

Acceptance and commitment therapy case studies in focused ACT (FACT)

Case study: GP practice

Client background:

Jill, a 38-year-old teacher, presents at her GP surgery with complaints of chronic headache and fatigue that she believes is related to stress. Jill describes her work as demanding and reports feeling overwhelmed both at work and at home. She struggles to set boundaries, often saying yes to additional responsibilities despite feeling overcommitted. She identifies herself as a perfectionist and is constantly worried about letting others down, which exacerbates her sense of stress and physical symptoms.

Setting:

Andy, a GP offering consultation: Providing brief intervention within 25 minutes.

Intervention:

Contextual interview:

Andy begins with brief, focused questions (following the FACT format (to understand the context of Jill's life. Questions explore her love-life context (family relations), work-life context (teaching demands), and her engagement in self-care or play. Jill shares that she has minimal time for self-care and feels trapped in a cycle of obligations.

Problem context:

Jill rates her distress about stress and her physical symptoms as an 8 out of 10. She describes triggers such as last-minute work deadlines and family pressure. Andy introduces a simple rating scale, helping Jill note how distress often links to her perfectionism and avoidance of conflict.

Case study: GP practice (continued)

Life path metaphor:

Using the "Two Life Paths" metaphor, Andy encourages Jill to visualise two paths: a path of avoidance where she says 'yes' based on fear of disapproval and continues to overwork, and a path of approach where she aligns her actions with values such as being a kind and effective teacher while also protecting her health and well-being.

Present moment awareness practice:

Jill is asked to notice physical sensations during the session and locate where stress manifests in her body. Using language like, "What do you notice between your shoulders when you think about saying 'yes' to yet another responsibility at work?" allows Jill to explore her body's natural reaction and pause before automatic actions.

Behavioural experiment:

Jill commits to one small change: pausing for 10 seconds and taking two deep breaths before automatically agreeing to any new work-related requests. This experiment helps her test small acts of boundary-setting while noticing what shows up internally (e.g., guilt, anxiety).

Follow-up plan:

In a follow-up visit, Andy would evaluate her confidence in continuing these changes, explore her barriers to setting boundaries, and fine-tune her behavioural experiments to strengthen engagement with her values of balance and health.