

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Parents

Whittingham, K., Sheffield, J. & Sofronoff, K.
The University of Queensland

Purpose

The following program is an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy stress management intervention, specifically targeting parents of children with developmental disabilities. It is well understood that parents of children with developmental disabilities experience high levels of stress. The intervention is presented as a 4 hour intervention delivered in 2 sessions (of 2 hours each) with homework. This intervention, as written, was trialed along with Stepping Stones Triple P for families of children with Cerebral Palsy and families of children with Acquired Brain Injuries and found to be effective. Results from the RCT of Stepping Stones Triple P and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for families of children with Cerebral Palsy showed additive benefits of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy above and beyond conventional parenting interventions. For more information, consult the relevant publications. The intervention could be adapted to other high-risk groups of parents.

Relevant Publications

Whittingham, K., Sanders, M., McKinlay, L. & Boyd, R.N. (2014). Interventions to Reduce Behavioral Problems in Children with Cerebral Palsy: An RCT.

Pediatrics. Accepted 14/02/2014 Epub ahead of print.

Brown, F., Whittingham, K., Boyd R., McKinlay, L. & Sofronoff, K. (in press) Improving child and parenting outcomes following paediatric acquired brain injury: A randomised controlled trial of Stepping Stones Triple P plus Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. Accepted 27/01/2014.

Whittingham, K., Sanders, M.R., McKinlay, L. & Boyd, R.N. (2013) Stepping Stones Triple P and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for parents of children with cerebral palsy: Trial protocol. *Brain Impairment*. 14 (2), 270-280.

Brown, F., Whittingham, K., McKinlay, L., Boyd, R.N. & Sofronoff, K. (2013) Efficacy of Stepping Stones Triple P plus a stress management adjunct for parents of children with acquired brain injury: The protocol of a randomized controlled trial. *Brain Impairment*. 14 (2), 253-269.

Enquires

This workshop was prepared by Koa Whittingham, Jeanie Sheffield and Kate Sofronoff. Please direct enquires to:

Koa Whittingham koawhittingham@uq.edu.au

Sources

The content of this program is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy as presented in:

Hayes, S.C., Strosahl, K.D. & Wilson, K.G. (2003) *Acceptance and commitment therapy: an experiential approach to behavior change*. Guilford Press: New York.

ACT exercises and metaphors are adapted from:

Hayes, S.C., Strosahl, K.D. & Wilson, K.G. (2003) *Acceptance and commitment therapy: an experiential approach to behavior change*. Guilford Press: New York.

Hayes (2005). *Get out of your mind and into your life*. New Harbinger Publications: Oakland.

In addition, the mindfulness of the breath exercise and the mindfulness of the thoughts exercise were adapted from:

Segal, Z.V., Mark, J., Williams, G., Teasdale, J.D. (2002). *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: a new approach to preventing relapse*. Guilford Press: New York.

Session One

Length: approximately 2 hours

Purpose: The purpose of session one is to provide a rationale for the intervention and the approach of the intervention, to introduce Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, to introduce the concept of struggle and to explain values.

Summary:

- ✓ Housekeeping and introductions (10 minutes)
- ✓ Introduce ACT (10 minutes)
- ✓ Stress and parenting discussion (30 minutes)
- ✓ The struggle (15 minutes)
- ✓ The passengers on the bus metaphor and role play (15 minutes)
- ✓ Introduce values (15 minutes)
- ✓ Set homework (10 minutes)

Housekeeping and Introductions (10 minutes)

Address any housekeeping such as the location of bathrooms. Therapists introduce themselves. Depending upon group size, therapists may ask the parents to introduce themselves as well. Therapists should provide name tags before the session begins.

Introduce Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (10 minutes)

Introduce the concept of ACT using the battlefield metaphor. Prepare the participants to experience something different.

“We know that parenting a child with *a developmental disability* [note: discuss particular developmental disability as relevant] can be challenging and one of the by-products of this is that parents of children with *a developmental disability* experience a lot of stress. That is what we are going to focus on for these first two sessions. After we’ve focussed on your own stress we’ll begin to focus on parenting with Stepping Stones Triple P. This stress management intervention is based in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT which is a very different way of looking at how you handle stress, not just the stress of being a parent of a child with *a developmental disability* but the stress that is a part of life. You’ll be pleased to know that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has a growing evidence base as a useful intervention for improving how people cope with all kinds of stress. The ACT approach might seem a bit unusual to some of you at first. ACT is quite different from traditional approaches to stress such as relaxation and is probably quite different to what you usually think of as managing stress. So I’m going to ask you to suspend

some initial judgements, to go with me on this for today, to try it out and to see for yourself whether or not this different approach could be helpful for you. I'm also going to ask you to be a bit patient. By the end of our two sessions we'll be getting down to the nitty-gritty of what you can actually do. But because the approach is so different it is important that we all clearly get the concepts right before we move on to the nitty-gritty stuff. Does that make sense? So I keep telling you we're doing something different. Let me give you a glimpse of what I mean. Usually, our approach to stress is to try to get rid of it. We think that the problem is that we are stressed- if only we could be less stressed then we could really be a good parent, or a wonderful partner, or really enjoy life. So we get into a real battle with stress. We've probably all tried out lots different weapons to try to win the battle with stress and sometimes we seem to win some ground too. But the battle itself keeps going. It might seem like we have to keep battling with stress everyday to keep on top of life. What you probably thought you were going to get from us today was a bigger, better weapon. Am I right? Something that could maybe destroy stress once and for all? Well, that's not what we're going to do. We are going to learn a very different move. We are going to learn how to walk away from the battlefield.... That is probably sounding quite vague right now but as we go through the day these concepts will become clearer and we'll start to get to the nitty-gritty of what you can do."

Stress and parenting discussion (30 minutes)

Therapists facilitate a group discussion on the sources of stress in parenting a child with a developmental disability [discuss the specific disability as relevant]. Therapists should make use of the whiteboard in creating this list. Therapist discusses the battlefield metaphor again and facilitates a group discussion on the "weapons" that the parents have already used in the battle against stress. This is done with the aim of drawing out that these "weapons" may help in the short term but none of them ultimately win the battle, also many of them have costs. This is consistent with the ACT concept of creative hopelessness and provides a rationale for the workshop.

"Let's start with a group discussion. Without turning this into just a whinge session and making ourselves miserable; let's discuss exactly what is stressful about parenting a child with a *developmental disability* and what kinds of stress you are experiencing. Any thoughts?"

Therapist facilitates the discussion and writes suggestions onto a whiteboard. If parents don't respond:

“I know from working with parents of children with *developmental disability* some things they can report is that there is an extra burden of care, a need to provide constant supervision, difficulty in transitions, a need to advocate for your child [*discuss as relevant to the specific disability*]. I’ve found that parents say that they’re experiencing worries about their child’s future, sadness when their child isn’t able to do something physically. Is that what you’re finding?”
Therapist wraps up the discussion and focuses on the battlefield metaphor again.

“So we can see from that short discussion you are experiencing stress and that’s not surprising. I talked earlier about how we can get into a battle with stress. You’ll notice that when we brainstorm about your stresses that some of these things are aspects of your situation, like the fact that you need to advocate for your child at school. Others are your own emotions, thoughts, memories, like worries about your child’s future. When I’m talking about the battle with stress I don’t mean the battles that you have out there in the world for your child, or even changes that you choose to make in how you live or what you do. I mean getting into a battle with your own stressful thoughts, emotions and memories. Have any of you experienced that? What kinds of weapons have you tried using to win the battle against stress?”

Therapist elicits some responses from participants and writes suggestions on a white board. Therapist facilitates a discussion on the workability of these weapons- do they work in the long-term? Are there costs?

“Do these weapons that you are talking about work?”

“Some of these weapons help you to win some ground in the battle against stress for awhile, do they keep working in the long-term? Has anyone here conquered stress once and for all?”

“Are there any costs with these weapons?”

“Have you ever had a moment where you’ve realised that you’ve been so focussed on the battle with stress that you aren’t being the kind of parent that you want to be? Or living life as you want to live it in another area of your life?”

Therapist wraps up this exercise and leads into metaphors on the struggle.

“It is interesting isn’t it? It seems that battles with our own thoughts, feelings and memories don’t quite work the same way as battles with things out there in the world. Maybe the fact that you haven’t won the battle against stress isn’t because you aren’t bright enough or strong enough or not equipped with just the right weapon....maybe this is exactly what a battle with stress looks like. Let’s look at this idea in more detail by looking at some other struggles out there in the world that seem to work the same way. There are a few other

situations in which there's a hard-wired instinct to struggle harder but where that's exactly the wrong thing to do."

The Struggle (15 minutes)

The therapist introduces a metaphor or several metaphors for the struggle. Here the therapist will discuss the quicksand metaphor. The therapist may also illustrate the struggle with other metaphors such as; getting caught in a rip, skiing, tug of war, or the chinese finger trap metaphor. This should be done as needed for the group depending upon the understanding of the parents. For each metaphor introduced the therapist relates it back to the workability of the struggle.

"First of all let's talk about quicksand. Are we all familiar with quicksand? Probably no one here has seen quicksand in real life but we've all probably seen it on cartoons and movies? Good- now imagine what you'd do if you actually got caught in quicksand. What would your basic instincts tell you to do? Absolutely- you'd just want to leap straight back out of the quicksand as fast as you could, you'd struggle. Actually, that's the last thing that you should do. Do you know what happens if you try to get out of quicksand like that? That's right- you get caught even more in the quicksand and you sink deeper into it. Does anyone know what you should do if you get caught in quicksand? That's right you need to relax, stop struggling and lie back into the quicksand so that more of your body is in contact with the quicksand. If you do that you'll float to the top and you can stay there safely until help arrives. Now- this isn't really about the quicksand. This is just an example of how sometimes continuing to struggle is the very last thing we need to be doing."

The therapist helps parents to understand that struggling with thoughts, feelings and memories is like struggling with quicksand (or a rip etc.) by using specific examples for thoughts, feelings and memories. The therapist should discuss some version of; changing a picture vs changing a memory, do not think of a pink elephant and feelings multiply.

"Our struggle with thoughts, feelings and memories is exactly like this. It often it simply doesn't work. Imagine for example, that when you go home today you see a picture in your lounge room and you decide that you now hate that picture and you never want to see it again. Could you get rid of the picture? Sure. What if instead you remembered something and you decided that you now hate that memory you never want to see it again. Could you get rid of the memory? No... So our thoughts, feelings and memories aren't quite the same as the stuff out there in the world. What about your thoughts? In a moment I'm going to say the word 'go' and when I do I want you to not think of a pink elephant. Don't think of the long trunk, the big floppy ears, and the large legs,

don't think of a pale pink elephant, don't think of a hot pink elephant. Ready? Okay, now, go.... (pause)... did anyone manage that? Can you see the problem? The only way to be certain that you aren't thinking about a pink elephant is to check, in other words to think 'ah good, I haven't thought of a pink elephant...' but straight away you are thinking of pink elephants again. What about emotions then? There's a good reason why struggling with our own emotions doesn't work. Say, you start by feeling anxious, but you don't want to feel anxious and you start to push that away. Maybe now you also feel angry at yourself for feeling anxious. Then, maybe you feel sad because you are so angry at yourself. So emotions tend to grow and multiply when we struggle with them."

Therapist facilitates a small group discussion on the Struggle to ensure that the concept is understood. Therapist ensures the parents understand that this is about the struggle with thoughts, emotions and memories not about battling for their child.

"What are some of the thoughts, emotions and memories that you really struggle with? Are there any particular thoughts that are really sticky and that you get caught up in? Or emotions that you just want to push away? Remember, you'll also have struggles and stresses that you can act on in your life. Letting go of struggling with our own thoughts, feelings and memories gives us the energy and focus to put into changing what we can change. "

Passengers on the Bus Metaphor (15 minutes)

Therapist introduces the passengers on the bus metaphor and facilitates the parents acting this metaphor out in pairs. In each pair both parents take turns in playing the role of the driver and the passenger. As the driver they try both struggling with the passenger and accepting the passenger. The therapist should act this out with a particular parent in front of the group first to ensure that all parents understand the task. The acting out of this metaphor is based on the exercise taking a walk with the mind. This exercise should give parents a glimpse of what giving up the struggle could look like.

"So what's the alternative? It is like you are a bus driver and the bus is your life. You want to take your bus west, that's the direction you'd like to go. Our thoughts, feelings and memories are like passengers on our bus. Sometimes the passengers are nice and polite; we don't mind taking these passengers along for the ride! Other times the passengers are nasty. What kinds of nasty thoughts can pop into our heads? What kinds of negative feelings might we feel? The struggle that we get into is with these passengers. We start arguing with them, trying to kick them off the bus or we may even strike a deal with them. We may for example, strike a deal with the passenger guilt that says

you'll stop taking the bus west and instead take the bus wherever guilt wants to go as long as guilt sits up the back and stays quiet. Can you relate to that? But the thing is while we're busy arguing with the passengers, convincing them to go away or striking deals what aren't we doing? We've taken our hands off the wheel. We're no longer driving the bus. So can we instead acknowledge the passengers and take them along for the ride with our eyes on the road and our focus on driving the bus? We're going to act this metaphor out so that we can really see what struggling with passengers vs accepting passengers might look like. For this next exercise you'll need to get into pairs. You are both going to have a turn at being the driver and the passenger. When you are the passenger your goal is to voice lots of nasty or distracting thoughts. When you are the driver first of all try struggling with your passenger by arguing back. Then try accepting the passenger and focussing instead on doing what you want to do. Before we all act it out I'm going to act it out for you so that you can see exactly what I mean. Can I please have a volunteer?

Therapist acts out both roles ensuring that everyone understands the exercise. The therapist then gives the pairs several minutes in each role. Therapist winds up the exercise and makes a quick comment that this is not about whether the thoughts are true or false. If some of the parents are confused about this or ask questions the therapist can spend longer on this point discussing specific examples of true thoughts that it isn't helpful to struggle with like "I'm going to die".

"So the more the driver struggled with the thoughts the more difficult it was to keep focussing on values and driving West. It is important to realise that this isn't about whether thoughts are true or false. It is about the fact that they are just thoughts and whether or not they are true or false it isn't very helpful to struggle with them."

Introducing Values (15 minutes)

Therapists introduce the concept of values and distinguish values from goals using the metaphor of going West. Therapists facilitate a group discussion on the values that participants have as parents. If the participants suggest a goal therapists remind them of the difference between goals and values and elicit the underlying goal.

"So far we've been focussing on letting go of the struggle, walking away from the battle, letting the passengers come along for the ride. Now I'd like to focus on where you'd like to drive your bus. Notice that just like a country we have limited resources. When a country is at war much of that country's resources have to go into that war. But when a country is at peace the country can put their resources into other things- education, health, trade, arts programs. So a

big part of walking away from the battle with stress is; what are you going to spend your resources on instead? Your homework for next session will be to think about this question. It is important here to distinguish between values and goals. A value is a direction in which you want your life to go- like heading West whereas goals are places you might walk to on the way. A goal is something you can complete. If you say you want to walk to the next corner you can walk there, reach it and it is done. You can't complete heading West. It is never finished. In the same way "being a loving parent" is never finished. It doesn't matter how many hugs you've given your child you can never say that you've finished being a loving parent. There's always more to do. This distinction between values and goals is an important one because we can get very caught up with our goals and lose sight of the underlying values which is really what it is all about. Sometimes we have particular goals and our circumstances change or sometimes realistically our goals need to be very small because that's all we can do right at that moment. If we are just looking at our goals we can become discouraged when this happens. If our focus is on values it is easier to adapt. What I want you to think about is what values you have, the general direction in which you'd like your life to move.

Group Discussion: Parenting Values

Therapist facilitates a short discussion about parenting values to ensure that the parents understand the task.

"What kinds of values do you have around parenting. It may help cast your mind back to the days before you had children, perhaps even think of times like when you were trying to fall pregnant, during your pregnancy or shortly after your child was born. What kind of parent did you want to be? What kind of parent do you want to be now?"

Setting Homework: Values Worksheet (10 minutes)

Therapist completing the values worksheet for homework.

"To help you think through your values in various areas of your life please complete the values worksheet for homework. You'll notice the values worksheet has different life areas listed as a space for writing your values in each. You'll also notice two spaces for putting your ratings. For each life area rate how important your values in this area are on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not at all and 10 being very important. Also, rate how well you are living out your values in this area on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not at all and 10 being living your values out completely. The purposes of these ratings is so that you can find which areas of your life you'd like to focus on. We all have some areas of life that are more important to us than others. Also, it is important to find the areas of your life in which there's a difference between how important you

think the area is and how much you are living your values in the area. We'll discuss this further next week."

Session 2

Length: approximately two hours

Purpose: The purpose of session two is to introduce mindfulness and cognitive defusion. In addition, values will be discussed with goals created for the next week.

Summary:

- ✓ Introducing mindfulness (10 minutes)
- ✓ Mindfulness of the breath exercise (10 minutes) and debrief (10 minutes)
- ✓ Thoughts are just thoughts (10 minutes)
- ✓ Leaves on the stream exercise (10 minutes) and debrief (10 minutes)
- ✓ Mindfulness of the emotions exercise (10 minutes) and debrief (10 minutes)
- ✓ Putting values into action (30 minutes)
- ✓ Setting homework (10 minutes)

Introducing Mindfulness (10 minutes)

Therapist introduces the concept of mindfulness and leads into the first mindfulness exercise- mindfulness of the breath.

"In our last session we looked at the problems of struggling with feelings, thoughts and memories. We saw that when the driver was able to notice that the passengers were there and keep their own attention focussed on the road, on heading West then life seemed a lot better for the driver- they were able to head West! Now you might be wondering, how do I do that in my life? Maybe you're even thinking that some of your thoughts and feelings are really nasty and how are you going to be able to just notice them and keep your eyes on the road? Well, the ability to do that, to just notice thoughts and feelings and keep your eyes on the road is a particular skill. That skill is called mindfulness. Mindfulness is the skill of being able to notice that your attention has wandered, maybe to a thought or a feeling and being able to put that attention back onto whatever we want our attention to be on. Mindfulness also means that we do this without judging ourselves, without getting trapped into fighting with the passengers and being able to accept whatever passengers come along for the ride. Mindfulness is an experiential skill- it is something that you do. Just like any other skill I can't just tell you how. I can give you some good instructions and some feedback on how you're going but you're going to need to practice it. So it is like learning to bake a cake or learning to swim I can give

you a great explanation of how to swim but that doesn't mean you can actually do it. You need to try it out and practice and practice until it clicks. Mindfulness is like that and that's why we're actually going to do some mindfulness, so you can try it out for yourselves and get some feedback from me. Then, if you want to build the skill yourselves you can practice later on at home too. Mindfulness may seem like a simple skill but it is amazing how much we just don't live mindfully. We spend a lot of our time not living in the present, getting caught up in thoughts about the past and thoughts about the future. Can anyone think of an example of when you've been doing a task and you've realised you're not actually engaged in it instead you are absorbed in your own thoughts? Good. Let's get a taste of mindfulness with a mindfulness of the breath exercise. Mindfulness exercises usually involve bringing your attention to a specific aspect of your environment like your breathing or simply keeping your attention broadly in the here and now. A mindfulness of the breath exercise is a good place to start and an excellent way to practice mindfulness because we carry our breathing around with us wherever we go. So once we learn mindfulness of the breath it is easy to practice during the day by bringing our attention back to our breath every now and then."

Mindfulness of the breath exercise (10 minutes)

Therapist talks the parents through a mindfulness of the breath exercise. The therapist takes their time following the script allowing parents time to complete the exercise.

"So let's start the exercise. First of all, settle into a comfortable sitting position. Allow your back to adopt an upright and comfortable position. If sitting on a chair, place your feet flat on the floor, with your legs uncrossed. You may like to close your eyes. Bring your awareness to the level of physical sensations by focusing your attention on the sensations of touch and pressure in your body where it makes contact with the floor and whatever you are sitting on. Spend a moment just exploring these sensations. Now bring your awareness to the changing patterns of physical sensations in the lower abdomen as the breath moves in and out of your body. Focus your awareness in the sensations of slight stretching as the abdominal wall rises with each in-breath, and of gentle deflation as it falls with each out-breath. As best you can, follow with your awareness the changing physical sensations in the lower abdomen all the way through as the breath enters your body on the in-breath and all the way through as the breath leaves your body on the out-breath, perhaps noticing the slight pauses between one in-breath and the following out-breath, and between one out-breath and the following in-breath. There is no need to try and control the breathing in any way – simply let the breath

breathe itself. As best you can, also bring this attitude of allowing to the rest of your experience. There is nothing to be fixed, no particular state to be achieved. As best you can, simply allow your experience to be your experience, without needing it to be other than it is. Sooner or later (usually sooner), your mind will wander away from the focus on the breath in the lower abdomen to thoughts, planning, daydreams, drifting along – whatever. This is perfectly ok – it’s simply what minds do. It is not a mistake or a failure. When you notice that your awareness is no longer on the breath, then congratulate yourself – you have come back and are once more aware of your experience! You may want to acknowledge briefly where the mind has been (‘Ah, there’s thinking!’). Then, gently escort the awareness back to a focus on the changing patterns of physical sensations in the lower abdomen, renewing the intention to pay attention to the ongoing in-breath or out-breath, whichever you find. However often you notice that the mind has wandered (and this will quite likely happen over and over and over again), as best you can, congratulate yourself each time on reconnecting with your experience in the moment, gently escorting the attention back to the breath, and simply resume following in awareness the changing pattern of physical sensations that come with each in-breath and out-breath. As best you can, bring a quality of kindness to your awareness, perhaps seeing the repeated wanderings of the mind as opportunities to bring patience and gentle curiosity to your experience. Continue with the practice for a time reminding yourself from time to time that the intention is simply to be aware of your experience in each moment, as best you can, using the breath as an anchor to gently reconnect with the here and now each time you notice that your mind has wandered and is no longer down in the abdomen, following the breath. Now we are coming to the end of the exercise so I’ll ask to, when you are ready return your attention to what is happening in this room. Perhaps start by noticing the sounds around you. When you are ready open your eyes and stretch your body if you feel the need.”

Mindfulness of the breath debriefing (10 minutes)

Therapist de-briefs the mindfulness of the breath exercise with a group discussion. If parents mention that the exercise made them feel relaxed the therapist needs to emphasize that this is a common side-effect of mindfulness but not the goal. The goal is not to get rid of stress. Therapist also emphasizes that the goal is not to not think- the goal is to be aware of the thinking and bring one’s attention back to the breath. If that needs to be done a hundred times that is okay.

“Let’s talk about what that was like, anyone want to share their experiences? Was it difficult to keep your attention on your breath? Do you usually notice your breathing like that? As I said at the beginning of this session mindfulness is a skill and just like any skills you’ll get better the more that you practice. You can practice mindfulness by doing any of the exercises that we covered today yourselves at home. You can also practice mindfulness in your daily life by simply deliberately keeping your attention on whatever task you are doing whether it is doing the dishes, or ironing or walking to the bus-stop. The more you practice the better you’ll become at mindfulness and the easier you’ll find it to stay mindful even in stressful situations.”

Thoughts are just thoughts (10 minutes)

Therapist introduces cognitive defusion exercises and ensures that the parents get the central point that thoughts are just thoughts.

“You might have found during the mindfulness exercise that some of your thoughts were particularly sticky and hard to let go of. Thoughts are often the passengers that we get caught up arguing with. It may seem like we’ve got to win the argument, to prove the thought wrong or to figure out what’s true before we can return to driving the bus. We’re going to do some exercises with our thoughts now and explore the idea that thoughts are just thoughts. For these exercises I’m going to ask you to think of a particularly sticky, nasty thought that you have, something like “I’m just worthless”, “I’m a bad parent”. Take a moment now to think of it. Firstly, let it catch you. Try to really buy into the thought. Repeat the thought in your mind. Has everyone got it? Now I want you to repeat the thought but start with “I’m noticing that I’m having the thought that...” So instead of saying “I’m just worthless” you might say, “I’m noticing that I’m having the thought that I’m just worthless”. What do you notice?”

Therapist elicits that the thought is less sticky. There’s distance between the person and the thought.

“Let’s try another. Again, start by thinking the sticky thought and take a moment to really buy into it. Repeat the thought in your mind. Now repeat the thought in a silly voice like the voice of a cartoon character. What do you notice?”

“Let’s try another. Again, start by thinking the sticky thought and take a moment to really buy into it. Repeat the thought in your mind. Now imagine that you are watching your thoughts from a distance. If you like you can visualise that the thought is a leaf floating down a stream in front of you or a cloud floating across the sky, or that it is scrolling across a computer screen. What do you notice?”

“These are all strategies that people find helpful to get some distance from their thoughts and to see their thoughts for what they are just thoughts. There are other strategies you might like to try such as singing your thought or imagining that your thoughts are a radio. You might find some of these strategies better than others or even come up with your own and that’s fine. The important thing is to realise that thoughts are just thoughts. We don’t need to act on them, or react to them or prove them true or false. It is like having a radio on, tuned to a station that plays music you don’t always like and you can’t switch the radio off. You could sit near the radio all day listening intently and becoming distressed about the music. Or you could get on with cooking dinner or being with your children and just let the radio be in the background, without giving your attention to it.”

Leaves on the Stream Exercise (10 minutes)

Therapist guides the parents through the leaves on the stream exercise. The therapist takes their time following the script allowing parents time to complete the exercise.

“We can also specifically practice being mindful of our thoughts. Let’s try that now. Let’s start by getting into a comfortable posture. If you wish to you can close your eyes. Begin to bring the spotlight of your attention to focus on the sensations in your body. You might like to spend a few moments just paying attention to your breathing. When you are ready we are going to watch our thoughts. You might like to imagine that you are sitting on the bank of a stream. You are sitting at the side of the stream watching the stream’s flow. Your thoughts are like leaves being carried down the river. Every so often you notice a thought arise, like a leaf at the top of the stream and that thought flows through your mind for while and then disappears again. See if you can imagine your thoughts as leaves on the stream. You can also imagine that your thoughts are like cars driving past or clouds in the sky or even pictures on a TV screen. If you find the visual is not helpful that is okay. You don’t need to focus on it. The important thing is to watch your thoughts. You might notice that some thoughts keep coming back. That’s okay. Just keep noticing the thought as a leaf on the stream Notice the thought arises, flows through your mind for awhile then disappears again. You might also find that you have thoughts about this exercise, maybe thoughts like ‘this is boring’ or ‘this is difficult’. Just notice these thoughts too are thoughts. Stay watching your thoughts as best you can. Every so often you might notice that you get sucked into your thoughts and that the thoughts carry you away with the. If this happens, that is okay. Congratulate yourself on becoming aware of this even if it happens a hundred times and pull yourself out of your thoughts and back

watching them. We're coming to the end of the exercise so I want you to put your attention back on your breath for a few moments. Now bring your attention to the sounds around you in the room. When you are ready, open your eyes and if you feel the need have a stretch."

Mindfulness of thoughts debriefing (10 minutes)

Therapist debriefs the mindfulness of thoughts emotions exercise with a group discussion. Therapist emphasizes that the goal is to be aware of when you get sucked in to the river and to be able to return to watching your thoughts.

"Let's talk about what that was like, anyone want to share their experiences?"

"Did anyone get caught up in their thoughts and sucked down the stream?"

"This can be really tricky at times. Notice that thoughts are just thoughts. We don't necessarily have to pay attention to them, to act on them or react to them. Instead, we can just let the thoughts come and go."

Mindfulness of emotions exercise (10 minutes)

Therapist talks the parents through a mindfulness of emotions exercise. The therapist takes their time following the script allowing parents time to complete the exercise.

"Now that we've got a sense of what mindfulness is let's try another mindfulness exercise. Let's try a mindfulness of emotions exercise. In this exercise I'm going to ask you to bring up a unpleasant emotion and we're going to practice being mindful of it. It may help to think about a particular experience such as how you felt after a difficult interaction with a teacher or an argument with a family member. Okay, ready to start? Again, let's begin by getting into a comfortable posture. If you wish to you can close your eyes. Begin to bring the spotlight of your attention to focus on the sensations in your body. You might like to spend a few moments just paying attention to your breathing. Now I want you to bring to mind a particular unpleasant emotion. To do this you may need to think about something specific that's happened to you such as a difficult interaction with a teacher or an argument with a family member. I'll give you a moment to do this now. Now scan your body with your attention and find the areas in which the emotion feels the most intense or troublesome to you. Is it the feeling in your stomach? Or maybe a tightness in your shoulders and neck? Or perhaps a dull ache in your head? Focus in on the most bothersome or intense sensation. Pretend that you are a curious scientist, or an adventurous explorer who is interested in feeling everything that is involved in this sensation. Start exploring the emotion by imagining that the sensations are an object. If the sensations were an object;

What colour would it be?

What temperature would it be?

How would it feel to touch?

Would it be moving or stationary?

Would it be light or dense?

Approach the emotion with a genuine sense of curiosity and acceptance.

You might like to continue exploring the emotion by imagining that the emotion is a creature. If the emotion were a creature;

What would it look like?

How would it feel to touch?

What would it be doing?

Would it be moving or stationary?

Would it be light or heavy?

At this point you may have found that thoughts have arisen in your mind about the emotion. Your mind may say something like, "I don't like this feeling", or "I don't want to feel this". Alternatively, thoughts about something unrelated to the emotion may pop into your head. If so, simply observe the thoughts arise and gently guide your attention back to mindfully exploring the emotion. If you find yourself experiencing a strong sense of resistance to exploring the emotion then imagine that this feeling of resistance is itself an object or a creature and explore this emotion with the same sense of curiosity and acceptance. Try to cultivate a sense of acceptance and kindness towards the emotion-creature. Consider, it may be ugly or aggressive but it has got nowhere else to go. Breathe in and around the emotion-creature or emotion-object. Focus upon your breath gently swirling around the emotion. With each in-breath feel yourself getting bigger and making room for the emotion. Notice that you are bigger than the emotion. Try, as best you can, to make room for the emotion. This doesn't mean you have to like it, or want it to be there. It just means making room for it and allowing it to be there. Spend some moments just sitting with the emotion. Now we are coming to the end of the exercise so spend a few moments paying attention to your breath. And now pay attention to the sounds in the room. And when you are ready open your eyes and stretch if you need to."

Mindfulness of emotions debriefing (10 minutes)

Therapist de-briefs the mindfulness of emotions exercise with a group discussion. If parents mention that the exercise made the emotion go away the therapist needs to emphasize that this can be a side-effect but it cannot be the goal. The goal is not to get rid of stress. Therapist also emphasizes that being mindful of emotions puts you back into control not the emotions.

“Let’s talk about what that was like, anyone want to share their experiences?”
“Notice that this skill of being able to be mindful of emotions means that you are in control- not your emotions. Often we get locked into particular ways of behaving just to get rid of painful emotions- we negotiate with the passengers on the bus! But if we can just stay present with our emotions, let the passengers come along for the ride no matter how ugly that gives the choice back to us. We can keep going in the direction that we want to go in.”

Putting values into action (30 minutes)

Therapist returns to values, the concept of making a plan and the concept of acts- steps towards their value. The therapist emphasizes the importance of small acts.

“For homework we completed the values worksheet. We’re going to return to looking at values now. Did anyone have any questions about the values worksheet first?”

“Now we want go back to your values and ask; what could I actually do to move closer to my values? What actions could I take? Pick a life domain that you’ve rated as important but where you also feel you aren’t living out your values fully. I’ll give you a moment shortly to brainstorm and come up with some actions that you could take. You may think of some bigger actions and that’s fine. You might decide that there are skills that you don’t have that you’ll need to learn or extra information that you need to gain. That’s fine too, put that down as well. We don’t want a list of just bigger acts though. We also want to make sure there are plenty of small, tiny steps on this list as well. So please put down actions that you can do every day as well as actions that you might do only once a year. You want to have lots of actions that you can incorporate into your life on a day to day basis. You can think of this a bit like stocking your kitchen pantry. You don’t want a kitchen pantry filled with only food that requires a lot of time and energy to cook you want it to be stocked with some easy meals and ready-made snacks as well! So your plan needs to have bigger acts for the days when you have the time and energy to invest as well as smaller acts that you can do anytime. It might help you to come up with these smaller acts to think; what is the smallest thing I could do? When you write down these acts please also write down any barriers you can see to you carrying out these acts. You might notice that there are two types of barriers- one type of barrier would be a practical barrier. So you might realise that you need some extra information or to learn a new skill. We’ll do some problem-solving together about these barriers. You might notice a different type of barrier too- a thought, or a feeling or a memory might pop up as well and tell you that they are a barrier. We’ve already learnt how to not struggle

with our thoughts, feelings and memories and that is exactly what we are going to practice if this happens. I'll give you some time to work on this alone first."

Therapist directs the parents to work alone initially, giving out a sheet to write down acts, barriers and possible solutions.

Small group discussion

Therapist directs the parents to get into small groups and discuss their acts, barriers and possible solutions.

"Now I want you to get into small groups and discuss your acts, barriers and potential solutions. This is an opportunity to pool ideas for acts as well as ideas for solutions around barriers. You might find that as you hear what other people have written down you want to add something new to your list. That's great, please do add it. You can also try to help each other to come up with possible solutions to any barriers listed. Remember that there can be two types of barriers. So think about whether the barrier is a practical barrier that needs to be problem-solved or whether the barrier is a thought or an emotion that you may need to let go of the struggle with."

Group Discussion and debrief

Therapist facilitates a group session on the acts, barriers and possible solutions.

"Let's discuss the acts, barriers and possible solutions as a group. What are some acts that you had listed? And what were some barriers that you thought of? And solutions? Were some barriers really thoughts and emotions?"

Setting homework

"Your homework is to pick a small act that would bring you closer to your values and do it this week. Remember pick a small act, something you could easily do. Are there any questions?"

Closing the ACT Stress Management Intervention

"This is the end of the Stress Management aspect of our group. Next week we'll begin looking at parenting. Remember as you try this out in your life that you will find that you'll still get stuck in the battle from time to time, that you will lose sight of your values from time to time. That is okay. The important thing is to be able to recognise this and to be able to bring yourself back to focussing on going in the direction that you want to go."

Therapist distributes a summary sheet on the ACT component of the intervention.

Appendix A: Parent Worksheets

Actions Worksheet

What could you do to move closer to your values? Brainstorm and write down every idea you have whether or not it is practical.

What are some **small actions** you could take to move closer to your values? Are there any **tiny steps** you could easily make in your everyday life? What would be the **smallest step** you could make closer to your values?

My Goals

Goals	Barriers	Solutions

This week I will take the **small step** of:

Values Worksheet: Instructions

Values are what we want our lives to be about. A value is a direction in which you want your life to go, like heading West. We never really finish living out our values because there is always more to be done. Our values provide the basis for the goals that we choose to act on day by day. But whereas goals can be achieved or “crossed off” we never really finish moving towards our values.

What do you want your life to be about? Deep down, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for?

This values worksheet contains **areas of life** that are valued by some people. Not everyone has the same values and this is not a test to see if your values are “correct”. There’s no right or wrong answer. Under each area of life there is space for you to brainstorm about your values in this area. Try to focus on general life directions rather than specific goals. For each area of life there’s also space to rate how important this life area is to you on a scale of 1-10 (1 = not at all important, 10 = very important) and how well you are currently living out your values in this area of your life on a scale of 1-10 (1=not at all important, 10= very important). You may notice that there is overlap between your values in different life areas. This is fine.

You may find the following descriptions of the areas of life helpful as you complete the worksheet:

1. **Family.** What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/aunt do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?
2. **Marriage/couples/romantic.** What sort of partner would you like to be in a romantic relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the ideal you in this relationship?
3. **Parenting.** What sort of parent would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with your children? How would you behave if you were the ideal you?
4. **Friends/social life.** What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?
5. **Career/employment.** What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work? What sort of work relations would you like to build?
6. **Education/personal growth.** What do you value about learning, education, training or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn? What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?
7. **Recreation/fun/leisure.** What sorts of hobbies sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?
8. **Spirituality.** Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. It may be as simple as communing with nature or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. What is important to you in this area of your life?
9. **Citizenship/environment/community life.** How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/charity/ political party? What sort of environments would you like to create at home and at work? What environments would you like to spend more time in?
10. **Health/Physical well-being.** What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol etc? Why is this important?

Family		Marriage/couples/romantic		Parenting	
Importance? (1-10)		Importance? (1-10)		Importance? (1-10)	
Living? (1-10)		Living? (1-10)		Living? (1-10)	

Friends/social life		Career/employment		Education/personal growth	
Importance? (1-10)		Importance? (1-10)		Importance? (1-10)	
Living? (1-10)		Living? (1-10)		Living? (1-10)	

Recreation/fun/leisure		Spirituality		Citizenship	
Importance? (1-10)		Importance? (1-10)		Importance? (1-10)	
Living? (1-10)		Living? (1-10)		Living? (1-10)	

Health/Physical		Other notes about my values			
Importance? (1-10)					
Living? (1-10)					

Appendix A: Parent Handout

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for Parenting Stress

Stepping Away From the Battlefield

Sometimes we can get stuck in a battle with stress. It may seem like we need to fight this battle with stress in order to live the life we want to live. Yet...no matter what weapon we use, even if we seem to gain some ground, the battle just keeps going on. ACT is about approaching stress differently. ACT is about stepping away from the battlefield. In the same way that a nation at peace has more resources to spend on healthcare, education and arts programs stepping away from the battle with stress will free you up to focus on living your life.

Accepting the Passengers

It is like you are the bus driver and the bus is your life. You have a direction in which you'd like to take the bus. Along the way passengers join you for the journey. These passengers are your thoughts and feelings. Sometimes the passengers are nice and polite, others they are ugly, nasty and noisy! Sometimes they start telling you how to drive the bus on in what direction you should be going. When you start battling with your thoughts and feelings you stop focussing on driving the bus. Sometimes you may even start driving in the direction they want to go just to get them to quieten down. Acceptance doesn't mean that you need to like the passengers or think that they are right (or wrong!). Acceptance just means allowing the passengers to be there, letting them be noisy if they are noisy and instead keeping your hands on the wheel and driving the bus in the direction you want to go.



Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the skill of keeping our awareness in the here and now with acceptance of our own thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness involves noticing that our attention has wandered and gently guiding it back. Like any skill it improves with practice. Practicing mindfulness of breathing is an excellent way to practice mindfulness because we carry our breathing around with us wherever we go. To practice mindfulness of breathing sit in a comfortable, relaxed and upright position. Allow your attention to settle onto the physical sensations when you breathe. You may prefer to focus on the sensations in your abdomen or your nostrils. Whenever you notice that your attention has wandered congratulate yourself for noticing this and gently guide your attention back to your breath. Try to bring a sense of curiosity to your experience as if you are really interested in the experience of your breathing. Use the rhythm of your breathing as an anchor to keep your awareness in the here and now. You may like to practice mindfulness of the breath regularly. You can also practice mindfulness by being mindful in everyday activities such as washing the dishes or walking.

Mindfulness of Emotions

To practice mindfulness of emotions allow your awareness to settle onto the physical sensations of the emotion. You may find it helpful to imagine that the sensations are an object or a creature. Notice that you are bigger than the emotion and try, as best you can, to make room for it. Try to bring a sense of curiosity towards the emotion as if you are really interested in what it is like to feel. This doesn't mean you need to like the emotion or want it to be there it just means making room for it and allowing it to be there.

Thoughts are Just Thoughts

Thoughts are just thoughts. We don't need to act on them, or react to them or to prove them true or false. Having thoughts is like having a radio station on all the time. You could sit near the radio all day listening intently or you could get on with doing what you want to do and just let the radio be in the background. Try adding, "I'm having the thought that..." to your thoughts, or singing them, or saying them in a silly voice. You can also try watching your thoughts, perhaps imagining that they are leaves floating

down a stream or clouds floating across the sky. What do you notice?

Values

Values are what we want our lives to be about. A value is a direction in which you want your life to go, like heading West. We never really finish living out our values because there is always more to be done. Our values provide the basis for the goals that we choose to act on day by day. What do you want your life to be about?

Taking Action

What steps can you take to move closer to your values? A value is a direction which is never really finished like heading West. A goal is a step that you can complete like getting to the next intersection. You may find that you have some bigger goals that will take time to achieve and that's okay. Ensure though that you also think of plenty of small steps too. It is like stocking the kitchen pantry. You want to plan for the days when you need ready-made snacks and easy meals! It may help to think, what is the smallest step I could take?

ACT in a Nutshell

Accept your thoughts and feelings

Choose a valued direction

Take Action towards your valued direction



Written by Koa Whittingham for the Stepping Stones Cerebral Palsy Project.
Artwork conceptualised by Joseph Ciarrochi and David Mercer & created by David Mercer