

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY FOR BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY



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Introduction

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) aims to improve human functioning and has shown efficacy across a wide range of conditions (**Box 1**).^[1]

ACT may be a promising means of supporting bereaved people, yet evidence on the use of ACT for bereavement support is lacking.^[2]

Box 1: What is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)?

ACT is a mindfulness-based behavioural therapy aimed at improving wellbeing and promoting values based living. ACT encourages people to be:

Open: make room for thoughts and feelings even when these are uncomfortable; and to step back and see them as thoughts and feelings that come and go.

Aware: connect with the present moment.

Engaged: recognise what is important to you and act in ways that are guided by your values.

Aim

To explore practitioner perspectives on how ACT is used for bereavement support and how it helps following bereavement.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via MS Teams with practitioners experienced in using ACT for bereavement support. Data were analysed thematically guided by a framework approach.

Results

Nine participants were recruited. Participants identified common issues for people struggling with grief (**Box 2**).

Box 2: Common issues for people struggling with grief

- Lack of meaning / value
- Unable to be in present
- Unable to move forwards
- Behavioural avoidance
- Negative emotion towards the loved one or others
- Dealing with a traumatic loss and/or multiple losses
- Negative emotion towards self (e.g. guilt, self-criticism)
- Grief alongside pre-existing anxiety and depression
- Losing someone where the relationship was complex

References: ^[1]Gloster, A. T., Walder, N., Levin, M. E., Twohig, M. P., & Karekla, M. (2020). The empirical status of acceptance and commitment therapy: A review of meta-analyses. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 18, 181–192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2020.09.009>. ^[2]Gibson Watt T, Gillanders D, Spiller JA, Finucane AM. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for people with advanced progressive illness, their caregivers and staff involved in their care: A scoping review. *Palliative Medicine*. 2023;37(8):1100–1128. doi:10.1177/02692163231183101.

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Three themes were identified:

1. Creating psychological space around grief:

Practitioners indicated that ACT improves clients' relationship with distressing internal experiences. Metaphors and mindfulness techniques were used to encourage acceptance of grief responses, take perspective on distressing thoughts and images, and contact the present moment.

“I think there’s something about working with people at the beginning to... accept what grief... is, and how it’s impacting on them. And a lot of people want to move really quickly away from their grief or their feelings. So, I think a lot of that is trying to get people to notice what they’re feeling, and in their body, and that is through a lot of mindfulness techniques [...] so it feels a bit less scary.”

2. Using psychological space for value-directed action in the midst of grieving:

Sensitive exploration of values was seen as supporting the bereaved person to rediscover a sense of purpose and engage in meaningful activities.

“The values-based work is hugely important because whatever path they choose after bereavement, it will be painful. So, you’ve got to have a really strong sense of your values and who you are to help you do those things.”

3. Adapting ACT for bereavement support:

Practitioners used ACT flexibly, integrating other interventions, and adapted ACT to the perceived sensitivities of bereaved people, and age-related and developmental factors.

“I’d usually do a lot of psychoeducation with kids on bereavement... once they’ve got that level of information, then it’s quite easy to do things like.. ‘choice points’.”

Conclusion

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is an evidence-based approach which can be used as a basis for effective bereavement support. It can be used to support people who have been bereaved to live well with their loss, and to enable them to identify, reconnect with, and act in line with their values.

mygrief
my way



Marie
Curie