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# CASE FORMULATION

With special reference to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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**To form an ACT oriented case conceptualisation, we need to be able to answer at least the following questions:**

## **1. What are the treatment goals?**

Our aim is to set valued goals and to prompt and nurture action towards those valued goals.  
See overleaf for more on goals.

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## **2. What valued direction does the client want to move in?**

How does the client want to grow and develop? How does he want to behave? What sort of relationships does he want to develop? What does he want to stand for in life? What does he want to stand for in this particular point in his life? What goals does he currently have that are congruent with his values?

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## **3. What's holding things back: what thoughts, beliefs, or images is the client fused with or attached to?**

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## **4. What's holding things back: what is the client avoiding?**

Thoughts, feelings, memories and urges the client is trying to avoid or get rid of.

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## **5. What's holding things back: what unworkable (unhelpful) actions is the client taking?**

Things the person is doing that restrict or worsen her life, short or long term.

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## Goal Setting:

Beware of Emotional goals. for example "I just want to be happy" because if we agree to these, we reinforce experiential avoidance (avoidance of how we feel) which is the opposite of Mindfulness. However, if we are too blunt with the client that won't work well so it is better to say something like

*"Can I put it this way ... you have painful thoughts and feelings that you have been struggling with, so our goal of therapy might be to learn better ways of handling those thoughts or feelings?"*

Be vigilant for Dead person's goals (anything that a corpse can do better than a live human being, for example: "I want to stop using drugs"). We try to replace those with goals that a live human being can do better than a corpse. To achieve that you can ask questions like: "If you weren't using drugs, what would you do instead?"

Fuzzy goals are OK. For example "I don't know", or "I just want to feel better". In fact it is perfectly possible that some cases such as these will gain particular benefit because ACT's emphasis on values, and values-based living may make a particularly strong impact on those whose current feelings are 'fuzzy'. Russ Harris suggests you might say the following:

*"So how about we agree to this? The work we do here will be about two things. First, learning new ways to handle your thoughts and feelings more effectively so they can't hold you back from living the life you want. Second even though right now you have no idea what you want and you feel like nothing matters, let's make this a place where you get to discover what does matter to you and what sort of life you do want to have. And once we have discovered that, let's set about making it happen."*

## How to run session 2 onwards

Immediately after session 1 you construct an ACT case conceptualisation.

Then you run each session according to the standard session plan, namely:

1. Ask how things have been since last time.
2. Ask how the 'homework' went.
3. Agree the agenda (see below)
4. Tackle the agenda
5. Agree the homework
6. Summarise
7. Get feedback on the session.

In between sessions you review and plan the next session. Feedback is helpful in monitoring your progress and keeping you on track. Supervision or peer discussion are important, but remember confidentiality issues.

Different ACT protocols advocate varying sequences of topics to cover, but in practice, it is difficult to argue against tackling what is most relevant for the client.

## Agreeing the Agenda

It may be that, having asked about 1 and 2 above, there are some obvious agenda items. Never forsake common sense in favour of any therapeutic doctrine (even ACT!) but if you are adopting an ACT focus then they will be 'ACT-type' agenda items. Examples might be:

- An experiential exercise, e.g. practise taking mindful breaths or something else on being in the present moment.
- An exercise to help accept one's thoughts and feelings
- An exercise or discussion on defusion – separating oneself from one's thoughts..
- An exercise or discussion on Self as context: the pervasive sense of 'self that exists whatever happens' – the sky that exists regardless of the coming and going of clouds.
- Helping the person clarify their values.
- Discussing or encouraging 'Committed Action' – "taking larger and larger patterns of effective action, guided and motivated by our values."