

The
Subtle
Essence
of ACT



BEYOND TECHNIQUES: EMBODYING ACCEPTANCE
AND COMMITMENT THERAPY IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Todd J. Schmenk, MS, MEd, LMHC

A TEXTBOOK FOR PRACTITIONERS OF ACT

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A Note on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, commonly abbreviated as ACT, emerged through the work of Steven C. Hayes, Kelly G. Wilson, Kirk D. Strosahl, and a growing international community of researchers, clinicians, trainers, and scholars. The model continues to develop within the broader tradition of contextual behavioral science.

This book is an independent contribution to that continuing conversation. It is not an official publication of, and has not been authorized or endorsed by, the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science or by the original developers of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, except where an endorsement is expressly identified.

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What Readers Are Saying

“The Subtle Essence of ACT offers us an absolute treasure trove of clinical wisdom that is both practical and completely accessible. The author takes complex ACT concepts like the self-as-context and makes them seem simple to both understand and work with in clinical practice. This book keeps coming back time and time again to implications for clinical practice, such as how to notice a particular ACT process in session, the goal of the ACT intervention and enormously useful practical pointers on how to put ACT into the clinical conversation. The author’s approach is humble, energized, engaging and light-hearted, making this a very fun and not to be missed read!”

*—Kirk D. Strosahl, PhD,
cofounder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
and coauthor of Brief Interventions for Radical
Change and In This Moment*

Make every minute count as you learn to “look under the hood”. That’s what this short, insightful, and practical book will help you do in every clinical encounter. Yes, you can move your practice of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy from competence to artistry – and enjoy the process. Todd Schmenk is a gifted writer and therapist – we owe him deep gratitude.

*Patti Robinson, PhD., Consultant and Trainer,
Mountainview Consultant Group and
Author of Brief Interventions for Radical Change, 2nd Ed*

“As a current graduate student, The Subtle Essence of ACT was a pivotal read at the beginning of my clinical career. The concepts and wisdom presented in this book offer a glimpse behind the curtain of therapy, illuminating how counselors can cultivate the warm, accepting therapeutic environment that clinicians aspire to create. The book guides counselors in developing a reflective practice by encouraging them to examine the function of their own behavior within the therapeutic relationship and, in turn, harness the power of their presence to support client growth.

The book provides clear guidance on what to pay attention to during sessions, both within yourself and your clients, offering a roadmap for continued growth as a counselor. Filled with reflective exercises, it is a resource I will return to throughout my career as I continue to refine the artistry of my practice. The deep respect, sensitivity, and responsibility toward clients that permeate the book reflect the same qualities I have observed in Todd himself. Through my own experiences, I have seen and felt the transformative power of the genuine presence that Todd embodies and so thoughtfully explores in this work.

I recommend The Subtle Essence of ACT to clinicians at all stages of their careers who wish to deepen their ability to hold the therapeutic space through their presence.”

Kendra Gever, clinical counseling student.

“The point of spiritual practice, of meditation,
of psychotherapy . . . is to make you more
aware or more conscious so that you actually
have choices about the way you live your life.”

— Mark Epstein

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Foreword

Diving Deeper

A while back I encouraged Todd Schmenk to write a book. I had seen him train and I had read a good deal of what he was writing, and it was clear to me that he understood something about ACT that is hard to put into words and even harder to teach. This book is the result, and I am glad I pushed.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has a problem that comes from its own success. I estimate that about a million professionals have had training in ACT. As the work spread around the world, the parts that traveled fastest were the metaphors and exercises. Passengers on the bus. Leaves on a stream. Tug of war with a monster. Some go back 40 to 45 years or so (those three do for example). Sometimes I even remember the client who first came up with them (perhaps a third or more of those from the earliest days were generated by my clients, not me). They deserve to travel and to live on. They are memorable, they are fun to teach, and clients like them. They were also never the point.

ACT grew out of a philosophy of science and a basic account of human language and cognition, and those of us developing it spent

almost two decades on those foundations before the first book-length description of the therapy appeared in 1999. The methods were meant to be examples of how a set of principles might be put to work with a particular person in a particular moment. They did not define ACT because ACT was never a set of techniques. It was a space in which work could be done, created by a set of processes and principles. Cut loose from those principles, the techniques and methods left behind are empty rituals. They might help, they might hurt, and you will have no way of knowing which until it is too late to adjust.

Todd knows this in his bones. From the first time I ever read his that was clear. He sees through what is superficially evident. It's not accident he has written is a book about function, and he looks for function where it actually lives, which is in the small moments of a session: pauses before a sentence; a held breath; a joke that arrives exactly on time – or half a beat too soon. In every case he asks what that bit of behavior is doing, here, for this person, given this history. Then he turns around and asks the very same question about the therapist.

That second step is what gives this book its biggest jump forward. Let me point to a few things that I hope you will watch for as you read. I'll even number them so you can keep track.

1. The first is the simple sequence of evoking, modeling, and reinforcing. It can sound like a training slogan, but look closer. Todd is describing variation and selective retention in context, which is how evolutionary change happens in any living system, at any level of analysis. Todd is just bringing it into the consulting room.

New behavior has to show up before anything can be done with it. Correct? Once it shows up, it has to be seen and supported if it is going to last. Isn't that so? The therapist is part of the context in which all of that takes place, whether she intends to be or not. Right?

Take these ideas seriously and a psychotherapy session begins to look less like a place to deliver interventions and more like a place to support what is happening right there in front of you.

2. second is a distinction Todd draws in the middle chapters. Distinguish responses that deepen a client's own awareness and responses that teach the client to please the therapist. Telling a client how proud you of them feels super kind. It should: it is kind. It can also quietly build the wrong thing, including tying new behavior to our approval instead of to the client's own values and experience.

I wish every ACT therapist would read those pages at least twice. They sit alongside an unusually frank discussion of how our methods can do harm when form takes the place of function: a mindfulness exercise that ends up serving suppression, or values work that produces little more than compliance. We do not talk about this nearly enough and it's what I hoped for when I encouraged Todd to write this book.

3. The third is that the therapist is in the same soup as the client. I have long told my students that this work takes head, heart, and hands. Todd asks you to notice your own urge to fix, your own discomfort with silence, your own need to look competent, and he doesn't treat any of that as a side issue. We are verbal creatures too. We are human beings. The processes that narrow our clients' lives will narrow our clinical work in exactly the same way, and the processes that open things up for them will open things up for us. An ACT therapist who has not felt that from the inside will have a hard time offering it to anyone else.

Early in the book you will find two graphs built from the same set of data. One shows group averages moving neatly downward over the course of treatment. The other shows the individual people who make

up those averages, and their lines go everywhere. Todd uses that picture to argue for an idiographic focus, and he is right to do so. No one lives a life on average.

I would add one thought. Beginning with the individual does not mean we give up on general knowledge. Once we have looked carefully at how processes of change unfold for one person over time and in context, we can begin to look for subgroups and patterns across people, and we can ask how far those patterns extend. General statements are the goal – so long as they do not distort what we see at the level of the person.

My colleagues and I have been calling this an “idionomic approach.” Seen that way, the fine-grained attention Todd is teaching is more than good clinical craft. He is laying out the kind of observation from which a more adequate science of human change can be built, one that fits the deep philosophical commitments of contextual behavioral science. Practitioners who work as this book suggests are in a position to expand what all of us understand.

Finally, a word about community. Todd is especially good at building it. He trains, he supervises, he teaches, he gathers clinicians together in Rhode Island, and he is now starting a press with this book as its first title. I learned a long time ago that lasting change comes from small groups of people who care, nested into larger groups. That is how the ACT / RFT / CBS tradition grew, and it is why the chapter in this book on supervision is not an afterthought. What one person learns gets passed along to the next, and then to the people they serve. It is how we amplify good work, and each of us can take it up in our own way. As you become more skillful, bring someone along with you. Watch what Todd is doing, and you will see that idea with a face attached to it.

So read this book slowly. Do the exercises, including the ones aimed at you. Stay in the silence five seconds longer than is comfortable and see what happens. Then find a colleague and talk about what you saw.

Steven C. Hayes, PhD

Foundation Professor of Psychology Emeritus,
University of Nevada, Reno

President, Institute for Better Health

Originator and co-Developer of Acceptance and
Commitment Therapy or Training (ACT).

Foreword

An Editor's Perspective

Being part of the process of reading, reflecting on, and helping support the development of this book has honestly been a deeply meaningful experience for me, both professionally and personally.

One of the things that stood out to me early on about *Subtle Essence* is that it feels grounded in the lived experience of actually doing therapy. Therapy can be incredibly meaningful work, but it is also deeply human work. We enter the room with our training, experience, theories, and interventions, but we also enter it as people. We have thoughts, emotions, assumptions, fears, hopes, histories, and our own ways of getting stuck. No amount of training makes us immune to being human.

And maybe that is part of the point.

Some of the most meaningful growth I have experienced as a therapist has come not from learning the “perfect” intervention or figuring out exactly what to say next, but from learning how to notice what is happening in the room (and within myself) with greater openness and

curiosity. To slow down. To recognize when I am getting pulled toward fixing, avoiding, performing, proving, or trying too hard to get therapy “right.” And then, when I can, to reconnect with what matters and intentionally choose how I want to show up with the person sitting across from me.

That is something I appreciate deeply about Todd’s work and about this book. Subtle Essence invites us to pay attention to the processes that are easy to miss: the small shifts, internal reactions, relational moments, and patterns that can quietly shape what happens in therapy. It encourages us not simply to know more, but to notice more, to become increasingly aware of ourselves, our clients, and the interaction unfolding between us.

I have also appreciated the way this book came to life. Being involved in its development gave me the opportunity to watch Todd approach his own work with many of the same qualities he encourages in therapists: curiosity, humility, flexibility, openness to feedback, and a willingness to experiment. Ideas were explored, questioned, changed, refined, and sometimes thrown out entirely. There was room for uncertainty. There was room to discover something better. In that sense, the process of creating this book often reflected the kind of therapeutic process it describes.

My hope is that readers do not approach Subtle Essence as another book they need to master or another collection of techniques they need to perform correctly. Instead, I hope it becomes something you interact with. Something that helps you slow down, notice, reflect, experiment, and perhaps see familiar moments in your work from a slightly different perspective.

Take what is useful. Try things. Notice what happens. Allow yourself to be surprised. And perhaps most importantly, give yourself permission

to remain a human being while doing the profoundly human work of helping another person.

More than anything, this book feels alive to me. And I think readers are going to feel that too.

Eric V. Vaught, MS, LMFT

Co-Owner, Compassionate Perspectives LLC

Prologue

Technique is nothing if not in service of function.
Function is nothing if not in service of what matters.

If you are reading this, you have spent time with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy known as ACT. You have used the metaphors, run the exercises, taught the six core processes to clients and perhaps to trainees. At some point, maybe recently, maybe long ago, you realized there is something more beneath the surface. A depth that is hard to describe but palpable when you are working well. A kind of resonance when the process unfolds like a dance.

You are not just doing ACT anymore.
You are inhabiting it. **This book is for you.**

Most ACT training begins with structure: diagrams, metaphors, techniques, protocols. That structure is genuinely useful. It is the scaffolding, though, not the building itself. If you are reading this, you already know that the map is not the territory and that ACT is not a toolkit but a stance.

ACT, and by extension other process-based approaches, are not merely a collection of interventions. They are grounded in a clinical philosophy rooted in Functional Contextualism—a way of seeing behavior in its historical and situational context, tracking patterns across time and domain, and intervening with precision and purpose. These are backed by Relational Frame Theory, which gives us a powerful understanding of how language shapes and constrains our behavior and how we might unhook from those constraints.

Even this description remains too abstract if not made alive through practice. That’s the purpose of this book, to bring the subtle essence of ACT into your fingertips. To help you refine the moves that already live in your sessions and, perhaps more importantly, to illuminate the ones that don’t—yet.

This book does not teach ACT from scratch. It assumes you already speak the language. What it does instead is invite you to slow down, listen more closely, look under the hood, and shift from applying techniques to embodying function and to expand from building competence to developing artistry.

Why Subtle Essence?

Because there are things that matter in a session that don’t show up in a book, a video, or on a checklist. See if you can relate to any of the following:

- The slight tension in a client’s body before they say, “I don’t know . . .”
- The moment your own breath tightens as a familiar fusion pattern unfolds
- The long pause before a client names something they’ve never said out loud

- The choice to stay quiet, to not fill the space
- The moment you slide your chair slightly closer, not to confront, but to join, when a client is visibly struggling, on the verge of something
- The decision to switch from a polished metaphor to a scribbled drawing because you sense the client needs less abstraction and more movement
- The quiet hunch that says pause the plan and ask the client what they feel in their hands, shoulders, and chest right now
- The conscious choice to let a client's sarcastic remark hang in the air instead of reflexively redirecting—so they can hear their own avoidance echo back at them
- The moment you feel your own urge to jump in—and instead, mirror stillness, inviting the client to find their own language
- The act of modeling openness with your own vulnerability or uncertainty

These moments are not “extras.” They’re the core of what makes this work transformative. To work this way requires more than competence. It requires fluency, attunement, and a commitment to staying grounded in the moment while tracking the broader function of behavior.

What This Book Covers

This book doesn't follow the standard layout of ACT textbooks. It doesn't go process-by-process, though it will revisit them from a deeper perspective, nor does it offer step-by-step treatment plans. Instead, it orients around ways of seeing and ways of being. This book explores the following areas:

- The use of yourself as the primary instrument of change
- The function of silence, breath, and pacing
- Language as a shaping tool, not just a delivery mechanism
- The difference between evoking and explaining
- How to map patterns across time and context
- How to train your eye to see function in micro-moments

Each chapter threads together practical clinical experience, behavioral theory, and real-world applications, along with personal exercises for reflection and suggestions for experimentation in session. Metaphors, vignettes, notes, and exercises are drawn from live work, training experiences, and supervisory dialogue. You'll see yourself and your clients reflected in these pages.

Who This Book Is For

This book is written for the seasoned beginner and the curious veteran. It is for those building fluency in ACT who want to go beyond memorization into mastery. It is for those leading groups, training others, and holding space in supervision. It is also for those who feel called to live their professional life in alignment with the same principles they teach.

A Note on Sources

Where claims rest on specific bodies of research or theoretical work, sources are cited in the text and listed in the References section at the back. The foundational theoretical anchors throughout this book include Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson's work on ACT (2012), Barnes-Holmes and colleagues' ongoing development of RFT (2020), the process-based therapy framework of Hayes, Hofmann, and Ciarrochi