

**Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Support a Multi-Tiered System of  
School Counseling Supports**

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### **Abstract**

There is a dearth of existing literature pertaining to the use of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in school counseling; which may be beneficial when addressing student concerns such as social anxiety and decreased social networks. This article discusses the overlap of ACT with comprehensive school counseling programs and culminates with a case study highlighting the role of school counselors in using an ACT-informed tiered plan to address students' social-emotional needs following a crisis situation.

*Keywords:* Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, multi-tiered system of supports, school counselors, social-emotional, crisis response

## **Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Support a Multi-Tiered System of School Counseling Supports**

As ethical and competent professionals, school counselors should utilize both a theoretical orientation as well as evidence-based counseling within individual, small-group, classroom, and large-group interventions (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a; 2019b). Similarly, accredited graduate programs are required to teach the leading counseling theories and techniques to individuals training to be school counselors (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). However, the fields of psychology and counseling are constantly adapting to changing needs in diagnoses and demographics, though this process is slow and methodical. A theory or technique that was just emerging in the field a few decades ago may not yet be taught regularly in the classrooms of master's preparation program. Therefore, it is essential that practicing school counselors remain up-to-date on developing theories within their own professional development (ASCA, 2016). One such emerging theoretical approach that deserves consideration by current school counselors is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an evidence-based theoretical approach that combines elements of cognitive-behavioral, positive psychology, and solution-focused brief counseling theories. ACT's philosophical roots are in behaviorism, and it utilizes techniques of mindfulness and acceptance to address client issues (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). However, ACT is also holistic in nature; it does not solely focus

on the behavioral reduction of symptoms, but also includes a strengths-based approach, client-created solutions, and focus on the present (Hayes et al. 2012).

The literature clearly documents and supports the use of ACT as an effective approach for use in schools and with children and adolescents. Examples include: (a) providing student interventions (e.g., individual, group, & life-skills curriculum) within the field of school psychology (Gillard et al., 2018), (b) assisting teachers with using experiential avoidance as an intervention to address stress (Hinds et al., 2015), (c) incorporating ACT into school-based groups (Takahashi et al., 2020), and (d) for general use with children and adolescents in schools (Bowden & Bowden, 2012; Hayes et al., 2012). According to Hayes and authors (2012), “When it [ACT] is applied in school settings, teachers report that their relations with other staff become more flexible, collegial, and values-based” (p. 992). While ACT has been consistently used within clinical and counseling psychology with positive results (A-Tjak et al., 2015) and within educational psychology (Gilliard et al., 2018), its documented use in school counseling is limited. By using the ACT theory and techniques at the universal, small-group, and individual levels (i.e., multi-tiered system of supports [MTSS] framework), school counselors may be able to incorporate new strengths-based and developmental practices to address a wide range of student concerns, including anxiety, peer relationships, and student attendance (Hayes et al., 2012). The purpose of this article is to demonstrate one use of ACT to help school counselors develop and deliver a comprehensive MTSS school counseling program.

## **An Overview of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**

The ACT approach was developed by Steven Hayes, along with his team of colleagues and students, as a way to address a variety of cognitive and behavioral issues (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). The overarching philosophy of ACT is that through decreasing an emphasis on past traumatic events, the student is able to place an increased awareness on the present moment and the function of current cognitions and behaviors (Hayes et al., 2012). This is not to say that the client's history is deemed unimportant. Instead, the student is encouraged to accept their past thoughts and feelings, rather than fight to suppress them. Additionally, the student must commit to be open to and aware of new opportunities for cognitive and behavioral modifications in the future.

Acceptance of negative interactions and thoughts is one of core facets of ACT. ACT counselors do not ask individuals to ignore every negative interaction or thought that have ever had, but instead accept that the experience or thought had a negative outcome, and then find ways to reimagine opportunities for growth (Bowden & Bowden, 2012; Hayes & Lillis, 2012). Within ACT, this tendency of avoidance is seen as a destructive but naturally occurring process after an individual has faced a traumatic event (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). By utilizing this principle of experiential avoidance, the counselor can encourage students to examine their already present avoidant behaviors, and then find approaches that will transform them into behaviors that inspire acceptance of the situation and self (Bowden & Bowden, 2012; Hayes & Lillis, 2012).

The process of self-examination of values and belief systems is important for the students to commit to behavioral change. An accurate understanding of one's true

values system, separate from outside influences, can help the student to engage in behaviors that align with what they believe, leading to better outcomes (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). In addition, understanding one's values, as they relate to behavior, helps provide a more holistic approach to change (Bowden & Bowden, 2012). Once the value system is defined, the student begins to commit to new adaptive behaviors that exemplify their true self and what they are wanting to convey to themselves, others, or the environment around them.

The primary technique within ACT to adapt the thoughts and actions of students is through the use of mindfulness. Mindfulness has already become an increasingly popular intervention for school counselors helping students address a variety of academic and mental health concerns (Emerson et al., 2020; Su & Swank, 2019), and therefore would be an ACT technique that is easily adapted into the school setting. Mindfulness, as it applies to ACT, involves a conscious effort to remain in the present moment to allow for the use of a growth mindset, or in ACT terms, psychological flexibility (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). According to ACT, this process of working toward an adaptable growth mindset, or psychological flexibility, will aid in future self-efficacy and resiliency (Biglan et al., 2013). Another key aspect of mindfulness and psychological flexibility within ACT is understanding things as they are and not as what they appear to be; meaning that the individual is aware of how their past experiences and personal values affect their perception of the world around them (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). For example, a child who experiences loud verbal reprimands at home may express anxiety and shut down when receiving constructive criticism at school. Using ACT techniques of

mindfulness and psychological flexibility may help that child overcome their anxious thoughts and appreciate the differences between approaches to delivering criticism.

Mindfulness and psychological flexibility are used concurrently with a process called defusion. Within ACT this process of defusion is meant to help the student recognize that cognitions are separate from behaviors. In other words, the student is encouraged to examine their thoughts objectively, rather than from a lens that guides behavior (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). An example of this could simply look like replacing the thought '*I am anxious*' with '*I am having an anxious thought*'. By allowing the student to remove the personal attachment from their thought, the change in wording provides an opportunity to process the meaning of the thought and how it may be influencing behaviors. The use of defusion changes the student's perception of the thought from one of personalized fear to one of objective realization, thus changing the behavior associated with that thought.

Through the core principles of acceptance of the past and commitment to change, and the utilization of mindfulness and defusion techniques, research has shown that the ACT approach can be successfully used to address a wide variety of issues across multiple diverse demographics (A-Tjak et al., 2015; Hayes & Lillis, 2012). ACT and its interventions have been instrumental with clinicians who see a variety of clients from different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as clients from a range of age groups and cognitive abilities (Fuchs et al., 2013; Hayes & Lillis, 2012). ACT interventions have been highly successful when working with clients on anxiety, depression, and addiction (A-Tjak et al., 2015). Much of the research surrounding ACT has dealt heavily with the field of psychology. However, many facets of ACT can be

adapted for use in the field of professional school counseling. There is limited literature on the implementation of using an ACT approach in schools. ACT has the potential to become another strong therapeutic option for current school counselors looking to find new ways of delivering services to students.

### **ACT and School Counseling**

School counselors often utilize a variety of theoretical approaches and techniques to meet the needs of their diverse student populations. ACT combines techniques from cognitive behavioral, positive psychology, and solution-focused theories – theories which are often employed by school counselors in classroom, small-group, and individual counseling - into one comprehensive and unified approach to counseling (Bowden & Bowden, 2012). Additionally, using ACT through a MTSS tiered approach may also provide a richer understanding of how students view, accept, and/or respond to stressful and trauma-related situations (i.e., stress, peer relationships, test anxiety) as well as how they commit to healthy coping and decision-making processes. Given that utilizing a brief and solution-focused approach aligns to the direct services outlined for school counselors within the ASCA National Model (2019), with the focus on acceptance and solutions, the time spent in counseling within each tier may decrease. According to Hayes and Lillis (2012), “[s]ome well-researched defusion methods are as short as 30 seconds long” (p. 50).

There are several overlapping priorities within ACT and comprehensive school counseling. In particular, the ASCA Mindsets & Behavior standards (2021) specify that school counselors work to build “belief in the development of the whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being” (ACSA, 2021, M 1.



p. 2) as well as “belief in using abilities to their fullest to achieve high-quality results and outcomes” (ASCA, 2021, M 5. p. 2). These mirror the ACT principles of developing a holistic cognitive and behavioral approach to change (Bowden & Bowden, 2012) in addition to utilizing strengths-based techniques within the counseling setting (Bowden & Bowden, 2012; Hayes & Lillis, 2012). Finally, ACT encourages psychological flexibility and growth mindsets in order to adapt or cope with a concern (Biglan et al., 2013; Hayes & Lillis, 2012) which is a direct application of helping students obtain skills to demonstrate “effective coping skills” (ASCA, 2021, B-SMS7. p. 2) as well as an indirect application of many of the other behavior standards under the Self-Management Skills section.

School counselors are uniquely positioned to help all students develop a strong and authentic sense of self. Through experiential activities such as mindfulness (Su & Swank, 2019) and perspective taking, school counselors help students view challenges as a way to know more about themselves. This is reflected in both ACT (Bowden & Bowden, 2012; Hayes & Lillis, 2012) and within the ASCA (2021) student standards. Similarly, school counselors use experiential interventions and processes to conceptualize student values, level of commitment, as well as interest regarding academic and college/career planning. ACT also strives to connect these type of “behavior[s] to client values” (Hayes, et al., 2012, p. 984). For example, a student who is not successful in the classroom will often work with the school counselor. Through their conversations, the school counselor may discover that the student values hard work, but is expressing it in other areas of their life. Using the ACT approach, the school counselor would allow the student to acknowledge and accept their avoidance of school

work, then re-focus the value the student places on their intrinsic motivation and hard work, as well as the here and now, to help the student recognize the importance of being successful in school.

While several similarities exist between ACT and school counseling, the school counselors' role with ACT using tiered approaches lacks attention within the school counseling literature. As such, a hypothetical case example highlighting the role of school counselors as leaders of combining both ACT and comprehensive school counseling programs follows.

### **Case Example**

Spirit Middle School serves students in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, with an enrollment of approximately 750 students. This middle school is one of three in the district and is situated outside of a large metropolitan area. About 50% of students identify as Caucasian and the other 50% is split between Black/African American and Latinx/Hispanic. The number of students qualifying for the free and reduced-price lunch program continues to climb each year, but is currently approximately 75% of the student population. There are approximately 50 faculty and staff employed at this middle school, including one principal, two assistant principals, and three school counselors assigned to each grade level.

Each grade level has an interdisciplinary team (i.e. Spirit Student Support Team [SSST]) that meets weekly to discuss and develop academic and social-emotional interventions at the large group/classroom, small group, and individual levels. This team consists of grade and specialty teaching representatives, the school psychologist and social worker, as well as one school counselor and an administrator. Each SSST is

facilitated by the administrator. The school counselor and administrator oversee the SSST data collection and analysis.

Like most schools in the country, Spirit Middle School closed its building for in-person instruction during the previous school year (March) due to the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19). Alternate instruction methods were used through the end of the school year (over 60 school days) as students, faculty, and staff were required to stay at home. Spirit Middle School re-opened for hybrid instruction in August of the following school year. This approach offered both in-person and remote instruction in order to meet the health and safety COVID standards established by national, state, and local officials. In September, at its first meeting since the school transitioned to hybrid learning, the 7th grade SSST examined data from the previous weeks to inform what types of comprehensive supports might be needed.

The school counselor and administration noticed some initial student concerns and issues that perhaps were related to the school cancellations and COVID-19. In particular, data indicated that student attendance decreased by 30%. Other concerns as expressed by SSST teachers and one student, in particular (Joseph) were social anxiety, decreased social networks, and panic symptoms. Each SSST member understood that school-wide collaboration and implementation of primary, secondary, and tertiary supports were needed in order to develop an effective plan of action. The 7th grade school counselor clearly understood their essential role as the leader of these supports, with direct service delivery in efforts to respond to the student needs (Ockerman et al., 2012). This case example will be utilized throughout the remainder of

this article to exemplify how a school counselor could incorporate and combine ACT principles with universal school counseling interventions.

### **Tier 1**

Tier 1 consists of general education instruction, school-wide programs and activities, as well as school counseling curriculum instruction (ASCA, 2019a). Consultation, collaboration, and resource sharing with administrators, teachers, and staff would also be important Tier 1 tasks and considerations (ASCA, 2019a).

To effectively combine elements of ACT and MTSS with the case example, the school counselor is first encouraged to self-assess their own knowledge and values that pertain to the presenting situation, especially from a trauma-informed lens. Seeking professional development opportunities that aim to strengthen professional competency would be an important place to start in Tier 1. Suggested activities include: (a) reviewing MTSS scholarship and websites for school counselors (see Goodman-Scott et al., 2020; Goodman-Scott et al., 2019; School Counselors for MTSS, n.d.; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016), (b) reviewing trauma-informed and COVID-19 resources (see ASCA, n.d), and (c) reading ACT literature that is relevant for use with children and adolescents in schools (see Bowden & Bowden, 2012). This professional development may assist the school counselor with identifying and reflecting upon their roles pertaining to supporting, facilitating, and delivering interventions at the Tier 1 level (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016).

As a supporter, the school counselor can attend weekly 7th grade meetings with teachers and administration to learn more about student needs and overall school climate. Bringing together these stakeholders might provide an opportunity to review data and school climate procedures as well as brainstorm new ways to assist students,

especially from an ACT perspective. For example, the school counselor might consider reviewing the emotional, psychological, and physical symptoms of trauma that connect to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., withdrawing from others, anxiety and fear, decreased school attendance) with stakeholders. Next, the school counselor could educate these individuals regarding how students might be using avoidance behaviors such as eliminating peer relationships at school to avoid uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. The school counselor would also want to address cultural sustaining practices such as racism and bias during these team meetings as well (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). Discussion topics may include establishing a sense of inclusion and belonging in the school culture, learning more about unconscious bias, and creating meaningful relationships with Black/African American and Latinx/Hispanic students. Modeling empathy and instilling hope for students especially different than SSST team members, would be important topics to incorporate into these discussions (Bogusch et al., 2018; Fuchs et al., 2013).

The school counselor can also assist the 7th grade team by reviewing the common language and procedures that pertain to forming peer relationships found within their Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) program. The team could intentionally add a category to the matrix that focuses on key ACT principles. One example could be to add “mindsets” to the matrix to teach all students how to challenge and replace self-defeating statements such as “I’m afraid to be close to my friend” and “it’s going to be horrible.” New mindset expectation examples that align with ACT may include expressing gratitude, practicing optimism, living by your values, and making time for friends. The school counselor can also consider viewing the video entitled,

“Developing a Growth Mindset” by Carol Dweck with the 7th grade team to further assist with this process (Stanford Alumni, 2014).

In the role as facilitator, the school counselor can work closely with the 7th grade team to develop school-wide programming opportunities (i.e., assemblies, homeroom advisory periods) that reinforce ACT principles. We recommend that the SSST team supports and aligns school-wide activities with programming designed to address racism and bias. The school counselor might suggest that all 7th grade students participate in focusing exercises and guided meditations as recommended by Hayes and Lillis (2012). Incorporating mindfulness and defusion activities at the Tier 1 level might teach students how to defuse their uncomfortable thoughts and “see them for what they are - just thoughts, not necessarily facts” (Bowden & Bowden, 2012, p. 284). More specifically, the team can advocate that 10-15 minutes at the start and end of each school day is devoted to mindfulness activities, either facilitated by the school counselor or another team member over the school intercom. We encourage team members to reference the document entitled, “Mindfulness Activities for Young Children,” which incorporates four ACT-infused mindfulness activities for children and adolescents (ACT on Purpose, n.d.a). Next, team members can process student experiences by asking follow-up questions. Suggested topics include: fears, grief and loss concerns with friendships, as well as school activities that were eliminated last school year due to COVID-19. From a multicultural perspective, discussion topics should also focus on advocacy skills and teach students how to seek support and assistance when encountering racism and/or bias related concerns (Goodman-Scott et

al., 2020). Metaphors, which incorporate mindfulness and acceptance, can be used to validate student cultural experiences (Fuchs et al., 2013).

Both school counselors and teachers are encouraged to view the previously mentioned website, ACT on Purpose when developing guided questions and resources to foster student discussion at the Tier 1 level (ACT on Purpose, n.d.b). This website contains free downloadable activities such as visual metaphors, books, and helpful ACT resources for use with children and adolescents (ACT on Purpose, n.d.b).

As an intervener, the school counselor can develop classroom instructional units aligned with the Mindsets & Behaviors student standards (ASCA, 2021) and with ACT. The school counselor can reference the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors database (ASCA, n.d) to identify competencies that align with ACT principles. Examples may include: sense of self (cultural identity), values, coping strategies, and resilience. The school counselor may want to model teaching ACT through the use of stories in classroom lessons such as the book entitled, *I Just Want To Be Me?: Building Resilience in Young People* by Timothy Bowden and Sandra Bowden (Bowden & Bowden, 2015). This ACT-based story uses a fictional character (Holly), who struggles with proceeding forward in living her life fully at home and school. ACT resources to supplement this lesson for school counselors, teachers, as well as parents/guardians can be found on the previously shared website, ACT on Purpose (n.d.b). Through practice and exposure to ACT techniques at Tier 1, students may begin to focus their attention more in the present moment, create space for uncomfortable feelings, and strengthen efficacy towards engaging in peer conversations.

## Tier 2

Following the implementation of the Tier 1 universal prevention, there will be a group of students who need extra support (ASCA, 2019a). These students can be identified through various forms of data such as sustained office referrals, consultation with teachers and parents/guardians, Mindsets & Behaviors data, and perception data from the students themselves (Hatch, 2013). When reviewing the data, SSST members should be mindful of and address the intersection of ecological and/or systemic factors (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). Examples may include: race/ethnicity, gender, sexual/affective orientation, cultural values, etc. Based on this data, these students may move into a Tier 2 ACT small-group counseling intervention. Utilizing the core principles of ACT, the school counselor can provide data-driven sessions for students while discussing topics relevant to their needs.

Acceptance, a key component of ACT, is something that will be important when developing a small-group counseling intervention. Using the case study example, we can hypothesize that there will be numerous repercussions for students following the COVID-19 pandemic such as anxiety surrounding health symptoms, grief following the death of a loved one, and fear-based bullying of students. Depending upon the needs of the specific small-group, the school counselor would challenge the students to accept their feelings rather than avoid them. The school counselor also works to challenge the students' mindsets to increase psychological flexibility. This could be done through a daily journal processing activity where students are encouraged to write through their anxieties and bring their writings to a group of non-judgmental supporters. By engaging in this technique, students may find that they have external support and accountability



with the school counselor and with their peers who may help to normalize some of their worries.

Mindfulness is an integral part of implementing an ACT approach. This counseling technique has gained an immense amount of popularity in the field of professional school counseling as it can be applied to various demographics experiencing a wide variety of needs. Mindfulness practices work to increase awareness of present sensations, thoughts, and behaviors, so that other therapeutic processes, such as defusion, are a possibility (Hayes & Lillis, 2012). Tier 2 techniques surrounding mindfulness can take many forms such as guided meditation and imagery practices, deep breathing exercises, nature walks, and sensory scans, to name a few. In these activities, the school counselor may act as a guide or an active participant in the mindfulness process depending on the developmental and cultural needs of their students. After the activity, the school counselor processes through the students' reactions towards mindfulness and solidifies the connection between awareness and their own unique needs.

The long-term effects and consequences following the COVID-19 global pandemic are largely unknown at this time. However, past research regarding natural disasters shows that people exposed to extended trauma may be more vulnerable to developing panic disorders, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Geng et al., 2018). To address the anxiety and panic symptoms in a small-group counseling setting, school counselors can encourage students to go through the process of defusion together. This can be done by inviting the students to assign physical traits to their thoughts through a process called physicalizing. For example, one

student may decide that their anxiety is a large, dark, and sharp thought bubble that hovers over their head while another student may view their anxiety as many small, quick-moving particles that follow closely behind them. Students are encouraged to either explain or draw out their anxiety's physical characteristics. This defusion technique invites students to externalize their thoughts rather than view them through a behavior-guiding lens. Doing this activity in a small-group setting can model how the defusion process looks and help the students to conceptualize how it can be done outside of counseling sessions when panic begins to arise. Defusion activities can also serve as another opportunity for continued accountability during group processing.

A unique opportunity that the small-group counseling process can provide in this situation is through the use of perspective-taking exercises. With ACT, it is important for students to understand their own personal beliefs and values systems and how they relate to their peers' perspectives. This helps to gain a better sense of how personal experiences can drive the way that individuals think and feel differently from one another even when they are presented with the same situation. An example of how a perspective taking exercise looks in a small-group counseling setting is through the use of values card sorts. Students are provided with a stack of cards that represent a variety of personal values. Students work individually to sort cards into piles of importance. After, the students come together to discuss the similarities and differences of their value systems and how that can cause them to view the same situation in a different way.

### Tier 3

Tier 3 interventions are suggested for high-risk students who have not responded to Tier 2 interventions (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). School counseling interventions at this level can vary according to school district culture (Ockerman et al., 2012), but may include short-term individual counseling and referrals to community organizations for long-term counseling (ASCA, 2019b; Belser et al., 2016).

After reviewing and integrating data compiled from Tier 1 and 2 interventions, the school counselor in this case example could recommend school-based individual counseling for a select number of 7th grade students. Creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment through rapport-building activities would be an important place for the school counselor to start. Enhancing personal safety should be prioritized. This process might help Tier 3 students share more of their personal and cultural experiences and learn new ways of reacting to internal experiences and stigma (Fuchs et al., 2013). Collaboration among all stakeholders (i.e., parents/guardians, teachers, administrators) would also be beneficial in developing a multicultural case conceptualization that identifies student needs and aligns with ACT. After a few school-based individual sessions (ASCA, 2019) with students identified in Tier 3, the school counselor decides to utilize Bowden and Bowden's (2012) recommended steps for developing an ACT-informed case conceptualization with one student (Joseph). This process is outlined next.

First, the school counselor encourages Joseph to draw a creative picture that references a few of the unhelpful messages and beliefs (i.e., catastrophic thoughts about attending school) that he frequently tells himself, as an example of defusion

(Bowden & Bowden, 2012). Working together, the school counselor empowers Joseph to describe his drawing and incorporates questions that pertain to his experiences and feelings that he might be avoiding. Joseph's input regarding his fear of peer and family interaction as well as the costs involved (not attending school to avoid unpleasant sensations) connect to the acceptance component found within the ACT approach, as suggested by Bowden and Bowden (2012). In terms of the present moment, the school counselor might next use a scaling question (with 1 being catastrophic and a 10 being not a concern at all) to find out how much time Joseph spends worrying about his past, present, and future fears. This information may lead to a richer understanding of Joseph's reliving of the COVID-19 crisis when school was not in session. To learn more about Joseph's sense of self, the school counselor could utilize the drawing and ask targeted questions that pertain to his cultural identity and perspective of the situation. For example, the school counselor can ask Joseph to reflect upon how he views the situation, (i.e., did he include himself in the drawing) from a problematic perspective (Bowden & Bowden, 2012) or from a growth-mindset. In terms of committed action and values, scaling can again be incorporated to assess how his actions (avoiding relationships and lack of school attendance) connect to his overall interests, motivations, and what he values most in life (Bowden & Bowden, 2012).

Due to the flexibility found within the ACT approach, the school counselor can utilize metaphors and experiential activities such as writing, drawing, and role-plays to address the most salient themes/patterns found within the previously outlined case conceptualization (Hayes et al., 2012). Incorporating mindfulness activities and assisting Joseph to see the situation as it is, might be an important starting place for the school

counselor. For example, the school counselor could describe mindfulness to Joseph as a process in which he is fully present without blocking or trying to alter the situation (Bogusch et al., 2018). We recommend that the school counselor preview the YouTube video/session entitled, “The Three Step Emotional Change Trick” by Dr. John Sommers-Flanagan (2017). This session includes helpful strategies regarding how to assist adolescents with honoring and expressing feelings without trying to change them.

To assist Joseph with defusion, the school counselor could remind Joseph that these are his thoughts and feelings (i.e. fear of contracting COVID-19 from his peers and family) and to create some distance from them and himself, would be helpful (Bowden & Bowden, 2012). The goal might be for Joseph to understand more about his thoughts and emotions (acceptance and willingness) and to explore if trying to eliminate them (by not attending school) is working or not. As such, we encourage the school counselor to incorporate the checkerboard metaphor activity in conversations with Joseph (Bogusch et al., 2018; Hayes et al., 2016). For example, Joseph could first identify his concerning thoughts and feelings and label them on checkerboard pieces. Next, he could imagine that he is the checkerboard and controls all of the moving parts of the game, but is not impacted by them (Bogusch et al., 2018; Hayes et al., 2016). This strategy might help Joseph be more present with and address some of his unpleasant thoughts and emotions with continued efforts to reduce his escape and avoidance behaviors in not wanting to attend school. Increasing Joseph’s awareness and acceptance to his thoughts and feelings through exploring the pros and cons of avoidance school.

A few individual sessions could also be devoted to Joseph's sense of self, goals and values, as well as cultural considerations. Through drawing and/or other creative activities, the school counselor could have Joseph explore and identify the people, extracurricular activities, as well as future postsecondary and career plans that he values. Next, Joseph could explore how his social relationships with his peers and family members have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Joseph could also explore and practice advocacy related skills to respond to bullying and bias concerns, if applicable. In efforts to align with his values and lessen ambivalence about attending school (social anxiety), the school counselor could invite Joseph to write a letter to a close friend or family member that he values. This activity might help Joseph re-connect with his values and practice how to be more true to himself as well as develop an intentional plan for re-engaging with peers and family members in the near future. Lastly, we encourage the school counselor to preview and adapt additional willingness and acceptance strategies such as the quicksand and dropping the rope metaphors as outlined in the article written by Bogusch and authors (2018).

### **Conclusion**

This article offered a discussion of how a school counselor might combine overlapping elements of ACT and MTSS within a comprehensive school counseling program as a support for students who experience social anxiety and other related social-emotional concerns. School counselors may benefit from utilizing ACT principles of holistic cognitive and behavior acceptance as well as commitment to make strengths-based changes in order to help students work toward many of the ASCA mindsets (ASCA, 2016). Additionally, techniques such as mindfulness and establishing a growth

mindset are already incorporated into many school counseling programs and could benefit from the overarching approach as viewed through the ACT theory. Finally, an ACT approach may be beneficial to inform how school counselors provide multi-tiered interventions to students within a formal crisis response, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to note, however, that the ACT principles connected to MTSS and student concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, as suggested in this article, has not been formally researched. Therefore, to advance this conversation, researchers should conduct studies that explore the overall effectiveness an ACT informed intervention plan from both a crisis and non-crisis perspective. Additionally, studies should explore the personal experiences and processes that school counselors utilize within the preparation and delivery of ACT interventions. These future studies are necessary to help advance evidence-based practices in school counseling, strengthen comprehensive programming, and provide practical social-emotional implications to the field.

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### **Biographical Statement**

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Erin M. D. Lane is an Assistant Professor in the Counselor Education Department at Western Illinois University-Quad Cities. Prior to her role at Western, Dr. Lane spent over a decade in school settings, serving in the roles of teacher, administrator, and, finally, school counselor. Her research interests include school counselor advocacy and social justice, serving under-represented gifted students, college and career readiness in PK-12 settings, and school counselor preparation. She is a licensed school counselor in Iowa and is a National Certified Counselor (NCC).

Ashley Dodson is an elementary school counselor for the Moline-Coal Valley School District No. 40 in Moline, Illinois. Areas of interest for Ms. Dodson include stress and anxiety management, trauma informed care, and issues surrounding diversity and equitable services in schools.