

The Anorexia Workbook: How to Accept Yourself, Heal Your Suffering, and Reclaim Your Life

Michelle Heffner and George H. Eifert, New Harbinger Publications, Inc. (www.newharbinger.com). May 2004, 197 pp., \$17.95, Paperback,

As a specialist in the field of eating disorders, it was a surprise to me that I did not hear about this book sooner. I only learnt of its existence as a result of a chance mention of it on the BABCP listserv, in response to a request for self-help books for someone with anorexia nervosa. I was interested to take a look at it, as there are relatively few self-help books for people with anorexia nervosa. I was also interested to learn about the ACT approach as adapted to anorexia nervosa.

The authors explain in their introduction that “there are essentially two important components to ACT: (1) acceptance of the uncontrollable thoughts and feelings you experience and (2) commitment and action toward living a life you value.” The aim of the workbook is to enable readers to “learn to accept and live with the uncontrollable thoughts and feelings that haunt you about your weight, and ... learn to take charge and move your life in directions that you value.” The workbook is aimed at people with anorexia nervosa, family and friends, and professionals. The authors emphasise that “this workbook is not about getting you to eat more... This workbook is about reclaiming your life.”

Part 1 is about understanding anorexia nervosa. Several causal factors are identified, including socio-cultural factors, lack of control, family interactions and genetics. The authors stress that readers are more than just their eating disorders, and do not have to be ruled by their thoughts and feelings related to anorexia nervosa. They also emphasise that “it is not necessary to know what caused you to have anorexia” in order to “start rebuilding your life and moving in the direction you want to go.”

Chapter 2 presents the Mizes Anorectic Cognitions Questionnaire, which readers are encouraged to complete before and after completing the workbook. The goal of ACT is not to get rid of or challenge thoughts, but to help readers “experience these thoughts without needing to diet in response to them.” Further, ACT does not aim to change readers’ desire for social acceptance, but rather to help them discover other ways of satisfying it.

Part II is about treating anorexia nervosa with ACT. Step 1 involves accepting thoughts and feelings that are not controllable. Step 2 involves choosing a direction for life. Step 3 involves taking steps towards realising valued goals.

Readers are encouraged to face and experience situations, thoughts and feelings rather than avoiding them. They are encouraged to observe thoughts and feelings, stay with them, and simply watch them come and go.

The book uses lots of metaphors and imagery (the tug of war or volleyball competition of the mind, digging oneself into a hole, getting caught in the Chinese finger trap, walking away from a broken machine, allowing the broken dam to collapse or frozen fingers to thaw) to illuminate its major points. For the most part, these are very helpful, though one (clean vs dirty discomfort) jarred, particularly in the context of a workbook that is aiming to impart a non-judgmental approach.

Chapter 5 has some excellent mindfulness exercises (imagining oneself in a deep pool of water, or next to a stream, or by a campfire, taking the mind for a walk, or listening to thoughts recorded onto a tape). It seemed to me that these could also be adapted for use in a group context.

Chapter 6 includes a series of exercises aimed at helping readers to approach situations they have previously avoided while being mindful of thoughts and feelings (mindful eating exercise, mirror exercise, scale exercise, exercise for those who purge).

Chapter 7 contains exercises designed to clarify the reader's values (funeral meditation, imaginary eulogy, epitaph, timeline, values assessment worksheet) in nine domains: family, friends, romantic relationships, leisure, citizenship, health, spirituality, career and education. Readers are encouraged to schedule times to engage in valued activities.

Chapter 8 helps readers to identify obstacles to moving in valued directions. Readers are encouraged to be mindful of these barriers and move forward.

Chapter 9 provides a case example, previously published by Heffner et al (2002).

Part III is a helpful section focusing on professional treatment issues. Chapter 10 orients the reader to additional treatment options, including inpatient hospitalisation, day treatment, intensive outpatient therapy, and family therapy. Chapter 11 reviews CBT and IPT for anorexia nervosa, and compares them to ACT. The authors acknowledge that there has not been enough research conducted to demonstrate the value of ACT with anorexia nervosa. At the same time, they observe that CBT and IPT have only been moderately successful at best.

ACT encourages readers to experience their thoughts without responding to them, as opposed to challenging them. The authors point out that some consider ACT to be the next wave of CBT, although currently most eating disorder therapists are not familiar with the ACT approach. Chapter 12 orients the reader to a range of treatment issues, some of which are specific to the USA (e.g. insurance), while others are more widely applicable (e.g. confidentiality).

Part IV includes a chapter for loved ones. As with sufferers, family members are encouraged to experience their emotions. Families are also encouraged to stop struggling with their loved one's anorexia, and to give the sufferer time to learn to deal with food issues herself. Instead of struggling with anorexia, families are advised to listen and describe what sufferers communicate to them, and to support valued living for their loved ones.

The final chapter offers readers the opportunity to reassess their progress on several questionnaires used in the workbook (Mizes Anorectic Cognitions, Coping Style, Acceptance and Action, Values Assessment). Readers are advised to expect change to be slow.

Overall, I found this to be a sympathetic, encouraging, well laid out workbook that I would recommend to colleagues and patients. As with other approaches, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating!

Reference

Heffner, M., Sperry, J.A., Eifert, G. H. and Detweiler, M. (2002) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in the treatment of anorexia nervosa: A case example. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 9: 232-236.

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