

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT)

An Experiential Overview

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What is ACT?

“ACT is a therapeutic approach that uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.”

ACT in Context

What is ACT?

“BF Skinner meets Carl Rogers”

Behavioral Activation +
Motivational Interviewing +
Mindfulness
(Blend, salt to taste....)

ACT in Context

What is ACT?

Oh, I already do this!

Er...well...maybe...probably not.

Where did ACT come from?

ACT has been called a “third wave” behavioral therapy; placing importance on changing the way individuals relate to their experience as opposed to changing the content of their experience.

Other “third wave” behavioral therapies include DBT, MBCT and FAP.

Folk Wisdom: So close...

Serenity Prayer

Reinhold Neibuhr?

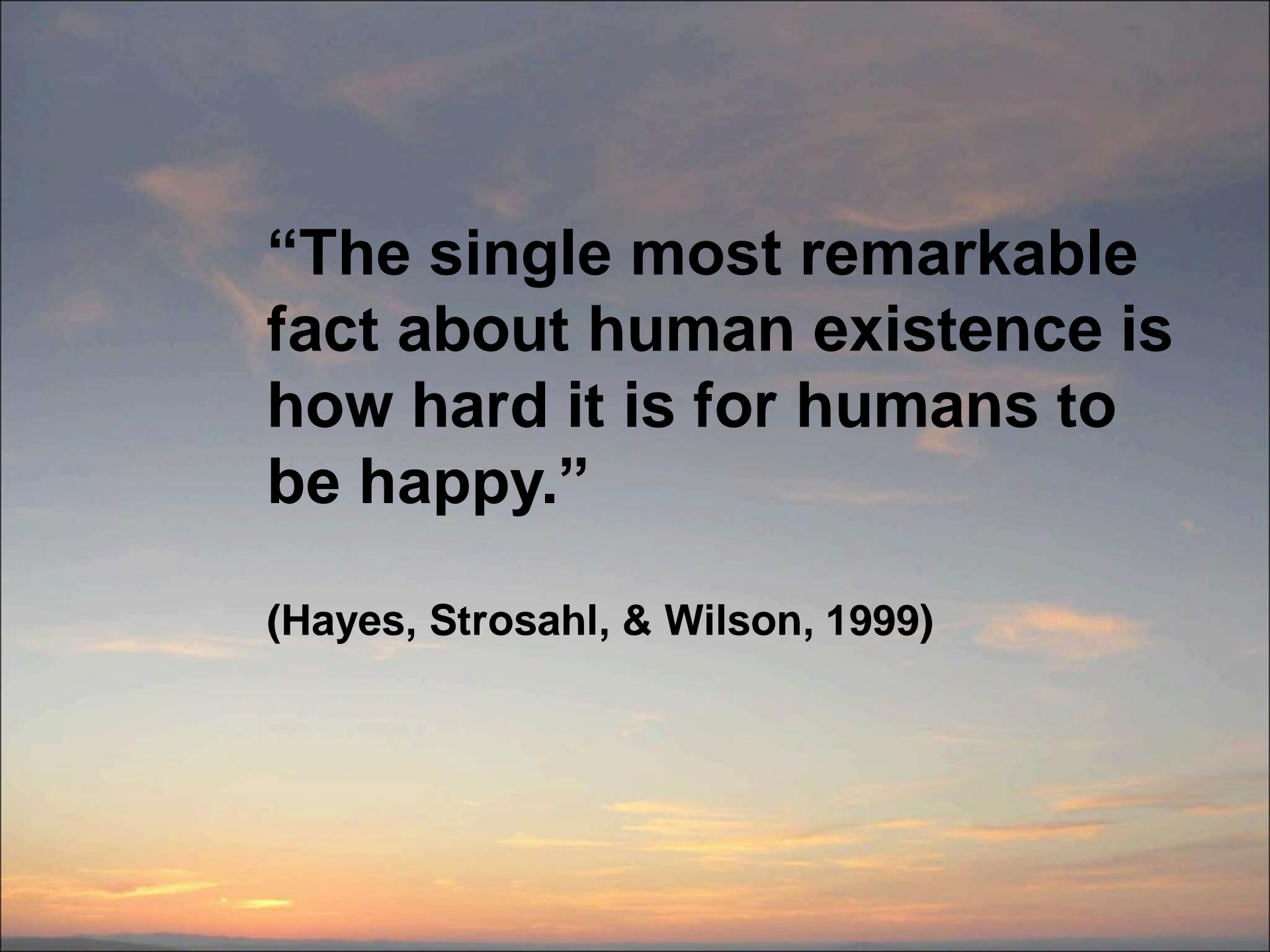
*God grant me the
serenity to accept the
things I cannot
change,
courage to change
the things I can,
and wisdom to
know the difference.*

Mother Goose

Rhyme (1695)

*For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy, or there is
none;
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it.*

...yet so hard to do.



“The single most remarkable fact about human existence is how hard it is for humans to be happy.”

(Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999)

Folk Wisdom: So close yet...

Why is it so hard to *live* the Serenity Prayer?

Why is peace of mind so elusive?

Normal mind processes, based in language, make some amount of struggle inevitable...and a tremendous amount of struggle possible.

According to the
“Assumption of Healthy Normality”

- By their nature, humans are psychologically healthy
- Abnormality is a disease or syndrome driven by unusual pathological processes
- We need to understand these processes and change them

Alternative Assumption: Destructive Normality

- Normal language & cognitive processes often are destructive and can amplify or exacerbate unusual pathological processes.
- If that is true, why don't we *all* struggle with anxiety, depressed moods, insecurities, fears, etc.....?



Answer:

Oh, wait...we do.

Contact with the
Present Moment

Acceptance

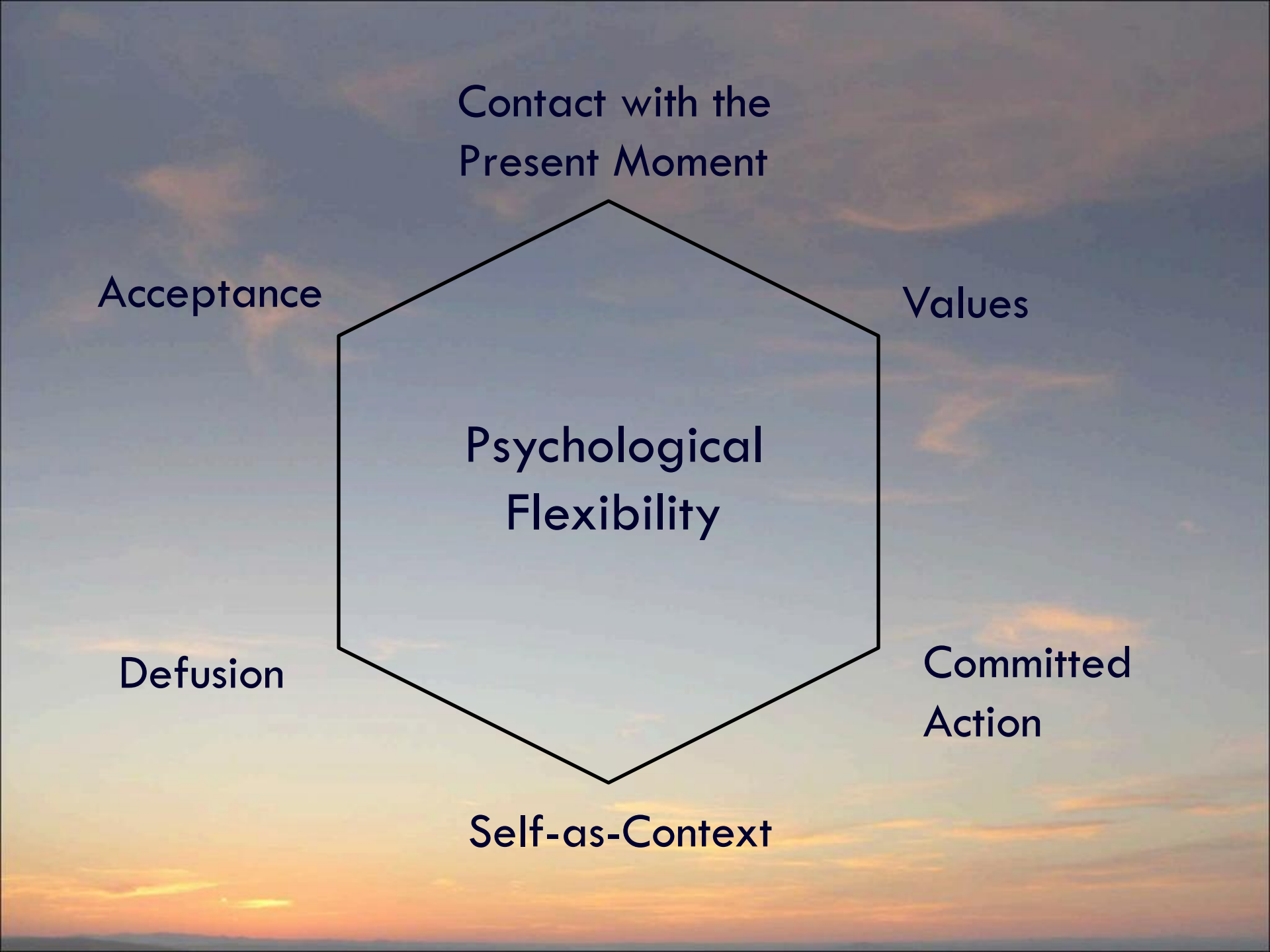
Values

Psychological
Flexibility

Defusion

Committed
Action

Self-as-Context



Acceptance

- An active embrace of the present moment, fully and without defense.
- Acceptance as an alternative to experiential avoidance.
- Willingness as a choice, not a decision, thought or feeling.
- Acceptance in the service of values-based action.

Cognitive Fusion

I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body. Then I realized who was telling me this.

...Emo Philips

Cognitive Defusion

- ACT views thoughts as problematic more in terms of function vs. content.
- Fusion with thoughts limits one's ability to be present and flexibly responsive
- Defusion aims to change the way one relates to their thoughts.
- Thoughts and feelings are not causes of behavior.

Self as context

- Simple awareness; a safe place from which we can have experiences as they are and not as they say they are.
- Distinguishing between conceptualized versions of self (life story, self-evaluations) and the context in which these events occur.
- Best understood as experienced.

Contact with the Present Moment

- Acceptance and defusion are in the service of “showing up” to the present moment.
- Being present promotes vitality, creativity and spontaneity.
- Being present is reinforced within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

Values

- Clarified values as important “guidance system” which leads to purposeful, enriching patterns of behavior.
- Differentiating values from goals.
- Letting go of experiential control in the service of pursuing valued ends in life.

Committed Action

- The ultimate goal of ACT is promoting committed action in valued directions.
- Any movement towards values, however small, leads to increased vitality.
- Emphasis on the process of growth vs. the achievement of specific goals.
- Action triggers barriers that breathe life into all other core interventions.

One more time: What is ACT?

ACT Said Simply:

ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.

One more time:
What is ACT?

ACT Said Even More Simply:

- Open Up
- Be Present
- Do What Matters

Contact with the
Present Moment

Acceptance

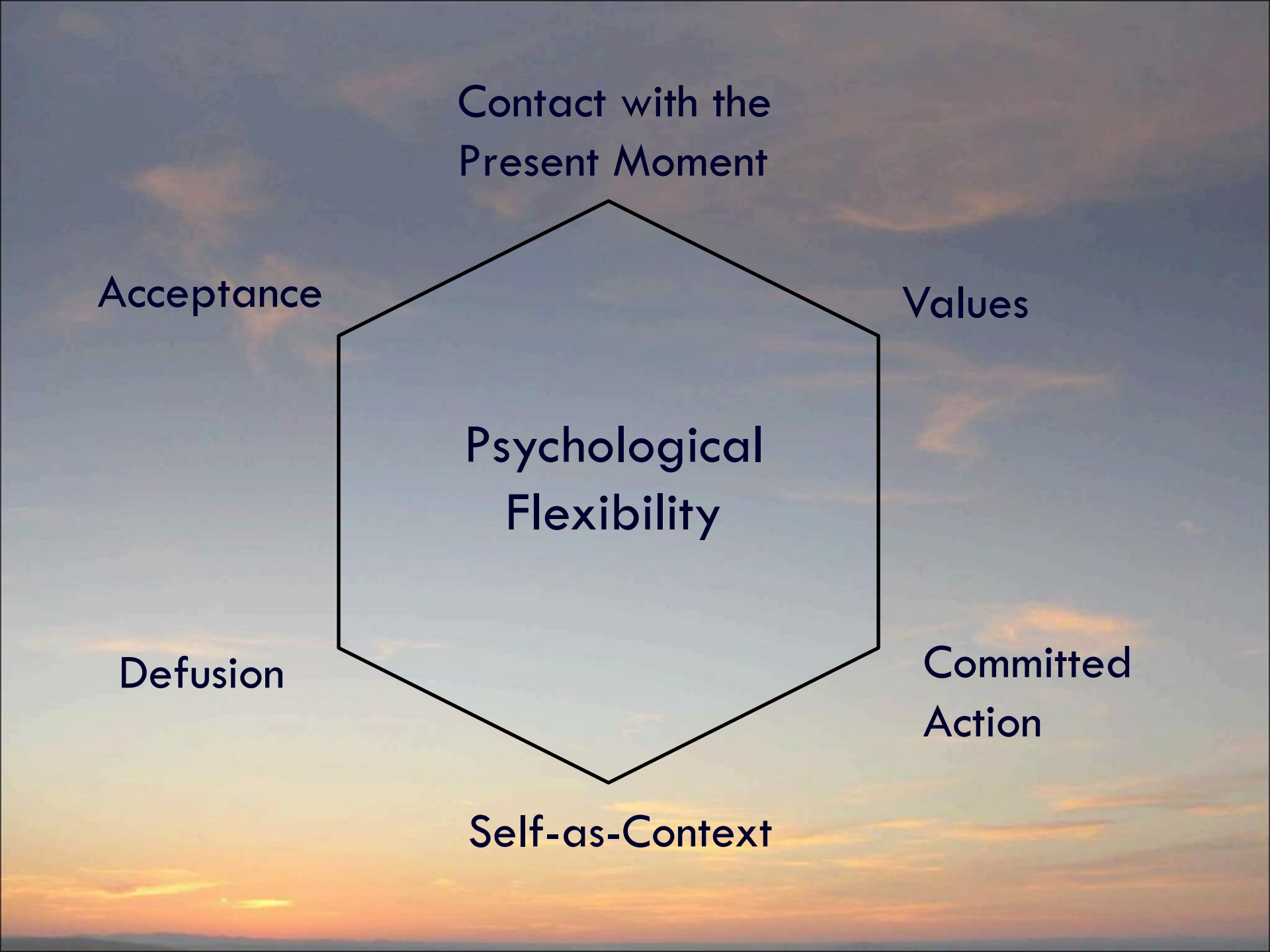
Values

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Acceptance and
Mindfulness
Processes

Contact with the
Present Moment

Acceptance

Values

Psychological
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Defusion

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Action

Self-as-Context

Contact with the Present Moment

Commitment and Behavior Change Processes

Acceptance

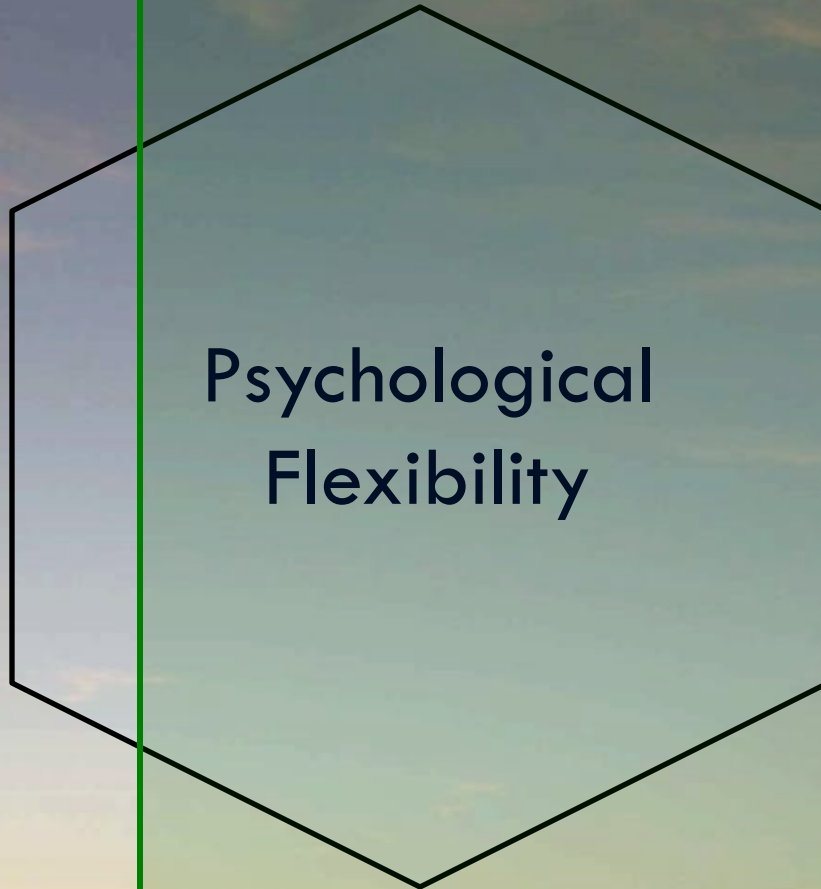
Values

Psychological Flexibility

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*Open
Up*

Acceptance

Defusion

Contact with the
Present Moment

*Be
Present*

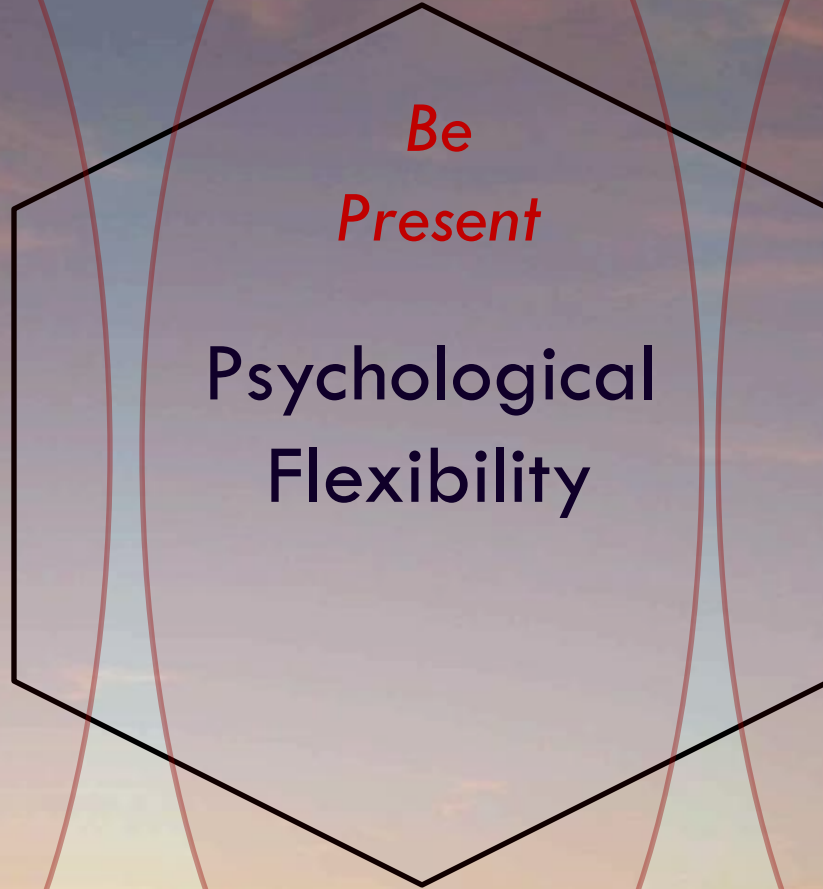
Psychological
Flexibility

Self-as-Context

*Do
What
Matters*

Values

Committed
Action



The ACT Question

Given a distinction between you and the stuff you are struggling with and trying to change are you willing to have that stuff, fully and without defense, as it is, and not as what it says it is, AND do what takes you in the direction of your chosen values at this time, in this situation.

ACT Question...

(2) are you willing to have that stuff, fully and without defense

Acceptance

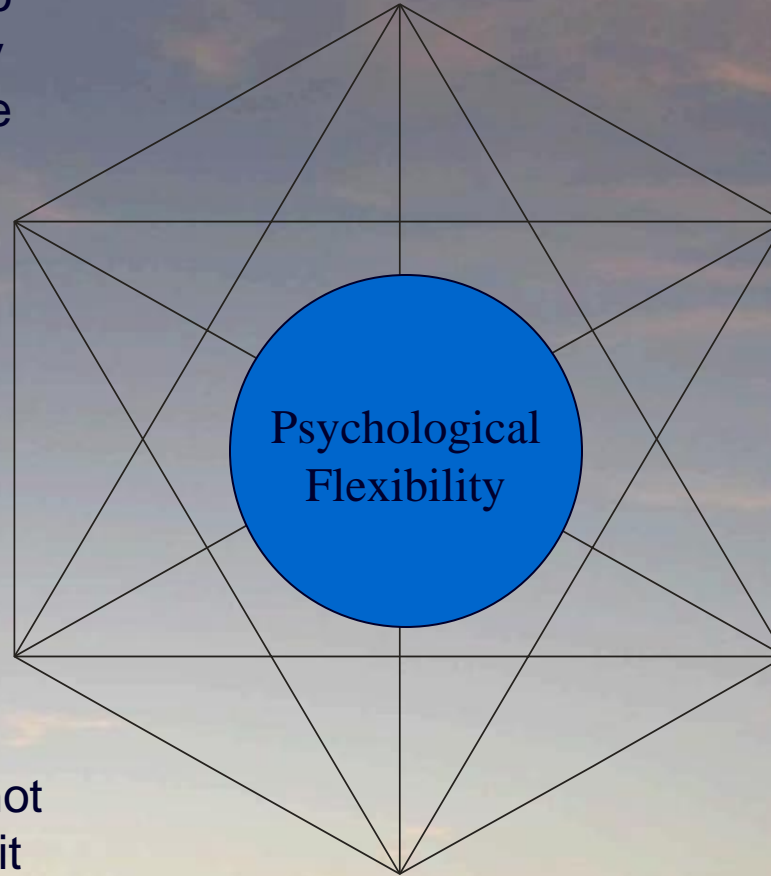
If the answer is “yes,” that is what builds...

Defusion

(3) as it is, and not as what it says it is,

Contact with the Present Moment

(6) at this time, in this situation?



Values
(5) of your chosen values

(4) AND do what takes you in the direction

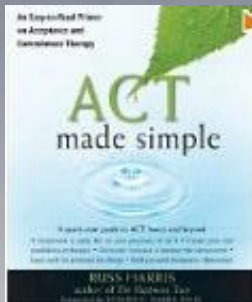
Committed Action

Self as Context

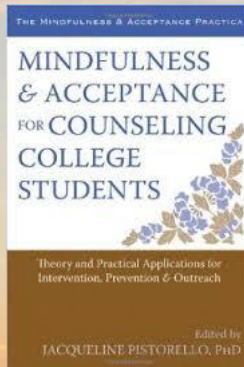
(1) Given a distinction between you and the stuff you are struggling with and trying to change



Hayes, Steve; Strosahl, Kirk; Wilson, Kelly. (2011). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change, 2nd Ed.*. New York: Guilford.



Harris, Russ. (2009). *ACT made simple*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Press.



Pistorello, J. (Ed.) (2013). *Mindfulness and Acceptance for Counseling College Students: Theory and Practical Applications for Intervention, Prevention, and Outreach*. Oakland, CA: Context Press.

Working with ACT

- Therapeutic Relationship
- ACT in the therapy room
- <http://contextualpsychology.org>

Questions?