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How can we develop psychological flexibility?

According to a study last year into workplace culture in the UK, just 55% of employees look forward to coming into work or experience high states of workplace wellbeing. Given that even the best workplaces come with inherent challenges and difficulties, **Richard MacKinnon** explains how we can help our clients to increase their psychological flexibility to cope better at work

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A brief moment spent scrolling the latest news headlines is almost certain to reveal a multitude of disasters, conflicts and chronic societal conflicts that are out of our control. And yet, even events somewhat distant from our own daily lives can quickly impact our economy, the prevailing business climate, the balance in our bank account and, of course, our experience of work.

While it's important that employers remove or minimise as many of the recognised workplace stressors as possible, employees will still find themselves wrestling with difficulties on a regular basis, and it's inevitable that even the best workplaces will still present us with challenges and difficulties. The subjective nature of challenge means difficulties can't be removed entirely. In fact, some challenges are inherent to the design of the job, such as emotional labour in healthcare, performance feedback from a manager or working towards performance targets.

Additionally, common challenges faced by employees are a function of their life outside the workplace, such as navigating work alongside caring responsibilities or a chronic illness. However, in my role, I see how many of the challenges we face in the workplace are a function of how we relate to our own minds – something I'm sure that workplace practitioners will witness in their caseloads.

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For the last 20 years, I've worked as a practitioner psychologist, and specialised in workplace wellbeing, productivity and interpersonal effectiveness for the last decade. Much of my time is spent coaching employees through challenges and transitions at work, and a key tool in my coaching toolkit is the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) model, suitably translated for coaching contexts. As a coaching psychologist, this robust and evidence-based model is a great fit for many of the challenges my clients face and it's the focus of this article, in which I share my work with clients to develop psychological flexibility.

Responding to challenges

It's how we respond to workplace difficulties, challenges and setbacks that really matters. We may bounce back from a setback, nimbly overcome a challenge and learn from a disappointing outcome. However, because of how we relate to the mental content provided by our minds, and the scripts for navigating the world that we've developed since childhood, we are just as likely to respond to a challenge inflexibly, leading to lowered job satisfaction, performance issues and an erosion of wellbeing.

Our coping responses may appropriately address the problem or give us the emotional boost we need to improve our outlook. But they may also hinge on the avoidance of effort, for example, by procrastinating, avoiding situations by being absent or even using substances to alter our mental experiences.

Case study: Tom

Let's imagine an employee, Tom, who receives an email from his manager, Susan, early one morning. Susan writes that she'd like to catch up with Tom in person at the end of the working day. This doesn't initially appear like the kind of challenge we'd wish to see removed from the workplace, unlike unreasonable workload demands or badly implemented organisational change. But if we explore how Tom's mind might process Susan's simple request, we can quickly discover how his responses might make his working day significantly more difficult and unproductive.

Unhelpful mental time travel

Planning and reflection are mental exercises that contribute to our creativity and growth. We effectively mentally time travel to learn from the past and consider the future. But we can disappear into mental time travel unwillingly, focusing on an imagined future (or past) rather than the present moment. For example, the thought: 'My manager wants to speak to me at the end of the day' could lead Tom to anticipate criticism, disappointment or even job loss. Now, consider how a focus on that imagined scenario takes Tom away from the present moment, his work priorities for the day and even his physical environment.

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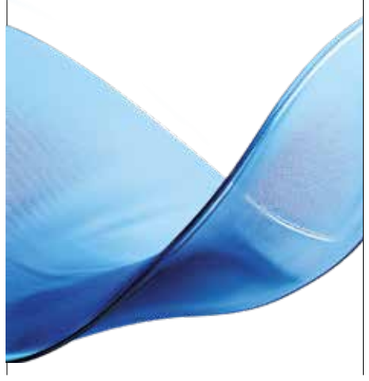

As his mind provides him with a compelling and scary vision of the near future, Tom finds himself thinking about the details of his meeting with Susan and all the many ways it could go wrong. Not merely distracted, Tom also now feels the emotions associated with this imagined dressing-down, including fear and shame.

An inflexible self-concept

Tom is not alone in over-simplifying his very complex self-concept, buying in to mental shorthand and stories about who he is. Therapists will meet clients working with similar self-concepts, and we may also recognise it in ourselves. But let's consider the blunt and unhelpful narrative: 'I'm only as good as my last piece of feedback'. As Tom focuses on this repeatedly, it's clear that whatever Susan wants to say to him could threaten his story, and the integrity of Tom's self-concept.

Rather than interpreting feedback as a call to action or a helpful commentary on a facet of his performance, Tom sees it as an existential threat to his fundamental self-worth, and bad feedback equals 'bad Tom'. The anticipated feedback now appears like a threat, and it's one that Tom really wants to avoid.

Avoiding discomfort

This is entirely understandable given that we are basically 'wired' to avoid discomfort. An appropriate level of focus on threats to our safety and wellbeing is what keeps us alive, after all. And yet, our mind can act as a smoke alarm, making the same screeching noise when we've burnt toast as when our living room is on fire. And so, it over-emphasises the risk of psychological discomfort (all the thoughts and feelings we'd rather avoid), presenting it as something to be avoided at all costs. Just like physical pain and danger.

This helps us understand why we find experiential avoidance so attractive and why it is also incredibly unhelpful to us.[3] Yes, we avoid the momentary discomfort, but when we do so, we also miss the learning and development that can come from such situations. And the ongoing vigilance regarding uncomfortable situations has a far deeper impact; 'when your primary motivation is the avoidance of unpleasant thoughts and feelings, this drains the joy and vitality from what you are doing.'[1]

Fusion with thoughts

Therapists, more than most, will know that we can pay far too much attention to the mental content provided by our mind. We can find ourselves 'hooked', like a fish, by thoughts that grab our focus, leading to an inevitable mental struggle to free ourselves from them.[4] If Tom's thought is: 'Susan thinks I'm not good enough', he might strive for unattainable levels of performance to somehow counter this illogical and over-simplified belief. Without pausing to consider the accuracy or utility of the belief, Tom sees it as immutable truth and, unhelpfully, something he should base his behaviour on.

A lack of clarity on what matters

Rather than consider how he'd ideally like to deal with the situation, Tom loses sight of what really matters to him (which we can summarise as his personal values), neglecting the personal qualities he'd ideally like to bring to his life right now. Instead, his focus is on identifying the behavioural response that will allow him to avoid discomfort, and escape the scary future his mind has conjured up for him. Rather than relying on values to navigate the situation, Tom finds himself led by the presence of psychological discomfort and the urge to rid himself of it.

Automatic responses

Looking for a 'way out' of his predicament, the combination of mental time travel, buying in to thoughts and wrestling with personal stories, not to mention the strong urge to avoid discomfort, means that Tom quickly emails Susan to say that he's unavailable to meet. A wave of relief surges through him and he realises he's avoided the imagined bad news.

And yet, within moments, Tom realises that this painful struggle was all for nothing. Susan emails back to reschedule a discussion for tomorrow morning instead. His escape from discomfort was fleeting. And the struggle he experienced while trying to find a way out was unpleasant, distracting and simply reinforced his learned, inflexible responses. It was ultimately unworkable.

> 'The desired outcome of acceptance and commitment coaching (ACC) is for the client to develop increased psychological flexibility'

Writing in his book, *The Liberated Mind*, clinical psychologist Steven Hayes succinctly points out: 'The punch line is that if the purpose of any coping strategy is to avoid feeling a challenging emotion or thinking an upsetting thought, to wipe out a painful memory or look away from a difficult sensation, the long-term outcome will almost always be poor.'[4]

A more flexible alternative

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a third-wave cognitive behavioural therapy with an impressive evidence base, supporting its use in a range of contexts, including therapeutic, social work and education.[2] It has also been translated for use in workplace coaching contexts, where it has the potential to positively impact job satisfaction, goal orientation and wellbeing.[5] The desired outcome of acceptance and commitment coaching (ACC) is for the client to develop increased psychological flexibility. It is also about increasing our ability to notice our internal and external experiences and, rather than reacting to or making decisions based on those experiences, it's about making decisions based on what is important and workable in that specific situation.[6]

Cultivating psychological flexibility

The core model contains six processes, which can be communicated as skills to be acquired, making it an ideal theoretical foundation for both coaching and training contexts. When coaching individuals to develop their psychological flexibility, I summarise the six skills that make up the model into three broad themes, to make it easier to recall and use in challenging situations.

1. Showing up, flexibly

This theme combines the skill of having present moment awareness and the cultivation of a more flexible self-concept. When we are able to focus on the here and now, we can use the information we gather from

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the specific context we're in to guide our behaviour – instead of relying on our mental content, which is focused on a disappointing past or an anxiety-inducing imagined future. We learn to notice any tendency to drift into mental time travel and bring ourselves gently back to the here and now – which is, after all, the only place where we can take action.

And rather than seeing ourselves as a simple collection of rules to adhere to, or over-simplified stories that we need to buy in to, we can 'show up' in the present moment with the version of ourselves most appropriate to the context we are facing. We can, for example, see how feedback applies to one aspect of our work performance, not to our total identity as a human being at work.

2. Letting go of mental struggle

This combines the skills of cognitive defusion and acceptance. The former allows us to see thoughts as simply passing mental content rather than rules, obligations or demands from our inner critic. The content moves from being problems to be solved or experiences to be removed, to simply temporary mental experiences that will move on in time. When we learn defusion, we expend less effort attempting to change or remove such thoughts which, given the networked, associative nature of our minds, is ultimately futile.[7]

Developing acceptance allows us to see psychological discomfort as part of our experience, rather than something to be automatically minimised or avoided. This isn't about passively accepting the status quo, nor should it imply hard-headed persistence through gritted teeth. Psychological acceptance in the ACT model is about making space for all that we find uncomfortable, ending the struggle to avoid it and learning to explore it as just another mental experience.

Sharing a client's account in his book, *A Liberated Mind*, Steven Hayes illustrates how powerful the battle with our own minds can be: 'I felt as though I was in a tug-of-war with a gigantic anxiety monster who was trying to pull me into a bottomless pit. I fought and pulled, but no matter how hard I tried I could not win, but neither could I give up and be cast into oblivion. It was very hard for me to realise that I did not need to win this war. Life was not asking that of me. It was asking me to drop the rope. Once I did that, I could use my arms and hands for more interesting things.'[4]

Cognitive defusion and acceptance allow us to drop the rope in this imaginary contest, end mental struggle, and focus more on the activities, experiences and responsibilities that really matter to us.

> 'When we move towards what matters, we pay less attention to the psychological noise from our mind and focus more on our valued direction of travel'

3. Moving towards what matters

The final theme combines clarity of values and committed action. The former is all about knowing what matters to you as an individual, and knowing how you want to bring these values to life in your behaviour. Unlike goals, which are achievable, values serve as an internal compass, providing a sense of direction, meaning and purpose. They are inherently flexible and avoid all the negative trappings of mental rules. As writer Russ Harris explains in *The Happiness Trap:* 'Values are what you want to do, not how you want to feel.'[1] In other words, clarity of values implies action based on their principles.

This is where the final skill in the ACT model comes in. Committing to action that is aligned with our values and appropriate for the context that we are in, no matter how uncomfortable it might be or how much we notice our inner 'smoke alarm' going off. We need to act with intention, based on what we think is going to be helpful in the situation – without being dragged in other, less workable directions by fear of discomfort or inflexible psychological rules.

When we move towards what matters, we pay less attention to the psychological noise from our mind and focus more on our valued direction of travel. The discomfort isn't absent and our mind is far from silent but we're just paying less attention to it.

This focus on the direction of travel is useful on a number of levels. Evaluating options in terms of 'good' and 'bad', 'pass' or 'fail' is the kind of binary thinking that comes easily to us. But it's also inflexible and rule-based. Moving towards what matters or away from discomfort in a situation is context-dependent, and therefore inherently more flexible.

Revisiting Tom

How might Tom's experience have been different had he been taught to develop his psychological flexibility? By showing up, flexibly, Tom could remain attached to the present moment and not get entangled in fictional future scenarios. He could notice, and then step back from, the stories about his performance that have held him back, and consider all the different reasons why Susan might be requesting the meeting.

By ending mental struggle, Tom can see his thoughts about his own performance, his relationships with his manager and even his job security as just that: thoughts. Not problems to be solved, experiences to be changed or facts to dictate his next steps. Any psychological discomfort (eg anxious thoughts about outcomes) would be seen as 'normal' and part of working for a manager who has performance expectations, not something strange to be avoided, minimised or somehow removed entirely.

Finally, by clarifying his values and engaging in committed action, Tom could reflect on the kind of person he'd like to be in that moment (eg professional) and commit to the afternoon meeting with Susan, but he could also ask her to clarify what she'd like to discuss so that he can prepare effectively.

Closing thoughts

Through Tom's case study, it's clear how a small and almost inconsequential event can take on a significance, and negative mental proportions in our minds due to psychological rigidity. Workplace practitioners will no doubt be familiar with clients who present with similar patterns of unhelpful thinking that have been explored in this article. However, with the judicious deployment of some simple skills, a more effective and contextually sensitive response is possible for clients, where avoidance of discomfort isn't the overriding mission, but instead a flexible engagement with life as it is, guided by personal values.

More broadly, these skills can also be brought to life when we find ourselves struggling with the disasters, conflicts and economic challenges that make their way into our awareness. Developing increased psychological flexibility allows us to cultivate a healthier relationship with the content our mind gives us about life's events, challenges, worries and setbacks. Rather than rumination, preoccupation, procrastination and avoidance as responses to difficult thoughts and emotions, psychological flexibility facilitates taking helpful action in the direction of what matters most to us in the moment.

It facilitates both increased work performance and boosts our wellbeing[8], and as such, can be viewed as a valuable skillset for work and life more generally, especially when we consider just how many of our concerns are about things that are well outside of our personal control. ●

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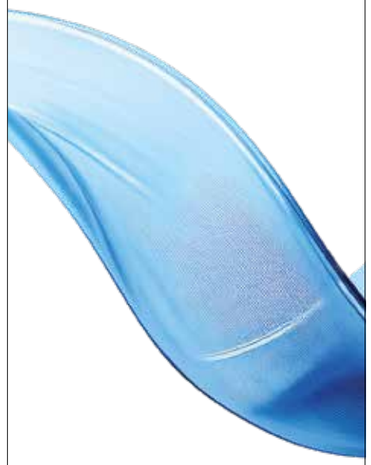

If you have an idea for a possible article for *BACP Workplace*, the editor would like to hear from you. Please write to: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

Further information

Acquisition of these skills for work and life is possible via formal training programmes, self-guided online training and one-to-one coaching. You can access a simple and effective ACT-based training programme set out by Frank Bond and colleagues in an article in *The Wiley Handbook of Contextual Behavioural Science*. You can also find out more about developing these skills for life at: **https://tinyurl.com/yc4uuzem**

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