

Trauma-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (TACT)

A Group Program for Survivors of Sexual Assault

CASA Forum Conference Presentation by Caroline Burrows (ECASA)

What is the TACT program?

TACT stands for Trauma-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. It is a 10-week structured group program for adult survivors of sexual assault (both male and female) experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms. The program is based on Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) and underpinned by trauma theory, research and practice.

Program background

The TACT program has been developed by three Counsellor/Advocates at the Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (ECASA): Caroline Burrows (the writer), Lindy Bearup, and Glenys Murray. The writer's Masters of Counselling and Psychotherapy research – published in *Clinical Case Studies* – examined the application of ACT with survivors of sexual assault. ACT is a mindfulness, acceptance and values-based model of psychotherapy. While the writer's research found ACT to be a promising treatment model for this client population, it identified a need for further research in this area.

In developing the TACT program we at ECASA integrated ACT with trauma model theory, attachment and systems theories, body-centred therapy and developmental neurobiological research. Our aim was to create something new and unique; a comprehensive program tailored specifically for sexual assault survivors. To the best of our knowledge, TACT is the first ACT-based group program to be developed specifically for sexual assault survivors.

A difference between the ACT model and TACT program is the approach taken with respect to trauma symptoms. In ACT, no attempt is made to neither directly change nor reduce a client's symptoms. Rather, the client is taught ways to relate more flexibly to, and be willing to accept their internal experiences, with symptom reduction being considered a by-product and not a goal of treatment.

The TACT program does draw on ACT-based mindfulness, acceptance and values-based processes. However, participants are also taught about the neurophysiology of trauma and the importance of titrating physiological arousal in trauma recovery. This is consistent with current trauma literature that emphasises the need to stabilise symptoms including hyperarousal, flashbacks, nightmares and dissociation in the early stages of trauma treatment. Clients can only think clearly, make mindful choices and safely engage in trauma therapy if their arousal remains within an optimal range referred to as the 'window of tolerance'. In the TACT program participants are taught how to mindfully observe their internal experiences while also titrating their physiological arousal to remain within the 'window of tolerance'.

Program objectives

- To increase the participants' knowledge of the impact of trauma on the whole self and awareness of how trauma has impacted the progression of their lives

- To increase the participants' willingness and capacity to stay in the present and accept their internal states including thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations.
- To increase the participants' knowledge and pro-activity around the importance of titrating physiological arousal in trauma recovery
- To enable participants to begin to experience themselves and their life in a more mindful and integrated way, enabling effective action that will increase their sense of hope, purpose and vitality

Program structure and duration

TACT is a closed, 10-week, structured group program. Each session is 3.5 hours in length, with two 15 minute breaks. The program is both psycho-educational and experiential in nature; incorporating didactic learning, body-based exercises, writing, music, art and movement.

Each session includes psycho-education about trauma, large group discussions, small group activities and individual reflection. The program is different from a support group in that participants engage in their own parallel processes in the group setting. There is strong emphasis on individual home practice between sessions, to help participants consolidate what they have learned.

Client eligibility

The TACT program is suitable for female and male adult victim/survivors of sexual assault who are 18 years or older, experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms and:

- Are engaged in individual counselling and can commit to attending a minimum of five sessions with their counsellor/practitioner over the 10-week duration of the program;
- Have sufficient self-regulation skills and external supports to safely engage in a structured program in a group setting;
- Can commit to attending all 10 sessions of the program (except in the case of unforeseen circumstances)

Program overview

Information Session

In this session information is provided about the TACT program - its aims, an overview of each session, what participants can hope to gain from the program, expectations, and the registration process. Participants have an opportunity to ask questions about the program so they can determine whether it will be suitable for them.

Session 1: Setting the scene

This session focuses on building rapport within the group and establishing a sense of safety, confidentiality and group values. Participants have an opportunity to share their hopes for the program. Participants learn about the impact of sexual assault trauma and the benefits of mindfulness in sexual assault recovery. These concepts are reinforced throughout each subsequent session in the program.

Session 2: The unique dynamics of sexual assault

This session explores what sexual assault is, community misconceptions about sexual assault, understanding the human survival response, the role that shame plays in the aftermath of sexual assault and the importance of boundaries in sexual assault recovery.

Session 3: The paradox of avoidance and control

This session explores a paradox: avoidance/control of unwanted internal experiences is natural and can provide short-term relief, but can also cause problems in the long run. This session provides participants with an opportunity to consider whether avoidance/control has come at a cost in their own lives. It is hoped that this will increase the participants' willingness to explore alternative ways of relating to their internal experiences.

Session 4: Willingness to stay present and accept what is

This session explores the idea of being willing to make space for internal experiences, as an alternative to fighting or running away from them. This takes courage, so the concept of courage is explored. The difference between being passive, aggressive, passive/aggressive and assertive is also explored.

Session 5: Mindfully unhooking

This session explores the difference between being 'hooked' in by internal experiences and learning ways to 'unhook' from them, so that the participants can be freed up to engage in the things that are important to them. A range of unhooking skills are taught in this session.

Session 6: Acceptance as an alternative to avoidance

This session focuses on making space for unwanted internal experiences, rather than avoiding of fighting thoughts/feelings/memories/sensations and parts of self. Acceptance doesn't mean liking or wanting difficult internal experiences. It means making room for them or letting them be, in order to focus on living a meaningful life. Mindful acceptance is a middle ground between being overwhelmed by ones' inner experience and avoiding/fighting it. It is about proactively using skills to keep distress at a manageable level. Further skills are taught in this session to enable participants to mindfully create space for their internal experiences.

Session 7: The enduring essence of self

The focus of this session is on the 'enduring essence of self'; the idea that every person has a part of self that cannot be damaged nor destroyed by trauma. This part of self is enduring, stable and transcends thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations. Being able to connect with the enduring essence of self can provide participants a safe space from which to non-judgementally observe thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations and parts of self without being overwhelmed.

Session 8: Values

This session explores the importance of being connected to ones' own personal 'values'. Participants engage in exercises to enable them to clarify what really matters to them and how consistently they are living in accordance with their values.

Session 9: Committed action

This session explores how participants can translate their values into effective action. This is aimed to help participants to experience a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, to increase their quality of life.

Session 10: Bringing it all together

The final session reinforces what was covered over the course of the program and prepares participants for setbacks that might arise after the program. Time is spent celebrating what each participant has achieved over the course of the program. A light lunch is shared together at the end of the session.

Follow-up sessions

When we have run the TACT program at ECASA, we have offered follow-up sessions after the conclusion of the 10-week program: four follow-up sessions over a 12-week period. The purpose has been to taper out support for participants, reinforce what was covered in the program, and obtain 12-week follow-up data for the program evaluation conducted by RMIT University.

Follow-up sessions are noted as optional in the TACT facilitator manual that we have developed. It is recommended that no new material be introduced in the follow-up sessions, but participants be invited to share how they have applied the strategies from the TACT program to their everyday lives, and receive support with managing setbacks.

Program evaluation

The TACT program has been facilitated by ECASA three times since its inception in 2012. The program has been evaluated by RMIT University twice. The following quantitative measures were administered in Session 1 (pre-program), Session 10 (post-program) and in the final follow-up session (3 month follow-up):

- Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC-40)
- Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (AAQ-II)
- Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)
- Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES)
- Depression and Anxiety Scale (DASS-21).

Qualitative data was also gathered. Participants were invited to complete written questions regarding their expectations for, and experience of, the TACT program. They were also invited to participate in a focus group with the researcher at the conclusion of the TACT program (Session 10).

Anticipated Outcomes

- An increase in the participants' level of mindfulness, self-awareness and psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility refers to a person's ability to stay in the present and take effective action that is aligned with their personal values.
- A reduction in the participants' trauma aftermath symptoms.
- An increase in the participants' understanding of the impact of trauma on the whole self and their own adaptation to trauma.

Research findings

27 participants completed the pre-treatment measures, 24 participants completed both the pre and post-treatment measures and 7 participants completed the measures across the three time periods (pre, post and follow-up).

At the time of writing, RMIT have conducted preliminary analyses to investigate whether there was a significant difference in the participants' post-traumatic stress symptoms and related symptomatology after completing the TACT program.

The preliminary findings demonstrate that across the three time periods there was a statistically significant reduction in the participants' ratings of post-traumatic stress symptoms and general stress levels. There was a statistically significant increase in the participants' levels of mindfulness and psychological flexibility. There was some reduction in the participants' levels of dissociation, anxiety and depression, but these changes were not statistically significant.

Given the small sample size, these preliminary results are very promising and suggest that the TACT program is effective for reducing post-traumatic stress symptoms and stress amongst adult sexual assault survivors. Additionally, the results indicate that TACT program is beneficial for increasing psychological flexibility, which is one of the overarching aims of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

In addition to the above self-report questionnaires, participants were asked to complete some written questions and participate in a post-treatment focus group with an RMIT researcher. The purpose was to gather qualitative information about the participants' experience of the TACT program and whether they had noticed any changes in their lives since commencing the program.

Participant feedback about the TACT program was generally very positive and included the following themes:

- An increased understanding of the impact of trauma
- An increased awareness of thoughts and feelings
- A greater number of skills for managing anxiety and stress
- An increased capacity to accept negative feelings
- A more positive outlook about the future and increased sense of hope

All of the anticipated outcomes were met.

Overall, preliminary data suggests that the TACT program is a promising group-based intervention for sexual assault survivors with post-traumatic stress symptoms. The results provide good preliminary support for integrating ACT with trauma theory and practice when working with this client population. Further research in this area would be beneficial.

Participant testimonials

- "What a life-changing course – this is it. The skills you learn will carry you through life on a much better level within yourself. You are not alone! This will only benefit you and all those who support you"
- "The TACT program offered me amazing insight into the effects of trauma (sexual) upon my life. It helped me to realise how I could work to live with the effects in a way that I was satisfied with. It helped me realise I was not alone, that there was a whole group of people who had suffered as I had and struggled to live with the results. We learned methods to cope with our past and our present and finished with experiences and tools that would let us have a good future"

Train-the-trainer program

A TACT training manual has recently been developed with assistance from a consultant and an illustrator. A train-the-trainer workshop is being held for ECASA staff in November 2014. We have plans to roll out training to other CASAs through the workforce development calendar in Semester 2, 2015. We may then expand to run training for other organisations.

