**Evidence Based Psychotherapy - ACT for Depression in Adolescents**

Dr. Deumic: Hello Byte-sized Brain listeners. My name is Dr. Emira Deumic Shultz, psychiatrist at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinic. I have a very special guest with me today, Atiana, and today we’ll be Tapping into Therapy. Want to introduce yourself?

Atiana: Hi, my name is Atiana. I’m a 14 year old from central Iowa. Dr. Deumic, I think you said we were going to talk about mood today, so can I ask you a question?

Dr. Deumic:: Sure, go for it.

Atiana: Why are adults so quick to call teenagers moody? My mom tells me I have an attitude sometimes, but I just don’t think she understands everything I have to deal with. It’s stressful being a teenager.

Dr. Deumic:: I think part of that is exactly what you just said - adults can have a hard time understanding where you might be coming from, especially as many teenagers don’t really want to talk to their parents about everything they have going on in their lives.   
Many teens have times when they feel sad or down. Having some sadness and moodiness is a normal part of growing up. But if you’re feeling sad, irritable, not enjoying things, and this is happening day after day, it may be a sign of major depressive disorder, commonly known as depression.

Atiana: Wait, so depression isn’t just feeling down because something bad happened?

Dr. Deumic:: Depression can show up in a lot of different ways. Some things to look out for might be:

* Feeling or looking sad, tearful, or irritable
* Not enjoying things as much as you used to
* Spending less time with friends or in after school activities
* Changes in appetite and/or weight
* Sleeping less or more than usual
* Feeling tired or having less energy
* Feeling like everything is your fault or you’re not good at anything
* Having more trouble concentrating
* Caring less about school or not doing as well in school
* Having thoughts of suicide or wanting to die

Atiana: That sounds scary, especially the last part of having the suicidal thoughts. I’ve had a friend tell me they felt that way before, but I didn’t quite get why and wasn’t sure how to help them. What should I do if that ever happened to me or my friend again?

Dr. Deumic: Talk to someone, whether that be a parent or trusted adult, or even calling a hotline like ‘1-800-273-TALK’ or texting ‘HOME’ to 741741. They have real people trained to help in those situations. It may also be a good idea to talk to your pediatrician or a mental health provider, like a psychiatrist, about what you’re experiencing. The good news is, there are several effective treatments for depression including medications and therapy.

Atiana: I don’t really like taking medications. But I don’t know that I’d like therapy either. Wait, I don’t exactly know what therapy is. Is it talking to someone? That might be okay, but not sure I’d want to talk about all my feelings.

Dr. Deumic: Yes, it would include talking to someone. There are different kinds of therapy, many of which are actually talked about in some of the other Podcast episodes. But the therapy you do depends on what you’re treating. One type of therapy that may be effective for depression is ACT therapy.

Atiana: Well that sounds easy enough, I’ll just act happy.

Dr. Deumic: Actually, ACT stands for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and it’s been around since 1982, but talked about more in the last 10-15 years. Sometimes we compare how good a type of therapy is to a different therapy we know works well for certain things. Research shows that ACT is similar in effectiveness to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT has often been the go-to therapy used to treat things like depression and anxiety.

Atiana: So, it has nothing to do with acting?

Dr. Deumic: Nope, the complete opposite actually. ACT wants you to be able to be yourself, whoever that may be.

Atiana: Is ACT something anyone can do?

Dr. Deumic: Well, there is ACT for adults, but there is also a modified version for adolescents, which is the teenage population of 13-17 year olds. There is evidence for ACT in treating depression, anxiety, OCD, psychosis, chronic pain, and substance abuse.

Atiana: What makes ACT different than other therapies?

Dr. Deumic: Many “talk therapies” are based on identifying a problem and then figuring out ways to cope and deal with that problem to make negative feelings go away. ACT approaches things a little differently. ACT says that it’s okay to have feelings and thoughts of all kinds, good or bad. ACT helps us to learn how our emotions work and how we process them. It helps us learn that emotions make us human rather than thinking there is something wrong with us for having them.

Atiana: So, can you tell my mom that me being moody is normal?

Dr. Deumic: Moodiness is usually your brain and body trying to tell you something. Trying to control hard emotions or experiences and push them away can end up causing more distress and doesn’t actually make us feel better.

Atiana: Oh, like bottling things up?

Dr. Deumic: Exactly. Teenagers sometimes have a hard time describing their emotions and talking about themselves, either because they are shy, embarrassed, or honestly aren’t sure how to, so they bottle things up. ACT has a more “doing” than “talking” approach which teenagers may like. It makes use of metaphors, stories, in-session experiences, and thought experiments to work toward understanding thoughts and emotions.

Atiana: So a mixture of talking and doing things, that sounds pretty cool. But there has to be a catch – how does it actually work?

Dr. Deumic: There are 6 components of ACT, known as the ACT Hexaflex, and it’s often drawn in the shape of a hexagon for those visual folks out there. There isn’t a rule about where to start, but eventually everyone will make their way around the model.

Atiana: A Hexa-what? But 6 parts and 6 sides of a hexagon. Let me guess, each part of ACT goes with a point on the hexagon shape?

Dr. Deumic: You got it. This Hexaflex and its parts are unique to ACT. Let’s talk about each and how they work.

* **Acceptance** is practicing being non-judgmental toward yourself or what goes on around you. It recognizes that there are things out of our control and if let go of this struggle, we can make decisions about the parts that we do have control over – our own actions.
* **Contact with the Present Moment** is practicing being in the “here and now” rather than getting stuck in thoughts or worries. We often use our five senses to help us in this. If you’ve ever heard of mindfulness, this is where it would go in this model.
* **Defusion** is learning to step back from unhelpful thoughts and worries. Instead of getting caught up in your thoughts, being pushed around by them, or struggling to get rid of them, you learn how to let them come and go – like watching cars driving past your house.
* **Self as context** allows you to observe yourself, including thoughts, behaviors, and moods. A lot of the time, teenagers place labels on themselves. Self as context shows it’s possible to be freed from those labels.
* **Values** are the things that are most important to you and the way to want to live your life. This one can be a bit tricky for teenagers as they are often trying to figure out who they are and learn about their values. Sometimes these values mesh with those of our families, but sometimes they don’t. ACT helps you to discover what some of those values are.
* **Committed action** is the process of taking steps toward valued goals and being able to experience uncomfortable feelings and thoughts along the way. Negative thoughts or emotions don’t have to stop us from living our best life.
* This all leads to a fancy term called **psychological flexibility** which is essentially the ability to be present, aware, open, and take action guided by our values. It is the 6 corners of the Hexaflex working together to help you achieve your goals in life.

Atiana: That was a lot of words. But I think I get it. It’s being able to accept yourself for who you are and live based on things that are important to you?

Dr. Deumic: Absolutely. For teenagers, we often talk about all of these Hexaflex components by talking about the roles of the Advisor, the Noticer, and the Discoverer.

Atiana: Oh, just 3 people. Those are easier to remember.

Dr. Deumic: Actually, just 1 person, you. All 3 of these roles are present inside you at all times; some are just more active than others at times.  
The Advisor is a metaphor for your inner voice and often tries to protect you. This can be helpful in dangerous situations, but sometimes your Advisor thinks certain situations are dangerous even when they’re not. Your Advisor often relies on others’ opinions to make decisions, rather than on your actual experiences. And the Advisor’s rules about emotions aren’t always helpful; your Advisor may tell you that “it isn’t okay to feel a certain way, certain feelings are bad, or you can’t cope with what you’re feeling.

Atiana: So the Advisor is a bad guy? By definition, isn’t an advisor just someone who gives advice? Shouldn’t it be up to me to make the decisions to do things?

Dr. Deumic: Exactly, your Advisor tells you about both the good and the bad, but sometimes your Advisor gets too overprotective and in trying to be helpful, can make things a bit harder.

Atiana: You said there were two others. Tell me about the Noticer one.

Dr. Deumic: The Noticer helps us understand what we are feeling and experiencing and can help gives us information to understand why. In looking at anger and moodiness, which are very common emotions teens experience, there is usually some other emotion buried under there. The Noticer helps us slow down and uses the 5 senses to describe body sensations and feelings. The Noticer then helps us Allow these feelings and sensations to come and go – reminding us that no feeling is good or bad and emotions aren’t the enemy; they’re just messages about what’s happening in our world.

Atiana: That sounds kind of hard. I feel like my brain and body are always working on something. It’s hard to just be.

Dr. Deumic: 100% agreed. That rings true for both teens and adults, which is where practicing mindfulness skills comes into play and helps us retrain our brain to focus on the present.

Atiana: That still sounds hard, but definitely something interesting to try. I’ve heard that mindfulness word before on social media. What’s the last role?

Dr. Deumic: The Discoverer. The Discoverer acts almost as an experimenter. The Discoverer helps us track our experiences and behaviors while asking questions about what worked, what didn’t, and if it made life better in the long run. Through this, the Discoverer also helps you learn about your values and your strengths.

Atiana: I don’t know if I’m sure of exactly who I am as a person yet. What if I wouldn’t be able to answer those questions?

Dr. Deumic: That’s totally normal and the point of working with someone on it in therapy.

Atiana: So, who could I see to do ACT therapy?

Dr. Deumic: That’s where talking to a mental health professional can be helpful. They can refer you to someone who does ACT. Most therapy providers who do ACT have additional ACT training, but there isn’t a special certification for it. The most important thing is that you like and get along with your therapist. If you can’t find someone in your area to do ACT, there are tons of other types of therapy to look into, like CBT which I mentioned before.

Atiana: How long would it take to do ACT?

Dr. Deumic: It depends and would be based on if the therapist was using a manual or not. But ACT is cool in that it’s pretty flexible and can be slowed down to meet you where you’re at and focus on the things that end up important to you. There are even workbooks that you can get to work on some of this stuff at home. One popular one is called *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens*.

Atiana: Wow, I learned way more than I thought I would today. But, can you still tell my mom that me being moody is pretty normal?

Dr. Deumic: (Chuckle), we can talk about it. Thanks so much for hanging out with me today, Atiana.

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