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Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) with long-term health conditions

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Summary by Frank Kelley

Alec Bond is a current Trainee Health Psychologist at Liverpool John Moores University and works with patients with various respiratory conditions and psychological needs at Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital. Professional interests include palliative and end of life care, particularly in relation to respiratory illness, as well as health inequalities.



Within respiratory patients there can often be complex elements at play regarding their psychological wellbeing which can be a contributor to how well a respiratory condition is managed (or not, in some cases) by a patient. ACT and CFT arguably have much to offer in psychological formulation and interventions with this patient group.

(ACT) is an empirically based psychological intervention that encourages acceptance of *what is*, employing mindfulness strategies, together with strategies to develop commitment and modify behaviour, to increase psychological flexibility. ACT also illuminates for patients the ways in which language may entangle them into futile attempts to battle against themselves and engage in self blame. It is particularly effective when combined with elements of compassion focused therapy (CFT). Research evidence provides evidence of efficacy for chronic pain and depression (Tamannaefar et al 2014).

This talk provided an understanding of how ACT and CFT can be applied to the psychological assessment, formulation, and intervention with patients managing a long-term health conditions, using examples when working with patients living with respiratory illness.

These approaches help with acceptance, psychological flexibility, the client's ability to remain in the present and avoidance of rumination. The gains of therapy contribute to a healthy observing self which can see experiences in context and without negative judgements.

We hope that our threat systems, drive systems and soothing systems are in some sort of balance. The threat system detects threats and protects us. The self criticism of the threat system gives us a motivated way out. The drive system motivates us towards resources. The soothing system helps us manage distress and promote bonding.

However with mental ill health here are imbalances in these systems, and particularly the dominance of the threat system. What we want or need can shift us from resourcefulness towards unhealthy habits and soothing is distorted by self criticism. However if the self criticism is reinforced and repetitive this rumination pushes us back into the threat system.

There is a particularly vicious circle for people with severe respiratory illness. Panic comes with breathlessness and a need for flight. This will exacerbate respiratory distress.

Recommended books are:

Your Guide to an Informed Mind a series of books including one by Michael Friedman, Culturescope.

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel van der Kolk 2014

Thank you to Alec Bond for his enthusiasm and ability to engage us in his different part of the therapeutic world.