

## Online ultra-brief group acceptance and commitment therapy for eating behaviour

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# AN ULTRA-BRIEF COMPONENTS ANALYSIS OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT) FOR BINGE EATING BEHAVIOUR

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## INTRODUCTION

Obesity is a major public health issue globally (Ng, 2014) and has been identified as a key target for intervention by the UK Government. Although obesity is undoubtedly a multifactorial disease, the recent rise in overweight and obesity is significantly influenced by eating behaviours that lead to overeating such as external eating, emotional eating and binge eating. Yet the psychology of overeating has been largely ignored in current treatment policy (Foresight Report, 2007). Most of the known risk factors that interfere with weight control efforts are linked to psychosocial stress and/or the experience of strong positive and negative emotional states (Elfhag & Rossner, 2005; Nicholls, Devonport & Blake, 2015).

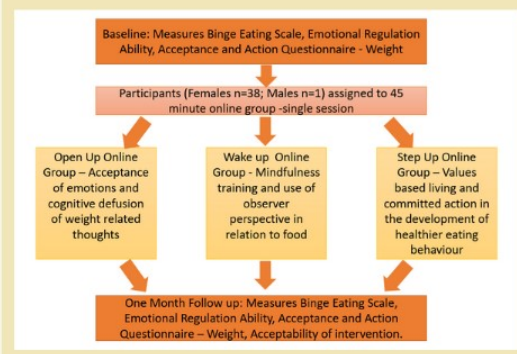
In 2015, Forman & Butryn proposed a new theoretical framework for improving self-regulation for an obese population engaged in weight control efforts. They argued that components of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) could be used to develop three key psychological skills necessary for reducing overeating: values clarity (Open up), metacognitive awareness (Wake up) and distress tolerance (Step up). Contemporaneously, Lillis et al. 2014, also argued for the need to test these components of Acceptance and Commitment therapy such that they might be used in an ultra-brief form as an adjunct to current weight management treatments.

In the present study, participants (n=39; Mean age = 41.66, SD =9.49) were offered an intervention addressing one of three skills within the ACT Tri-flex model to investigate whether any of these components reduce binge eating behaviour, improve emotional regulation skills and increase psychological flexibility. It was hypothesised that the "Open Up" component would be more effective than the other interventions.

## OBJECTIVE

To test and compare the effect of three very brief ACT component based psychological interventions on binge eating behaviour, emotional regulation, and psychological flexibility in an overweight/obese community sample who identified as struggling with dieting and binge eating, and were not in receipt of any psychological services.

## OPEN TRIAL DESIGN



## RESULTS

The data were analysed by separate mixed 2 x 3 ANOVAs and the error rate was controlled with post-hoc Bonferroni corrections.

The analysis of variance showed that all three interventions (Open Up, Wake Up, Step Up) demonstrated a significant main effect of time in binge eating ( $F(1, 36) = 13.66, p = 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .27$ ) and psychological flexibility ( $F(1, 34) = 13.74, p = 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .29$ ).

In contrast, there was no significant difference in participants' ability to regulate their emotions following the interventions ( $F(1, 36) = 3.20, p = 0.08, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .08$ ).

The research hypothesis could not be accepted as there was no significant interaction effect detected between time and group for any of the dependent variables.

These data suggest that there was no difference in the effectiveness of the three interventions with regards to reducing binge eating behaviour or increasing psychological flexibility.



This paper offers evidence that ultra-brief online ACT interventions present a cost-effective solution to reduce binge eating and improve psychological flexibility as an adjunct to current weight management programmes.

## CONCLUSION

The data did not support the hypothesis that Acceptance and Cognitive Defusion were more effective at increasing Psychological Flexibility than other components of ACT.

All of the components of ACT were effective at reducing binge eating behaviour and increasing psychological flexibility specifically related to weight and body image.

Improvements were not related to increased skill in emotional regulation as expected. This may be because the development of these skills requires a longer-term investment than can be offered in an ultra-brief intervention.

Limitation: Lack of randomisation and a control group.

This an exciting time for research into ultra-brief psychological interventions for obesity (Guerrini Usubini et al., 2021) which is highly relevant in the current economic and health-care landscape.

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