Why I Work This Way: A Glimpse Into Contextual Awareness in Session

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As a clinician, I used to get stuck trying to make sense of everything a client brought into the room—the stories, the thoughts, the memories, the symptoms. It's how I was trained after all, and most likely, it was n your training too.

> *Tune in to the function of what's happening in the moment*

In using this approach, I'd find myself trying to organize it all, like piecing together a puzzle with too many moving parts and while that impulse to understand is deeply human (and often well-engrained), I found that it rarely led anywhere transformational.

That started to change when I began working within the ACT framework and even more so when I began grounding my work in Functional Contextualism (FC).

FC isn't just a philosophy—it's a stance. It gives me permission to step back from the surface of what's being said and instead tune in to the function of what's happening in the moment. Rather than getting pulled into the swirl of content, I shift my attention to what the behavior is doing.

Is it moving the client toward something that matters?

Is it protecting them from pain?

Is it part of a well-worn pattern that once made sense but no longer serves?

It's not that I stop listening. I do, but I listen differently. I allow myself to half-listen to the story, while fully attending to the relational and contextual cues underneath, how they pause, how they shift, when avoidance shows up, how metaphors surface spontaneously.

I'm watching the system in motion, not just the words.

And here's the thing, when I do this, something remarkable happens.

Patterns start to emerge. The client's internal world begins to organize, not because I forced it into a treatment model, but because the function reveals itself. With just a few questions, I can often reflect back something the client hasn't explicitly told me, yet it lands with surprising accuracy. They sometimes think I'm reading their mind. I'm not. I'm reading the context.

From here, I often introduce a metaphor, often one pulled from their own experience or adapted from a familiar frame tailored to the experience happening in the moment. The goal isn't to provide insight or advice. It's to shape the process. To loosen the grip of an unworkable function or expand

their behavioral repertoire in places they've felt stuck.

What follows is often a visible shift:

- Posture changes
- Voice softens
- Body relaxes
- Everything slows down
- Clarity returns

These moments are why I do this work the way I do. They're why I continue to refine how I train clinicians in Contextual Strategies, integrating FC, Relational Frame Theory (RFT), and process-based approaches like ACT in a way that moves beyond rigid protocols and back into the immediacy of the therapeutic relationship.

If you're a clinician looking to deepen your work—not just to "do ACT," but to think and move functionally—I'd love to connect.

Whether through consultation, training, or experiential lab groups, the work I offer is about building fluency, not just knowledge. It's about noticing what's happening now, in this room, in this system, because in my experience, when we stop trying to fix or solve and instead tune into what's unfolding contextually, the work tends to reveal its own direction—with more clarity and a lot less effort.

Best

- Todd