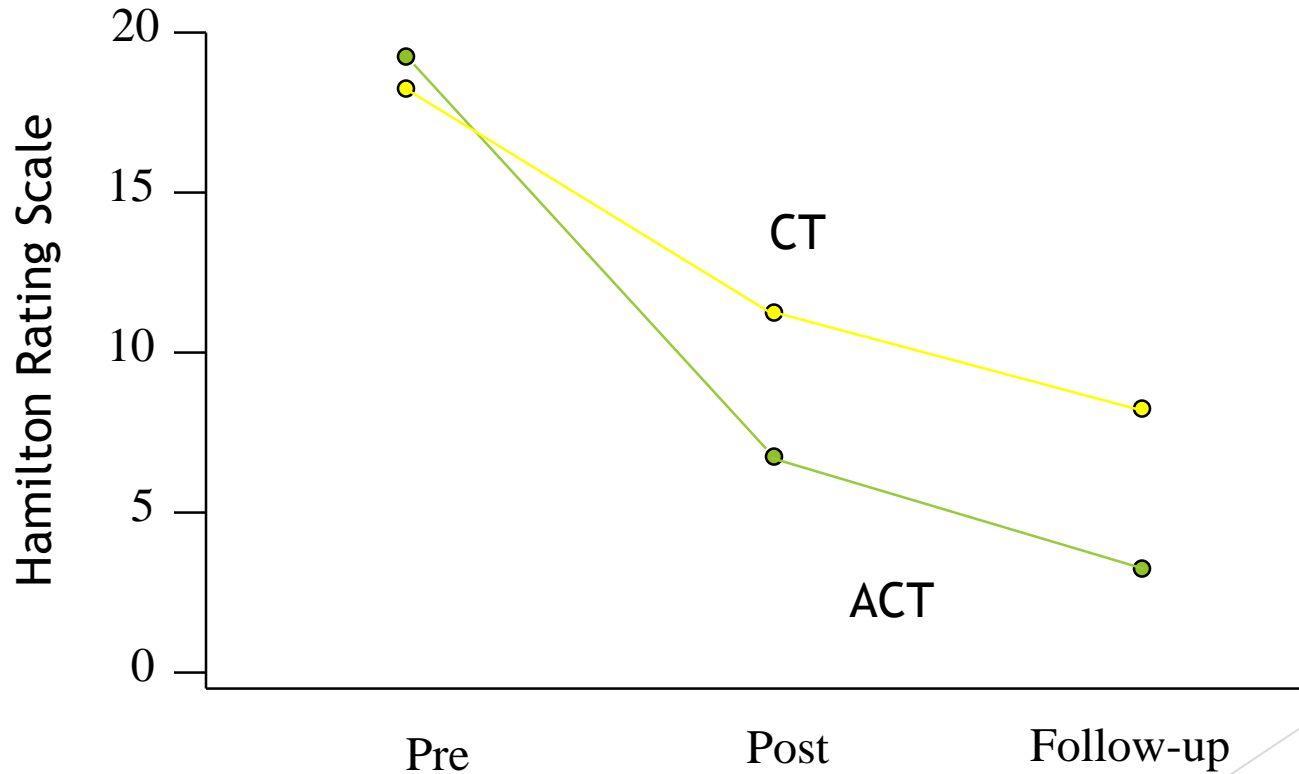
A Brief History of ACT

ACT Beginnings

- ▶ In the late 70's, Steven Hayes and colleagues began to be explicit about the fact that existing behavioural principles had failed to capture the complexities of language and cognition
- ▶ Which they believed were critically (but not abnormally) involved in psychological suffering
- ▶ They proposed that the core problem was that your external behaviour was unnecessarily controlled by your internal (emotional, etc.) events (referred to in ACT as **fusion**)
- ▶ They developed a set of techniques first called **Comprehensive Distancing**

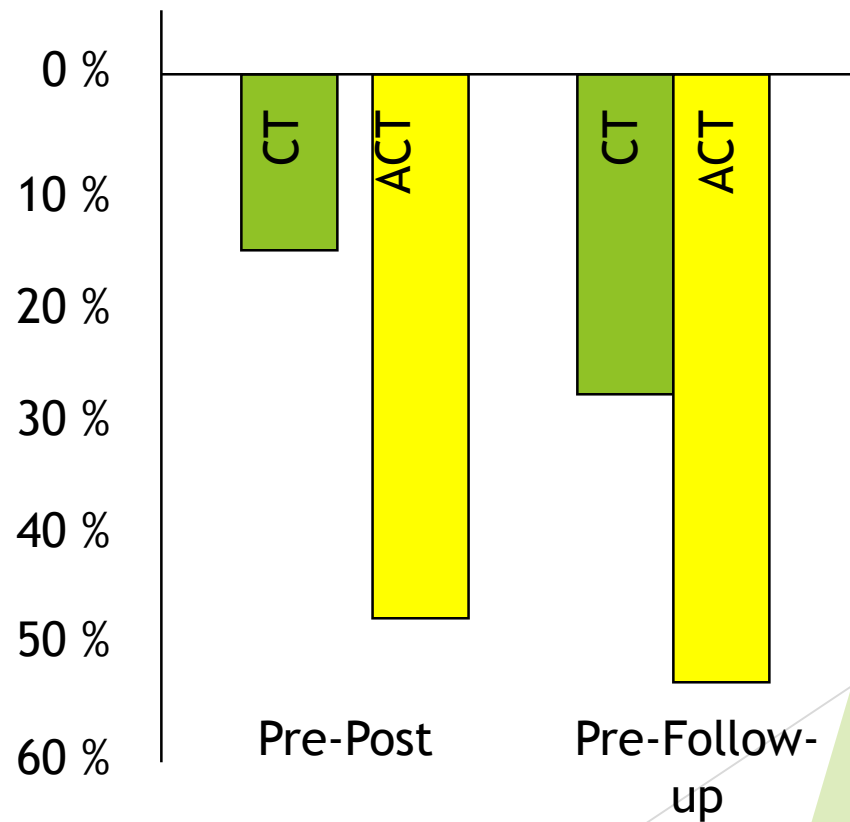
Brief Outcome Study: Depression

(Zettle & Hayes, 1986)



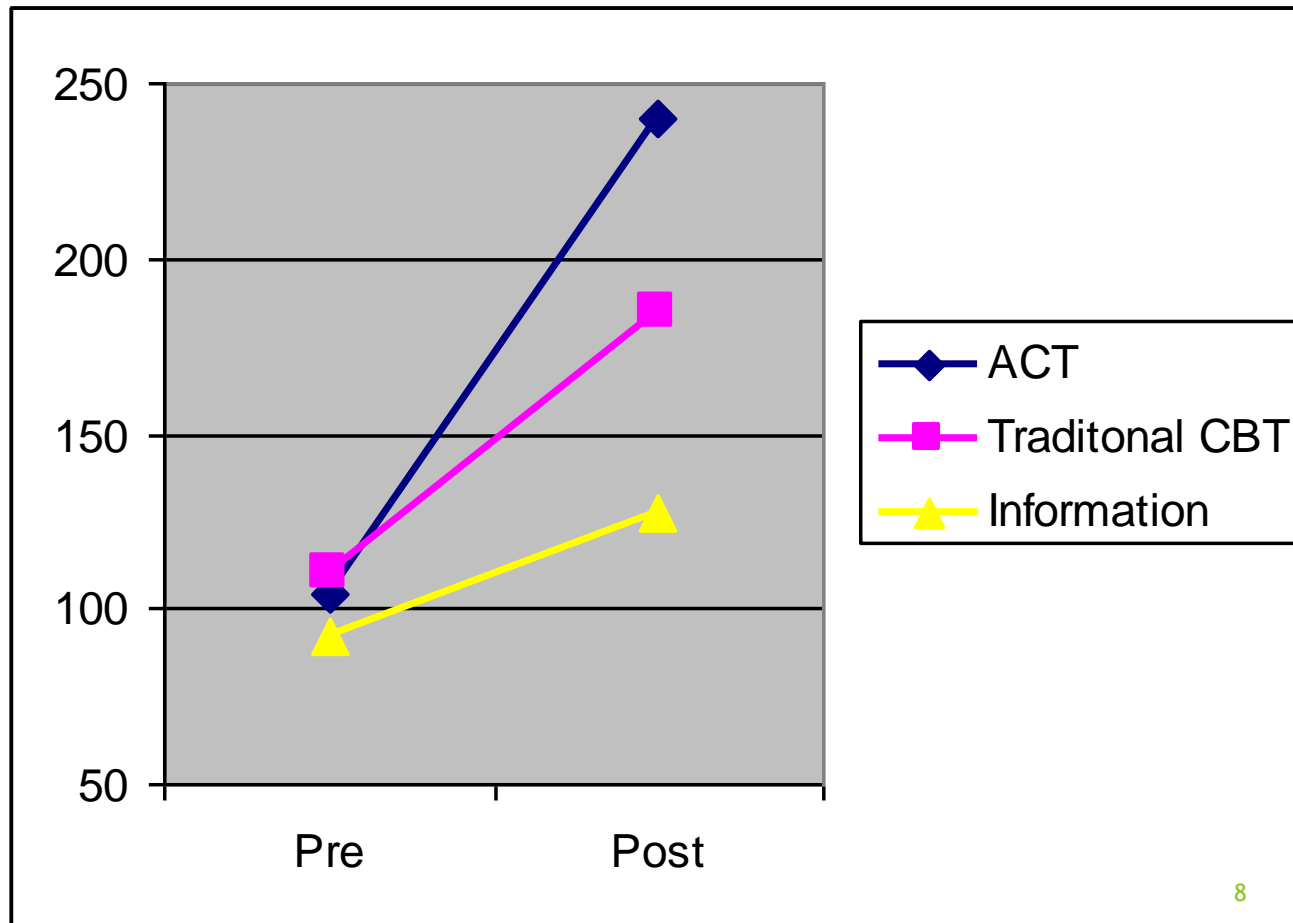
Reducing the Believability of Depressive Thoughts

Reduced believability
(no change in frequency)
strongly mediated the
reductions in depression

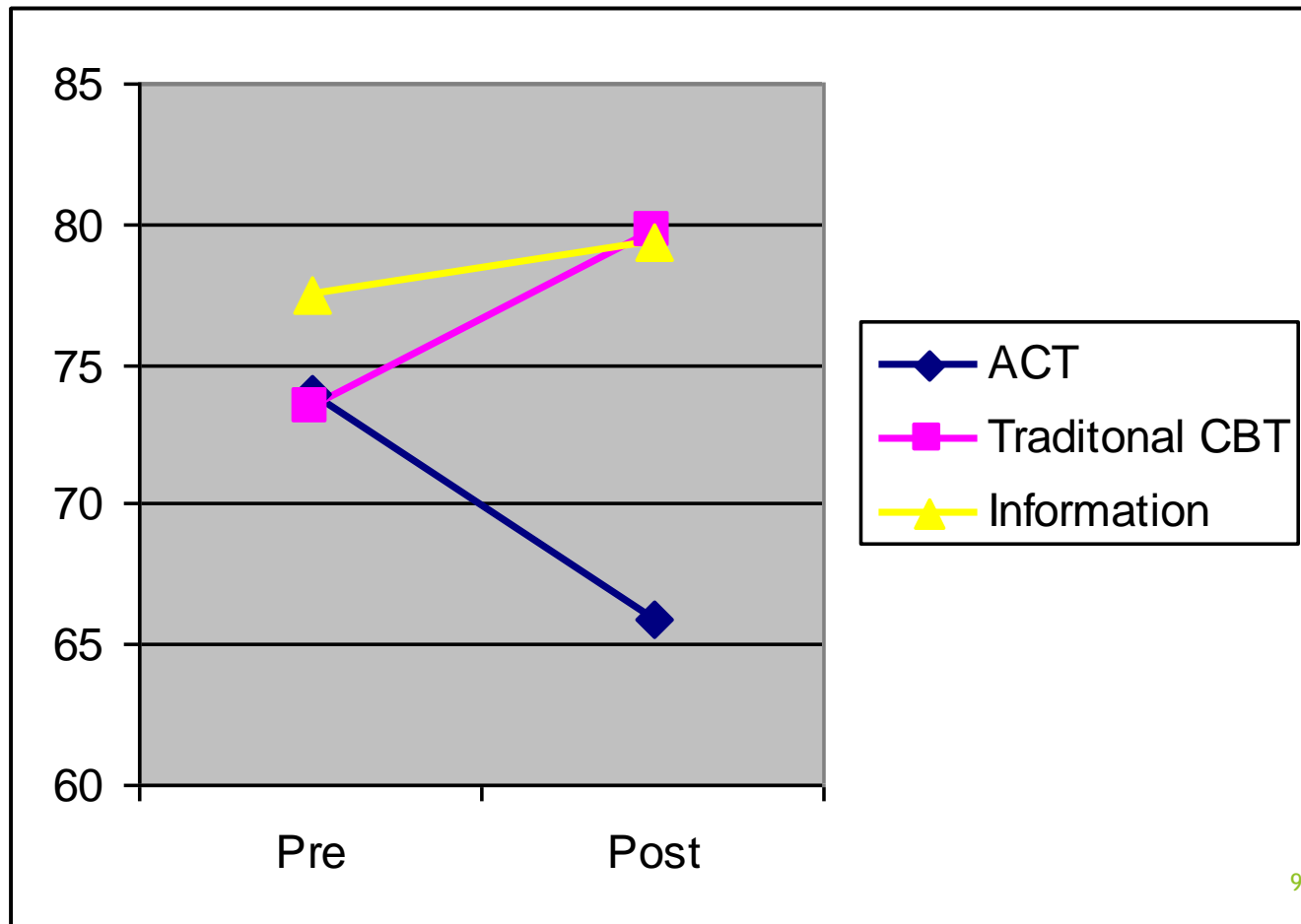


Component Analysis: Cold Tolerance

(Hayes et al., 1999)

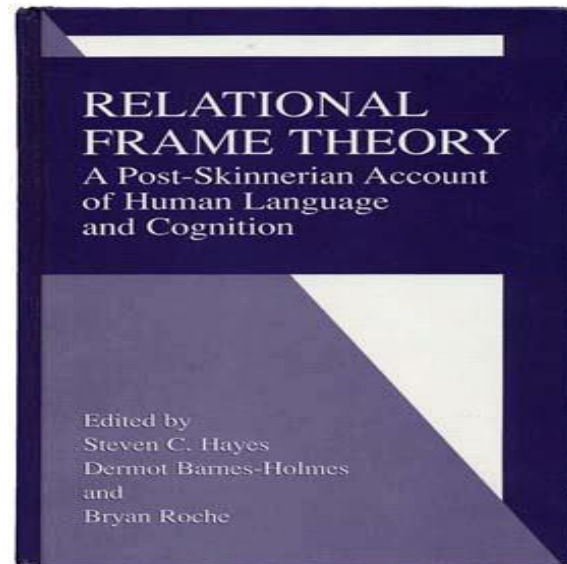


Believability of Emotional and Cognitive Reasons



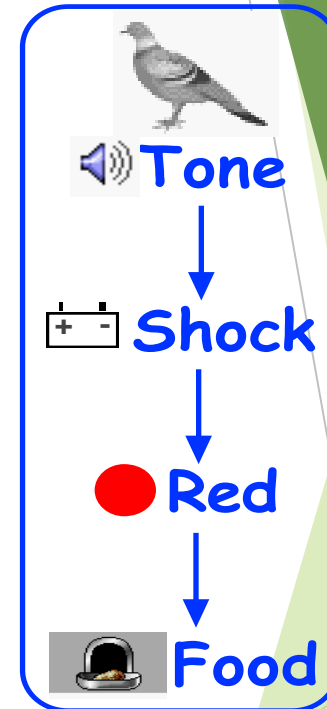
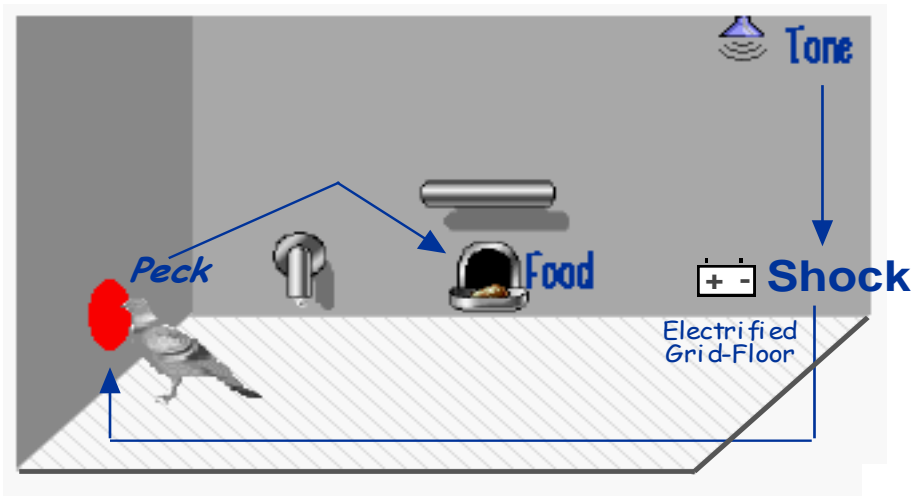
Then Something that Seemed Strange

- ▶ They stopped doing ACT research for nearly 15 years and did not even publish the component study until 15 years later
- ▶ In that time, we worked on the philosophy of science (functional contextualism) and inside that on a basic theory of language and cognition that might be more adequate to explain the concept of fusion



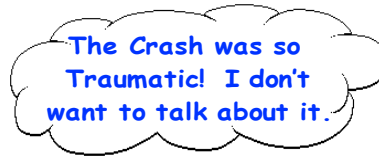
The Happy Pigeon

A Traumatic Event in the
life of a Non-Human

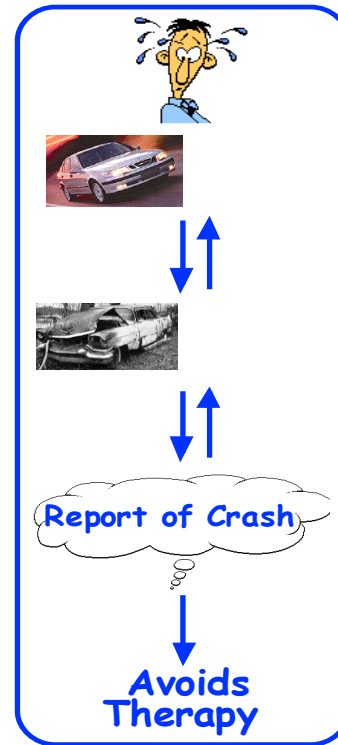


The Unhappy Human

A Traumatic Event
in the life of a Human



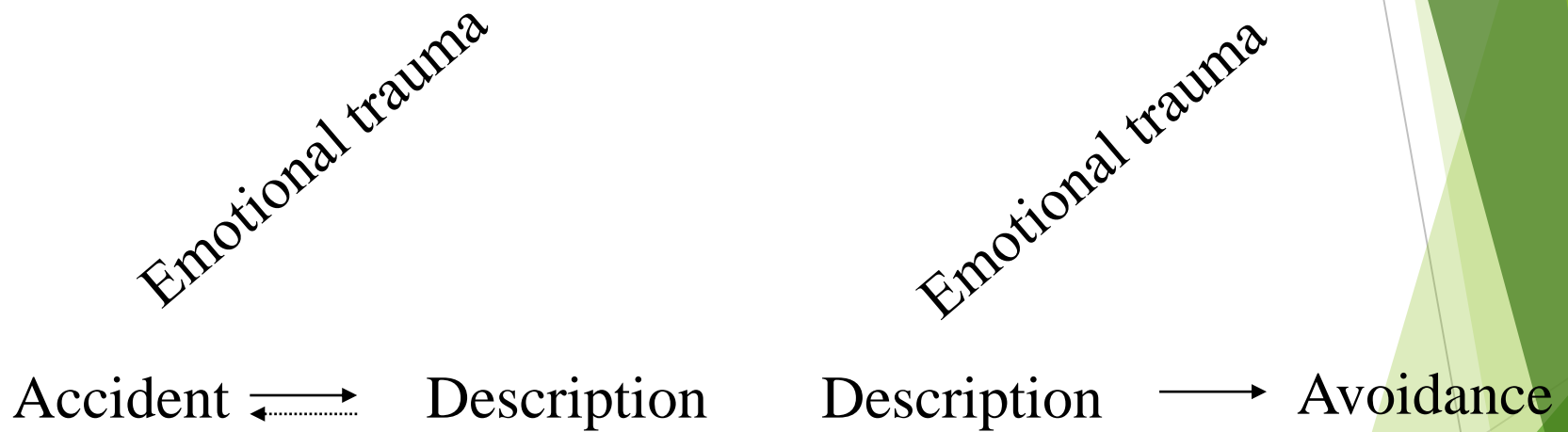
*Avoids
Helpful
Therapy*



Fusion: Operationally Defined

- ▶ The derived transformation of (emotional and behavioural) functions through arbitrary relations
- ▶ That is, when my thoughts are co-ordinated (related by co-ordination) with my actions, then thoughts acquire the functions of controlling behaviour
- ▶ Ultimately, I can become whatever my mind tells me

The Transformation of Avoidance Functions



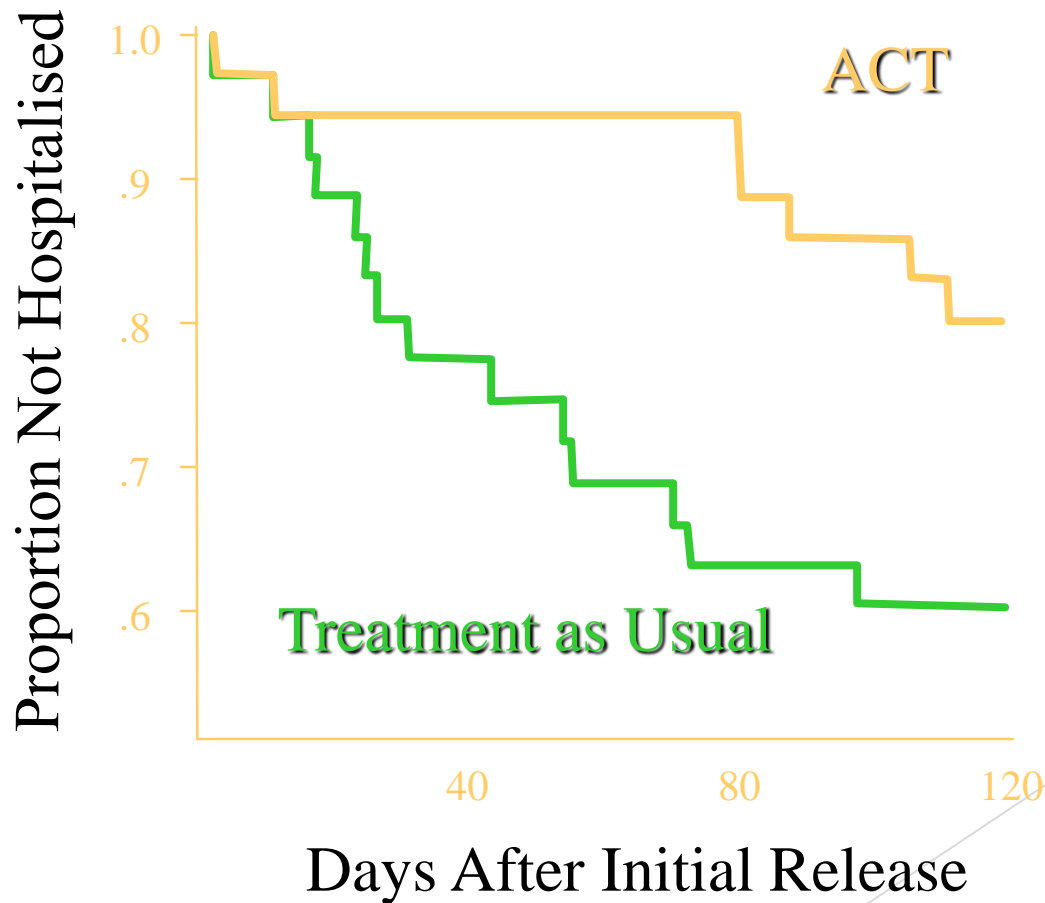
Avoidance: Operationally Defined

- ▶ The derived transformation of avoidant functions through coordination relations between with my thoughts and my actions
- ▶ Ultimately, I can become an ‘avoidant person’ and my life can shrink horribly, even when I don’t want it to

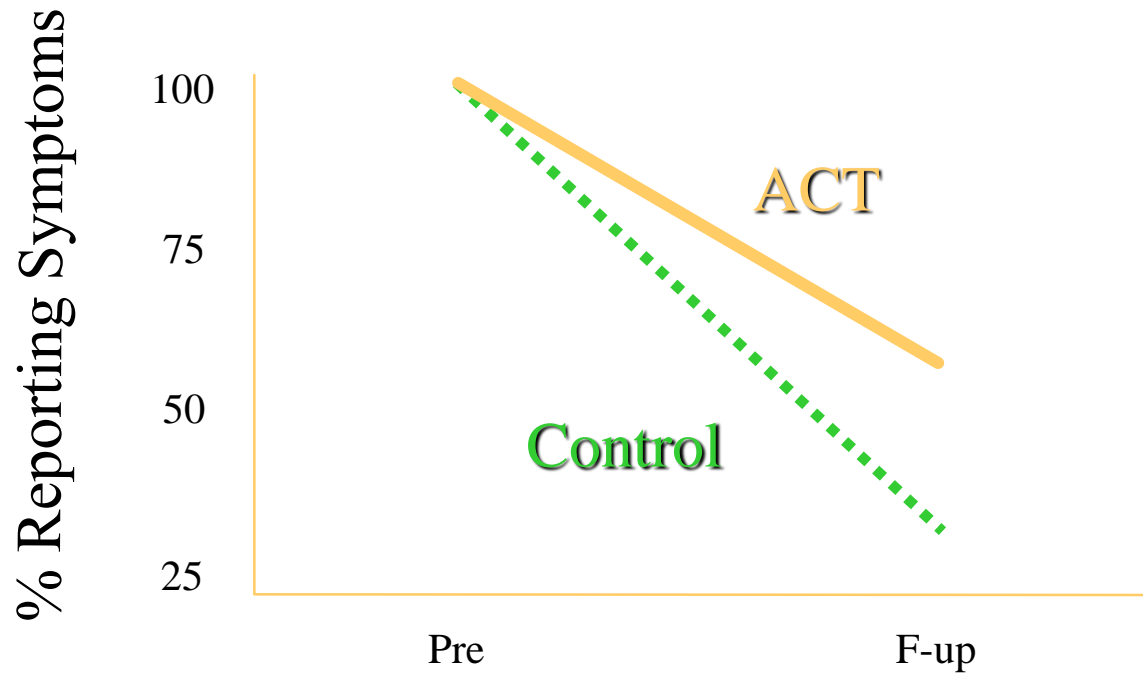
ACT: Outcome Evidence

Re-hospitalisation in Psychosis

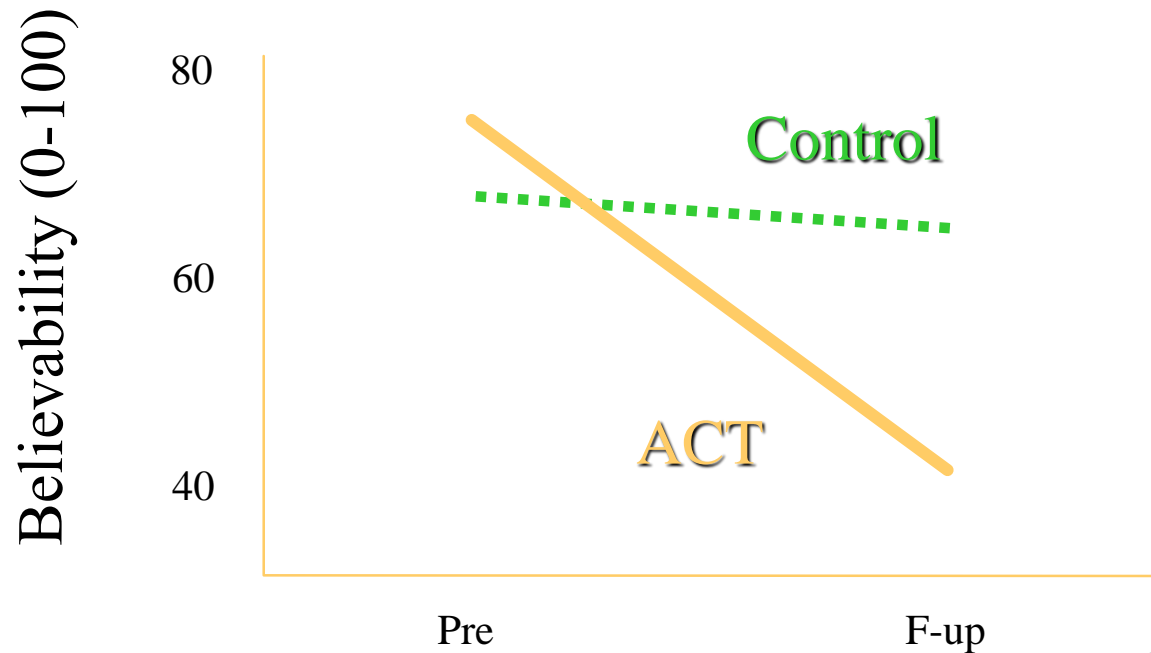
(Bach & Hayes, 2002)



Psychotic Symptoms

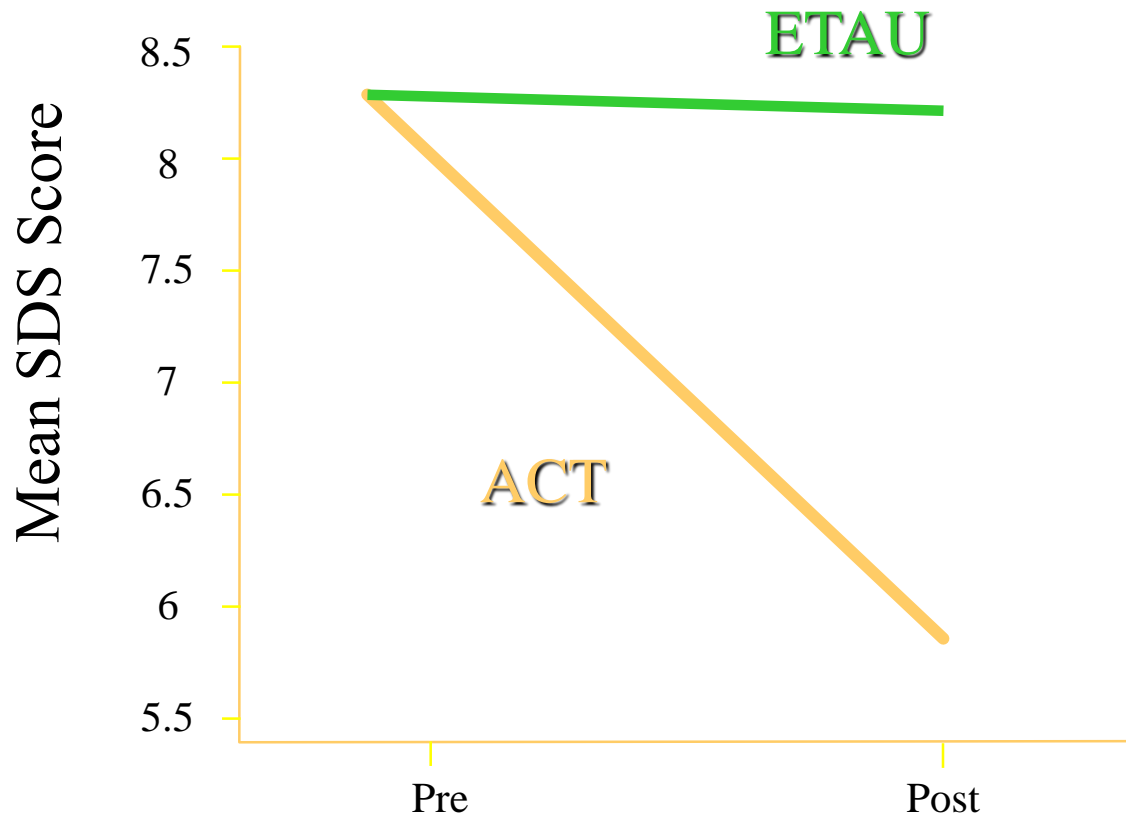


Believability of Psychotic Symptoms



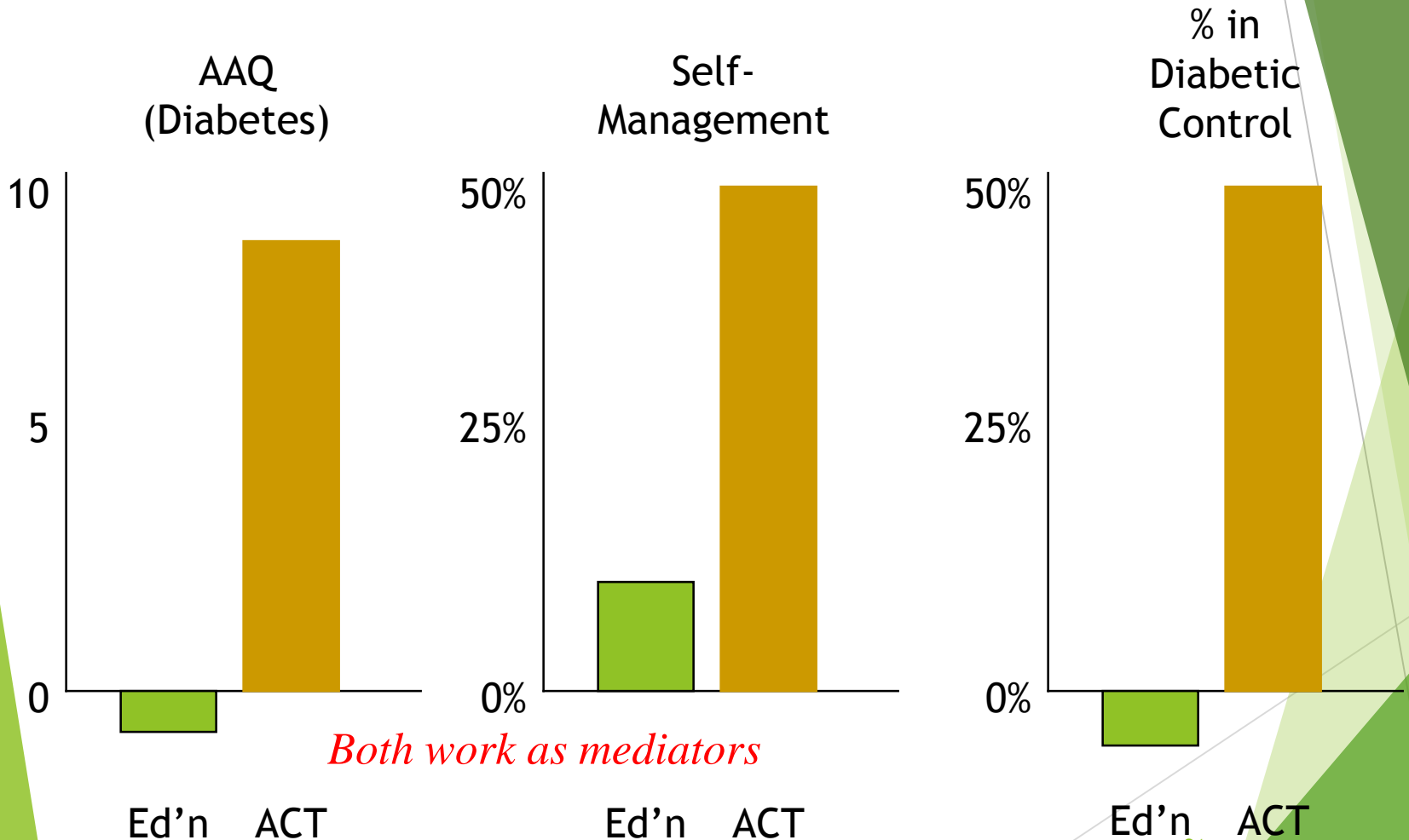
Self-Report Psychosocial Disability

(Brandon, et al., 2006)



Type-2 Diabetes Change Pre-F/up

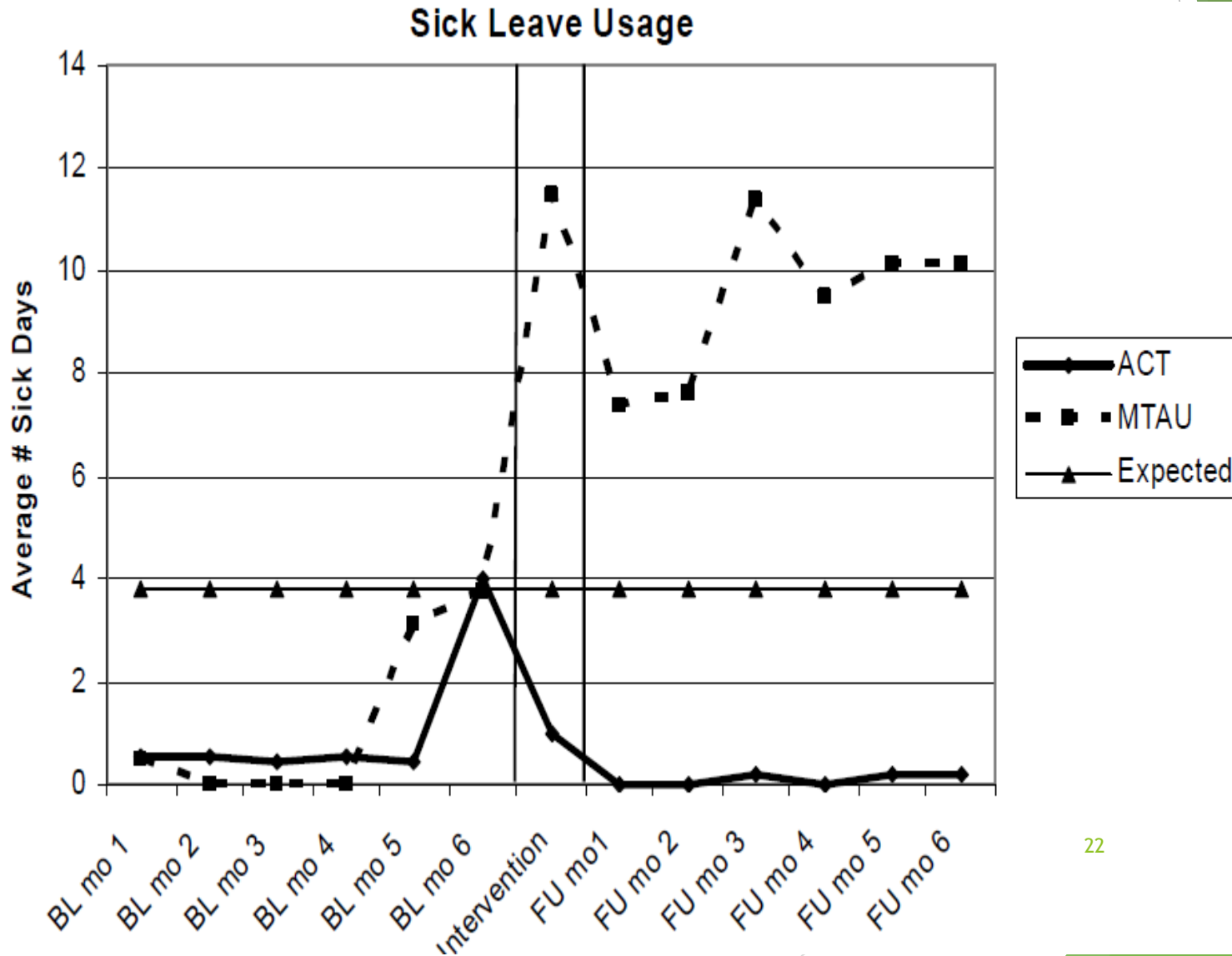
(Gregg et al., 2007)



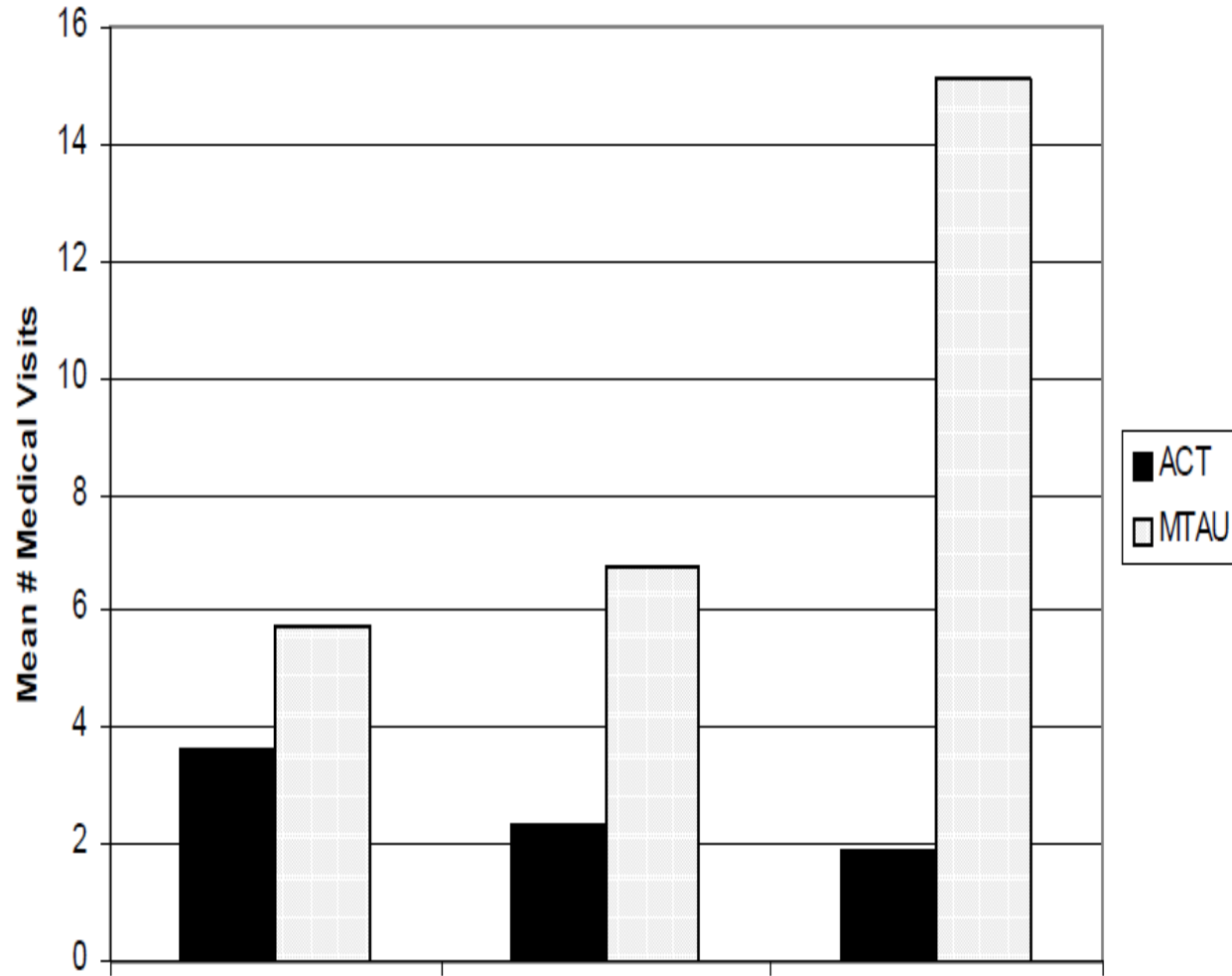
Both work as mediators

Stress/Pain in Healthcare Workers

(Dahl et al., 2004)



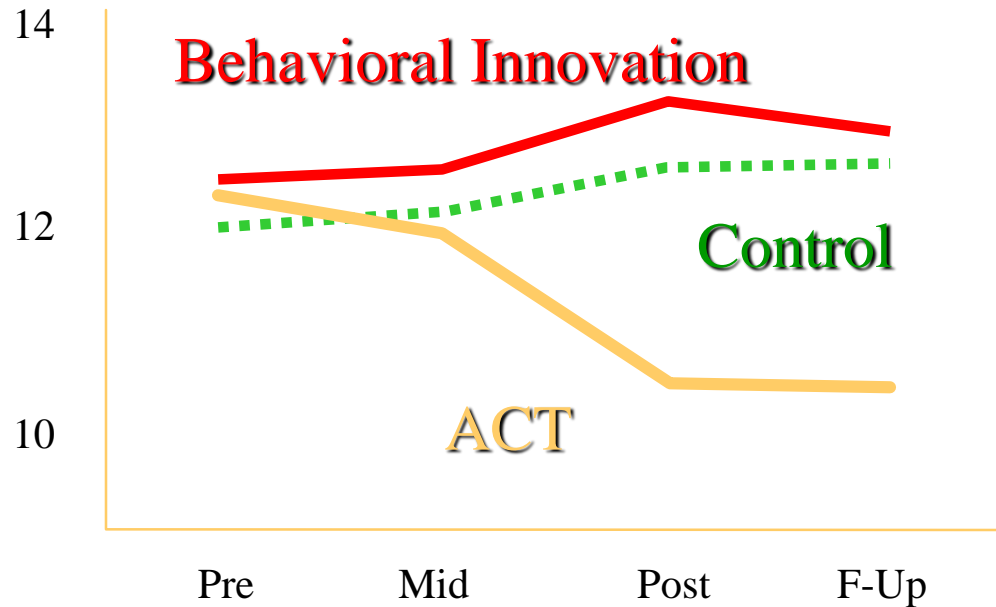
Medical Utilization



Occupational Stress

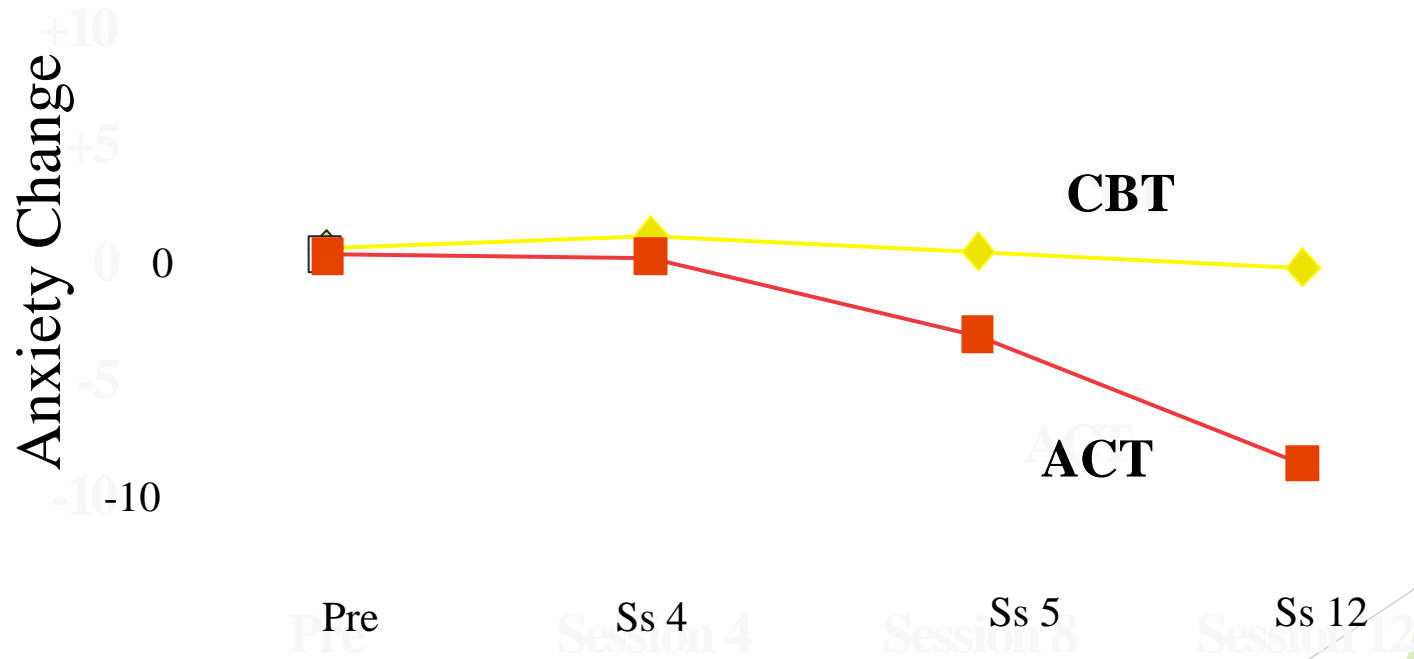
(Bond & Bunce, 2000)

General Health and Stress

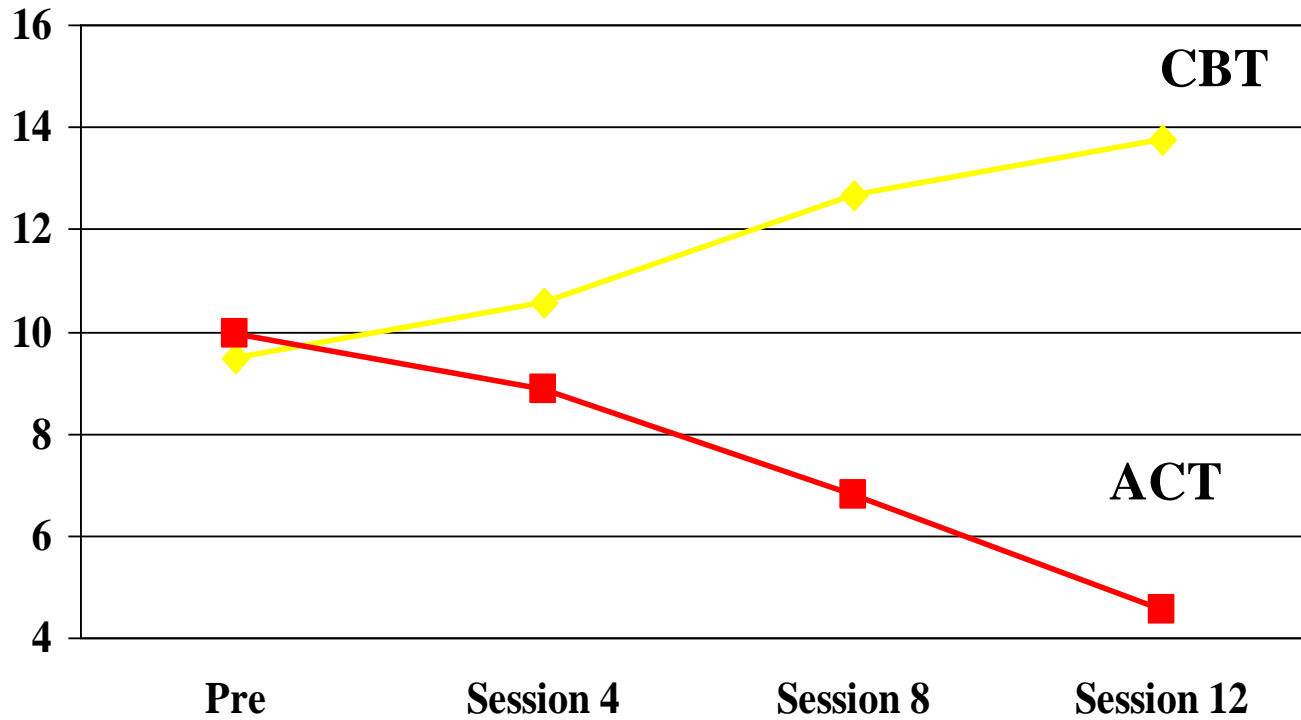


End Stage Cancer Anxiety Change

(Branstetter et al.)

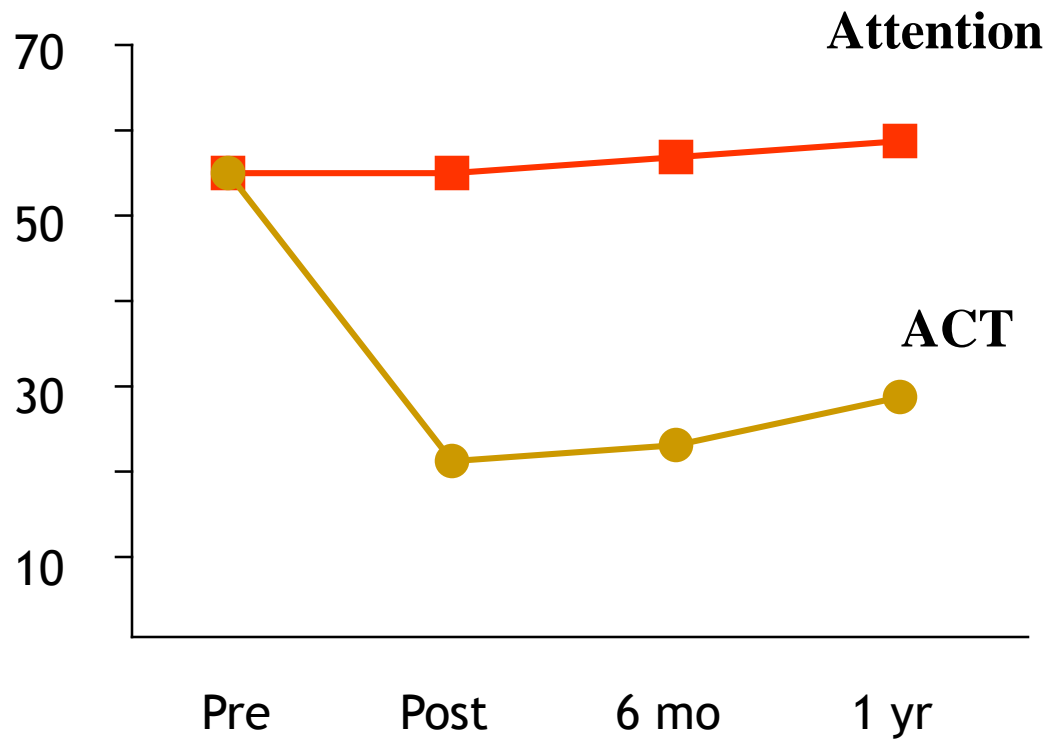


Experiential Avoidance

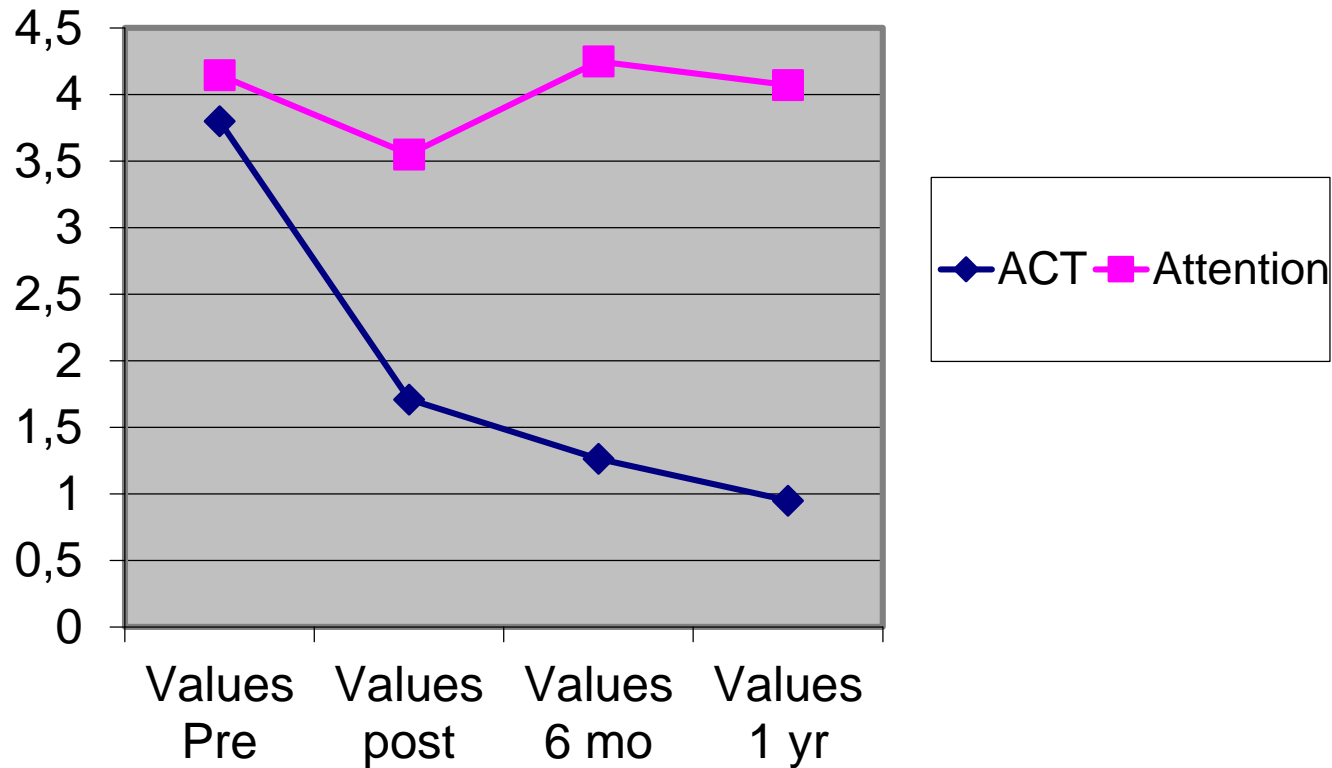


Epilepsy-focused Avoidance

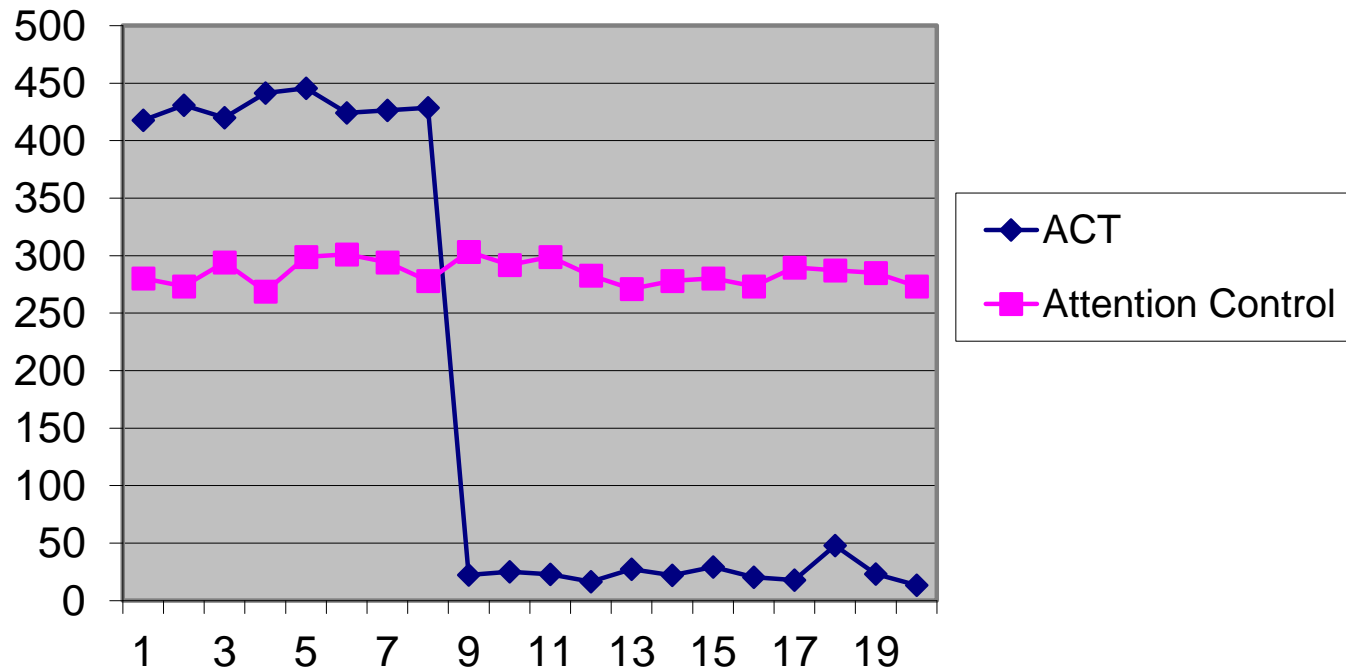
(Lundgren et al., 2006)



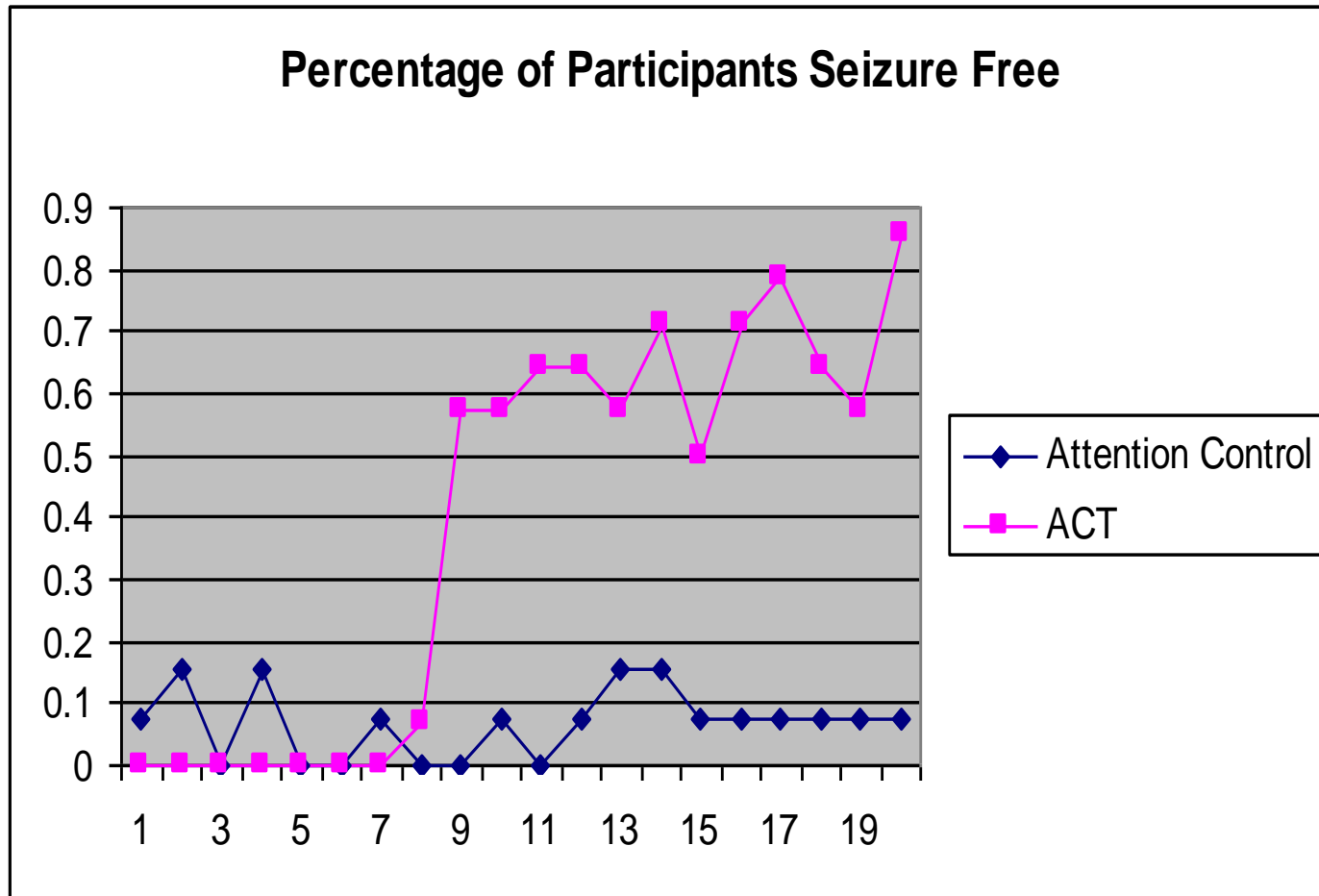
Persisting with Barriers



Total Sec Seizure Duration/Month



Outcome: % Seizure Free



Core ACT Components

Contact with the
Present Moment

Acceptance

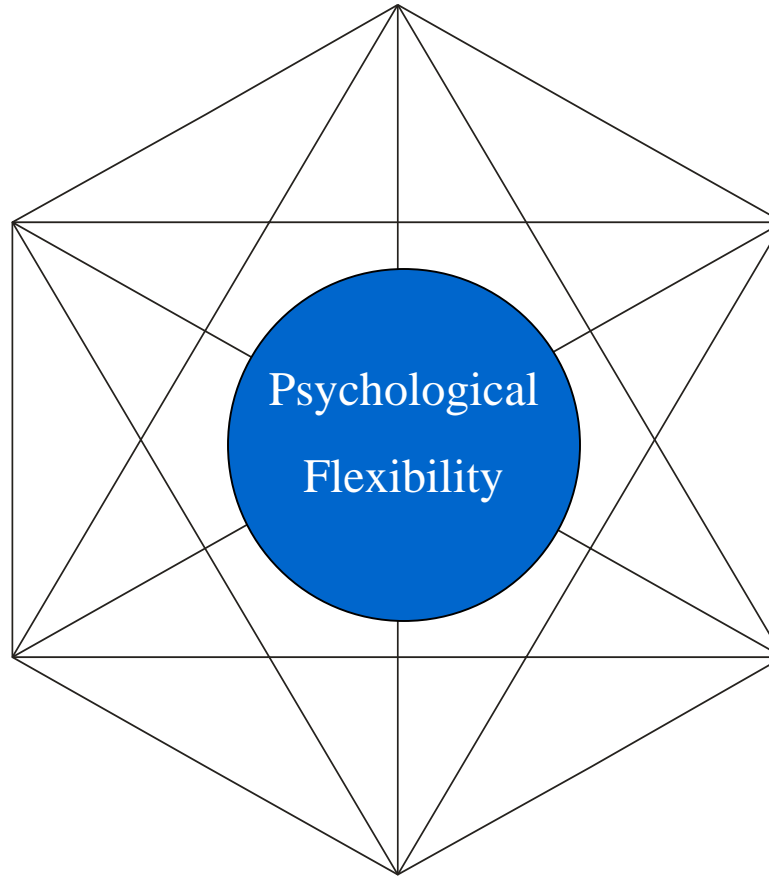
Values

Psychological
Flexibility

Defusion

Committed
Action

Self as
Context



Fusion is Always Painful

- Because we operate in close and essential (co-dependent) proximity with others, we are predominantly evaluative and comparative, so fusion often comprises negatively evaluated comparison relations between self and others
- Because the self is fused with content, self can be transient, threatened, unsettled, frustrated, small, etc.



With Fusion There can only be Struggle

- ▶ Fusion makes struggling with content inevitable
- ▶ We don't want to be who our minds tell us we are, so we go on the counter-attack (but if you believed that this content said nice things about you as a person, you would be just as fused)
- ▶ This game of back and forth just adds more struggle
- ▶ If you operate from inside your mind, struggling with good vs. bad is all there is and the struggle itself (as well as the content) is something

Workability

- Fusion lacks workability (excludes causal relations between actions and outcomes) on two levels
 - We know well from the suppression literature that struggling designed to ease or avoid discomfort or pain actually **increases contact** with these events (white bear!)
 - The behaviour of struggling is about struggling and is thus incompatible with behaviour as values -- behaviour that is not about values will never get you what you value

Distancing Self

Context vs. Content

Imagine that there are little people, soldiers, marching out of your left ear down in front of you in a parade. You are up on the reviewing stand, watching the parade go by. Each soldier is carrying a sign, and each thought you have is a sentence written on one of these signs. What would each sign say. One after another, watch as each sign rolls out and marches away. Soon the next appears ... and so on. **Notice that you can notice that from the stand. Notice that you are there and they are here.**

Switching from Avoid to Approach

Chinese Handcuffs

This situation is like Chinese handcuffs. You push both fingers in, one in each end, and as you pull them back out, the straw catches and tightens. The harder you pull, the smaller the tube gets, and the stronger it holds your fingers. What if this tube represents your life? As long as you're alive, you're caught in this tube. So the choice you're faced with is how much room you want to move in life. The more you struggle, the more constricted your life will be. If you push into it, on the other hand, you're still in the tube, but at least you have enough room to move around and live your life.

Moving from Fusion to Hierarchy

House And Furniture

It's as if you are a house, filled with furniture. The furniture is not, and can never be the house. Furniture is the content of the house and the house merely holds or contains it. It provides the context in which the furniture can be furniture. Whether the furniture is thought to be good or bad says nothing about the value of the house. You are the house but not the furniture. Your thoughts and feelings are the furniture. Just as the furniture is not the house, your thoughts and feelings are not you. They are simply experiences you have that are like pieces of furniture.

Choosing and Valuing a Direction

What Do You Want Your Life To Stand For

I want you to imagine that through some twist of fate, you have died but you are able to attend your funeral in spirit. You are watching and listening to the eulogies offered by your spouse, your children, your friends, colleagues and so on. Imagine just being in that situation and get yourself into that room emotionally. Ok, now I want you to visualise what you would like these people who were part of your life to remember you for. What would you like your husband to say about you as a wife? Have him say that. Really be brave here. Let him say exactly what you would most want him to say if you had a totally free choice about what that would be. Now what would you like your children to remember you for as a mother? Again, don't hold back. If you could have them say anything what would it be? Even if you have not actually lived up to what you would want, let them say it as you would most want it to be.

Conclusions

- ▶ **ACT** is part of a third wave behaviour therapy movement that seeks to explain the basic processes of psychological suffering and to use those explanations to deliver and enhance therapeutic intervention
- ▶ This approach provides a very coherent philosophical and scientific account, with excellent outcome and process evidence to suggest that the targeted processes are central to suffering and should be targeted in therapy
- ▶ But we are not there yet, with either processes or interventions, although we think this could potentially take us to a place that psychological understanding and intervention have not been before