

Using ACT and DNA-V to support adolescents

Case study: Sam – Identity development, belonging, and peer influence in late adolescence

Background and developmental context

Sam is a 17-year-old adolescent navigating a period of heightened identity exploration and social sensitivity. Peer relationships have become increasingly central to his sense of belonging and self definition. He reports feeling unsure of who he is and where he fits, particularly as friendship groups become more defined and social hierarchies more salient.

In an effort to maintain connection and avoid exclusion, Sam has begun vaping and skipping school, behaviours that feel misaligned with how he understands himself. While these behaviours help him feel accepted in the moment, he describes a growing sense of emptiness, confusion, and disconnection from his "real self."

This pattern appears within a normal developmental context where belonging, social status, and identity are highly salient, but where Sam lacks flexible ways of holding peer pressure alongside his emerging values.

Conceptualisation through DNA V (DNA-V terms in brackets)

Cognitions (Advisor)

Sam's Advisor is highly attuned to social threat. Internally, he experiences anxiety, self doubt, and fear of rejection. These experiences are interpreted as signals that he must conform in order to stay safe and connected. It generates predictions such as:

"If I don't go along with this, I'll be left out."

"I need to be like them to belong."

These thoughts reflect an understandable adolescent concern with peer acceptance, rather than faulty thinking. The problem arises when the Advisor becomes the primary driver of behaviour, narrowing Sam's choices.

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Sensory Awareness (Noticer)

Sam experiences a persistent sense of unease, guilt, and disconnection following behaviours that go against his values. However, he has not learned to relate to these sensations as meaningful information. Instead, they are experienced as uncomfortable states to be ignored or overridden in order to keep fitting in.

Actions and Tracking (Discoverer)

Sam's Discoverer is active but largely constrained by peer norms. Sam engages in avoidant and compliance based behaviours, prioritising short term social acceptance over longer-term coherence with his values. His experimentation is driven more by fear of exclusion than curiosity or values. This limits opportunities for learning who he is through authentic choice and reduces experiences of agency and self trust. Although these behaviours temporarily reduce anxiety and increase social inclusion, they also strengthen Sam's sense that he is betraying himself. This deepens confusion about identity and reinforces reliance on external validation to guide behaviour.

Values and Motivation

Sam values connection and belonging, but he also values authenticity, creativity, and being able to respect himself. At present, these values feel mutually exclusive. He experiences belonging as requiring self abandonment, rather than something that can coexist with authenticity.

Intervention approach (developmentally and formulation driven)

The therapeutic focus would be on helping Sam develop flexibility in how he relates to social threat, increase trust in his own internal cues, and learn that authenticity and connection do not have to be in opposition.

1. Making sense of peer pressure through a developmental lens

Initial work would involve normalising Sam's sensitivity to peer influence as part of adolescent development, rather than framing it as weakness or poor decision making. Using DNA V language, this becomes recognising when the Advisor is running a "belonging at all costs" strategy. This reframes Sam's behaviour as understandable, while opening space for choice.

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2. Strengthening Noticer skills around values signals

Rather than generic mindfulness, Sam would be supported to notice the specific bodily and emotional signals that arise when he acts against himself, such as discomfort, flatness, or unease. These experiences are framed as useful signals about alignment, not problems to be eliminated.

This builds internal guidance and reduces reliance on external approval.

3. Supporting values based experimentation in the Discoverer

Discoverer work would focus on small, low risk experiments in authenticity, framed as learning rather than performance.

For example:

- Choosing when and how to say no
- Expressing a preference that differs from the group
- Spending time with peers in contexts that feel more aligned

The emphasis is on observing outcomes, including emotional responses, rather than proving anything about himself.

4. Integrating belonging and authenticity through values work

Values conversations would explore what kind of relationships Sam wants to build and what it means to belong without losing himself. Rather than choosing between connection and authenticity, the work supports him to define belonging in ways that allow both.

Values then become a compass for navigating social situations, rather than rules he must live up to.