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## **ACT as Innovation for Career Guidance**

**Keywords:** ACT, Innovation, Adaptability

Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) is a relatively new, successful approach to mental health and resilience. In a recent project in the Netherlands, the authors have linked this approach to career guidance around during the transition from secondary to tertiary education. The result is an innovative toolkit intended for counselors offering guidance to students choosing a program in higher education. This article describes the background and content of the toolkit.

### **Why innovate Career Guidance?**

It is over a century ago that Frank Parsons founded vocational guidance, but his approach is still mainstream. Essentially the person gathers information about themselves and the world and decides after conscious reflection. This paradigm is put under pressure during the last decades by research findings from several disciplines, including developmental psychology and neuroscience. Generally speaking, adolescents are not sufficiently mature and experienced to take far-reaching decisions about their careers (Luken, 2014). Also, many studies show that too much conscious reflection may hamper the quality of decisions, and may even lead to rumination (Lengelle, Luken, & Meijers, 2016). Investments in career guidance have not yet produced significant results, at least in the Netherlands, in diminishing dropping out and program switching behavior, or in amelioration the match between education and occupation. The pressure on students to take 'the right decision' augments the challenge. The material and immaterial stakes of career development are huge, providing many reasons to look for innovations of career guidance.

### **Why ACT?**

In 2012, Hoare, McIlveen, and Hamilton published a well-documented plea to use ACT as a career counseling strategy. We endorse their arguments. Essentially, ACT contributes to developing competencies that are indispensable for successful career development in the 21st-century. The Commitment part of ACT helps in finding and holding a direction in life. In the Career Construction Theory (CCT) this is called 'narratability' (Savickas, et al, 2009). The Acceptance part contributes to perceiving in an undistorted way internal and external signals that may lead to correcting or changing course. CCT calls this 'adaptability'. Together, the different processes of ACT contribute to developing psychological health, flexibility and resilience, which may be regarded as indispensable ingredients for thriving in the turbulent labour economies of this century. ACT does not emphasize conscious reflection. Instead it emphasizes an openness to experiencing, and taking an observing perspective. ACT helps in accepting the inevitable anxiety, implied by having to make decisions for an uncertain or even chaotic future.

### **What is ACT?**

Originally, the T in ACT stood for Therapy. Since about 2000, this evidence-based, cognitive-behavior psychotherapy is on the rise in many countries of the world (including The Netherlands). Its success is explained by the strong theoretical and scientific basis of ACT and by the fact that there are demonstrated positive results in many areas (Hayes, et al., 2006).

The central objective of ACT is psychological flexibility. ACT revolves around six core processes, often presented in a 'hexaflex' (hexa from the Greek number six, and flex from flexibility). See Figure 1. The processes are concretized by different kinds of interventions, e.g. exercises, metaphors, and homework assignments.

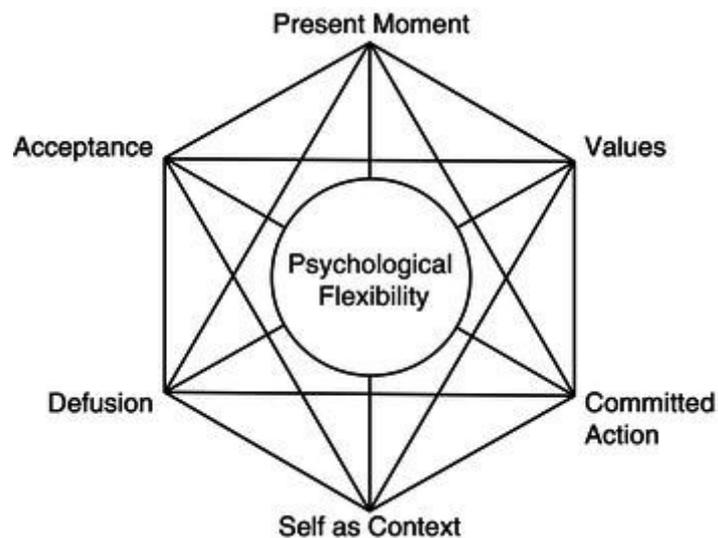


Figure 1: 'Hexaflex' of six ACT core processes (after Hayes et al, 2006)

The six core processes are described here in the context of career development.

- Acceptance means accepting unwanted feelings or thoughts, e.g. the uncertainty and ambiguity regarding oneself and the future. Acceptance contributes to preventing escape behavior (e.g. procrastination or 'jumping' into an easy alternative).
- Mindfulness, or Presence in the here and now, means a non-judging openness to experience, which implies a better perceiving of signals from the environment and from within one's own organism. Mindfulness has shown to have many positive effects, e.g. on exploring behavior (Jacobs & Blustein, 2008), and the development of a career identity (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2014).
- Values are "chosen qualities of purposive action that can never be obtained as an object but can be instantiated moment by moment" (Hayes, et al, 2006, p. 9). Clarification of values provides relatively stable, though flexible guidelines for career choices and development.
- Commitment means choosing to live according to one's own values, instead of being led by rules, anxieties, or fears. This contributes to being able to cope with obstacles and to hold direction.
- Self as context refers to experiencing the self as the context for ever-changing feelings and thoughts, instead of seeing the self as a collection of fixed traits.
- Defusion means stopping over-identification with one's own thoughts, which implies experiencing more freedom from prejudices, self-imposed rules, and limiting thought patterns.

### **Goals of the ACT Career Guidance toolkit**

1. Students experience less choice related stress or are less bothered with this.
2. Counselors dispose of a more focused and therefore more effective approach of choice situations and choice problems.
3. Students are better motivated, more committed and more stable in their choices.
4. Students develop skills and attitudes for making career and life choices in general.
5. Students lay a foundation for adaptability and a sense of direction for the long term.

### **Contents of the toolkit**

The second goal above is pursued by a Dutch version of the Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (Gati, 2011). This questionnaire clarifies if the student experiences difficulties with his study choice, and if so, what is the nature of these difficulties. This offers a convenient, facultative portal for choosing tools from the toolkit.

The toolkit itself consists of 25 tools, e.g. guidelines for lessons, discussions and counseling sessions, exercises, assignments. All of them are in Dutch language. They are freely available online (<http://www.act-in-lob.eu>) and as a book (De Folter & Luken, 2015). The tools vary in intensity, difficulty and nature. The counselor may choose one or more tools flexibly and in any desired order. They can be applied individually, in small groups, in class, or as homework. A training by the authors, consisting of three half-day sessions, is recommended.

The tools may be categorized into three groups. In the first category mindfulness is a central theme. These tools aim at creating favorable conditions, i.e. a calm and focused working atmosphere, and an openness to hear 'inner voices', which often, in day to day circumstances, are not discernible. The second group of tools has a developmental focus. More specifically, they aim at stimulating a time and future perspective, the loosening of rigid self-concepts, and the development of a more flexible, value-based self-image. The third group of tools focuses on the study choice itself, e.g. coping with choice anxiety, finding and digesting information, exploring thoughts and feelings about choosing and alternatives, and making up one's mind.

### **Progress of the toolkit**

We don't know exactly on what scale the toolkit is used, because the tools may be downloaded and implemented freely. Currently, in the Netherlands about 70 study choice counselors are trained by the authors. A research project is being conducted to reinforce the theoretical base of ACT in career guidance, and to explore user? evaluations and effects of the toolkit.

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