

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	19
Guest:	Robyn Walser, PhD
Title:	#19: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology, like mobile mental health apps, can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

Today we will be talking about a type of therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, usually abbreviated as ACT. My guest today is Dr. Robyn Walser, an expert in ACT who has authored or co-authored seven books on ACT. She runs an international training, consulting and therapy practice, is an assistant professor at UC Berkeley, co-director of Bay Area Trauma Recovery Services. She's also a clinical psychologist with us here in VA at the National Center for PTSD. Welcome Robyn, it's great to have you.

Robyn:

Thank you, Pearl. I'm happy to be here.

Pearl:

So ACT is used in VA as an evidence-based treatment for depression. It has been studied and used by researchers and clinicians around the world, with people struggling with a variety of mental health challenges. For Veterans or other individuals wondering what ACT is like, can you describe the experience of engaging in ACT?

Robyn:

I think someone interested in ACT would see that it's not necessarily about feeling good, which is often what people come to therapy seeking. But it's about living well. Tuning into what their values are and how to engage in behaviors that bring those values to life. So the key question is what kind of meaning do I want to create in my life?

Pearl:

And if somebody listening to the podcast right now is finding themselves struggling and is going, 'Hey, but I want to feel good, I want to feel happy.' What words would you offer

Robyn:

Well, one of the things that we've learned, is that if you're really invested in feeling good or trying to be happy all the time, it typically means that you're trying not to feel pain or anxiety or some other difficult emotion. And people are not very good at controlling a single emotion. They essentially have to control all of their emotions to try to get one to stop. And so what that means is if you aren't willing to experience and watch the flow of your emotion, you're just cutting it off, then you're also cutting yourself off from joy.

Pearl:

That's a really powerful explanation of ACT and how and how it works. And I think probably challenging for some folks to take in.

Robyn:

Essentially what we're inviting people to do here is to change the relationship that they have with their emotion, thought and sensation experience. Often when people are struggling, they're trying to eliminate and get rid of the things that they don't like to feel. And that very battle itself adds to suffering. So you've got pain and pain plus the battle. And so we hope to do in ACT is to help people open up to that experience, letting go of the battle, allowing the pain to rise and fall as it rise and falls.

Pearl:

I think a lot of people listening will relate to that struggle of trying to do things to make pain go away and inadvertently actually making their emotional pain worse. So if somebody's wrestling with maybe anxiety or depression or they're avoiding engaging with family members or friends, and maybe also avoiding, not wanting to feel the emotional pain, can you kind of walk us through some of the processes that you're describing?

Robyn:

ACT uses a lot of different exercises and metaphors to help people connect to what it is that we're inviting them to do. And I'm referring specifically to the experiences that they don't want, like in PTSD, not wanting a memory. Or if in depression, getting entangled with thoughts like, I'm worthless so there's something wrong with me. And so part of what we might do to assist the person in therapy is invite them to engage in watching how these emotion, thought and sensation experiences come and go. This could include something like imagining that you are sitting next to a stream and that there's leaves floating on the stream and you attach your thoughts to the leaves and you simply observe the leaves floating down the stream. One question that we might ask is would you be willing to feel whatever it is that you feel, whether it be pain or joy or whatever range of emotions fall in between, in the service of living a meaningful life? Can you allow this pain, would you be willing to feel it, if it means that you get to have love? If it means you get to connect? If it means that you get to create the things in life that feel important to you?

Pearl:

That was a really helpful illustration. I love the question, would you be willing to feel what you're feeling if it means you get to have love, if it means you get to have whatever your value is. So having that acceptance for the struggle, instead of struggling against the struggle and, and adding pain to pain as you described. I think it's a probably an approach that resonates with a lot of people

Robyn:

Yes.

Pearl:

If somebody listening to the podcast is interested in ACT, how can they find an ACT therapist, whether they're in VA or outside of VA?

Robyn:

It's a great question. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is housed in an organization called the Association for Contextual and Behavioral Science. And they have a website where when you go to it, on the very first page, you'll see a find a therapist button. And you can find therapists essentially all over the world and you can define your search there. And both therapists in VA and outside of VA can be found there. And that website is contextualscience.org.

Pearl:

Thank you. And I know there's been a ton of research on ACT. Can you give us the quick, maybe bite-sized summary about what the science says about whether ACT works and for whom?

Robyn:

There's been a huge review of all of the studies that have been done on ACT that look at its effectiveness. And essentially for all the different things it's looked at, it works for a number of different problems that people experience in in their lives. OCD, psychosis, depression, anxiety, pain. There's a lot of different things that ACT has been studied for and there's a number of really great outcomes.

Pearl:

Now in terms of technology and ACT, I know we have an ACT Coach app, it was developed way back in 2014, so it's been around a while. It also has a lot of helpful information in it. If somebody opens ACT Coach, where would you recommend they start in terms of exploring the app or applying it?

Robyn:

First I think it would be helpful to go to the learn about section and read what the different processes are in ACT. One of them's acceptance, another one is being in the present moment. What are your values? So I'd learn about those. And then I think probably the next best place to go is to the values definition section. And going there and really get oriented toward what really matters to you in life. What's important for you in terms of how you want to live.

Pearl:

That makes a lot of sense.

Robyn:

My hope for the people that come into ACT is that they can connect to something that is loving and kind or whatever value it is that they want to bring that fully into their life experience.

Pearl:

Thank you.

Robyn:

Thank you, Pearl. Thank you for inviting me to be here. I'm really happy to be able to share what's happening in ACT with the broader world that listens to the podcast.

Pearl:

Thank you again for joining us and sharing your ACT expertise. The mobile app ACT Coach is available to everyone for free on Apple or Android devices. You can search ACT, that's A-C-T Coach in the app store or Google Play. Dr. Walser also mentioned the website, contextualscience.org, where you can learn more about ACT, including how to find an ACT therapist.

Andrea:

Hello! This is Dr. Andrea Jamison and I am the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.