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Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Help Cancer Survivors Move Forward After Treatment
May 15

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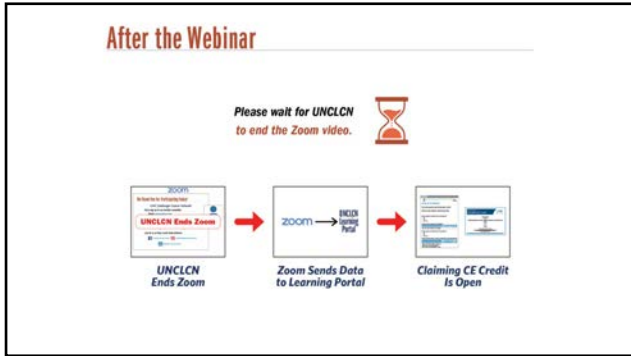
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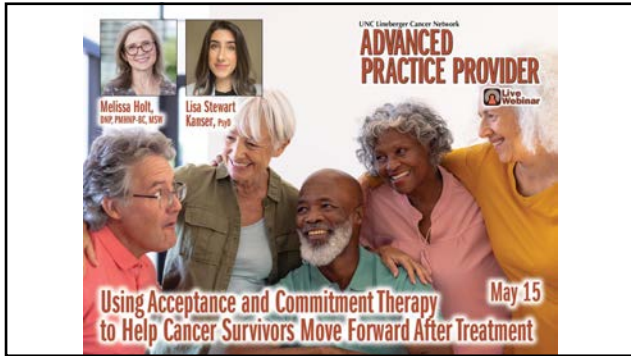
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Our Presenter



Our Presenter

Melissa Holt, DNP, PMNP-BC, NCC, is a board certified Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner with a unique focus of intersecting psychiatric care with oncology care. She has always had a passion for working with people with cancer and focusing on their psychosocial needs. She has a special interest in anxiety and mood disorders and how critical illness impacts the treatment and care of these patients. Her role within the Comprehensive Cancer Support Program is to provide psychiatric medication management and psychotherapy for the patients receiving care at UNC Cancer Hospital. She also serves as the Survivorship Program Coordinator for UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Dr. Holt recently started a survivorship clinic for cancer survivors with her colleagues Lisa Kanser, PhD, and Ellen Ruebush, LCSW, LCSA, NCC, and she teaches Finding Wellness After Cancer, wellness classes for cancer survivors. She's fortunate to work with incredibly talented colleagues with the Comprehensive Cancer Support Program, and helping cancer survivors has become her passion. Also, working as a nurse practitioner has brought incredible meaning to her life.

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Our Presenter

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Our Presenter

- 3. Melissa Holt, DNP, PMHNP-BC, recently started a survivorship clinic for cancer survivors with my colleagues Lisa Kanser, PsyD, and Ellen Ruebush, LCSW, LCAS, NCTIP.

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Our Presenter

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Our Presenter

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- 2. She teaches *Finding Wellness After Cancer*, wellness classes for cancer survivors.
- 1. She is fortunate to work with incredibly talented colleagues with the Comprehensive Cancer Support Program.

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Our Presenter



Lisa Kanser, PhD

Lisa Kanser, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in the UNC Department of Psychiatry. Her clinical roles include treating adult cancer patients and survivors through UNC's Comprehensive Cancer Support Program. She also provides psychological services for patients who are medically hospitalized through the Psychiatry Consultation-Liaison service. She has a strong appreciation for the complex interplay between biomedical, sociocultural, and psychological factors and outcomes. Clinical and research interests include applying evidence-based psychotherapeutic modalities to optimize illness management and to promote overall wellbeing and resilience.

Dr. Kanser completed her doctoral training at the Florida Institute of Technology. She completed a post-doctoral fellowship in Health Psychology at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa, Florida. Dr. Kanser joined UNC faculty in 2021 and developed the Adult Consultation-Liaison Psychology Service. She provides psychological evaluations and treatment for adult cancer patients and survivors through UNC's Comprehensive Cancer Support Program. She also enjoys supervising the next generation of mental health professionals and currently supervises PGY2 residents and pre-doctoral psychology interns.

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Our Presenter

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Our Presenter

3. Lisa Kanser, PhD, completed her doctoral training at the Florida Institute of Technology.

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Our Presenter

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Sample Poll Everywhere Question



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ACCME Disclosure

This activity has been planned and implemented under the sole supervision of the Course Director, Stephanie Wheeler, M.D. M.H., in association with the UNC Office of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The course director received research support from AstraZeneca (ended June 2023) and Pfizer Medical Foundation (ended December 2023). These financial relationships have been mitigated. CPD staff have no relevant financial relationships with ineligible companies as defined by the ACCME.

A potential conflict of interest occurs when an individual has an opportunity to affect educational content about health-care products or services of a commercial interest with which he/she has a financial relationship. The speakers and planners of this learning activity have not disclosed any relevant financial relationships with any commercial interests pertaining to this activity.

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ANCC Disclosure

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Relevant Financial Relationship:
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Criteria for Activity Completion:
 Criteria for successful completion requires attendance at the NCPD activity and submission of an evaluation within 30 days.

Approved Provider Statement:
 UNC Health is approved as a provider of nursing continuing professional development by the North Carolina Nurses Association, an accredited approver by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission on Accreditation.

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What is a common concern for cancer survivors?

Nobody has responded yet.
 Hang tight! Responses are coming in.


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Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to Help Cancer Survivors Move Forward After Treatment

Melissa Holt, DNP, PMHNP-BC, MSW
melissa_holt@med.unc.edu
Lisa Stewart Kanser, PsyD
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Disclosures

We have no financial disclosures.

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Learning Objectives

1. Describe psychosocial challenges faced by cancer survivors
2. Identify core concepts of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
3. Explain how ACT can be used to address psychosocial concerns in cancer survivorship

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Common Survivorship Concerns

Fear of cancer recurrence

Change in self-concept

Body image difficulties

Fatigue

Attention/concentration difficulties

Difficulty adjusting to changes in functioning

Work and social reintegration

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The Realities of Cancer Survivorship:

The cancer survival rate continues to improve, so more and more people are living with both physical and psychological symptoms after cancer treatments.

Post-cancer treatment effects, such as anxiety, pain, fatigue, insomnia, depression, and fear of recurrence, often persist for more than 10 years.

It is common for cancer survivors to perceive stressors as more severe due to fear of recurrence. This can lead to a significant impact on mood and physical symptoms.

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What is ACT?

Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999

- Form of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) developed in the 1980s
- Process-oriented vs. Outcomes-oriented
- Helps patients change their *relationship* with their symptoms rather than *eliminate* symptoms

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What is ACT? (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999)

Six core principles:

- Acceptance
- Defusion
- Self-as-context
- Contact with the present moment
- Values
- Committed Action

Goal is to increase psychological flexibility



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What is a difference between ACT and other forms of psychotherapy?


ACT sessions can be completed in less than 30 min	0%
ACT sessions help patients change their thoughts to be more positive	0%
ACT is process-oriented vs outcomes-oriented	0%
ACT involves uncovering unconscious factors that contribute to suffering	0%

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ACT Principles

- **Acceptance:** Learning to accept uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and sensations without trying to control them
- **Mindfulness:** Developing nonjudgmental awareness and being present in the moment
- **Self-as-Context:** Recognizing the "observing self" that can observe experiences without judgement
- **Defusion:** Detaching from unhelpful thoughts and feelings
- **Values:** Identifying core values and using these to guide behavior and decision-making
- **Committed Action:** Setting goals and taking actions consistent with values, even in the face of difficult circumstances



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Acceptance

Learning to accept uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and sensations without trying to control them

Pain is universal, and it is natural to want to avoid pain and discomfort.

However, sometimes our efforts to avoid pain and discomfort inadvertently prolongs suffering and takes us away from the things that matter most.

Ex:

- Procrastinating
- Excessive reassurance seeking
- Avoidance behaviors
- Emotional suppression
- Substance misuse




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Mindfulness

Developing nonjudgmental awareness and being present in the moment.

How?

We refocus mind to the present moment.

A	Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
C	Come back into your body
E	Engage in what you're doing



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Self-as-Context

Recognizing the "observing self" that can observe experiences without judgment

Self-as-context (SAC) is "the part that notices."

SAC can help patients establish a more stable sense of self




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Defusion



Detaching from our thoughts and feelings

Using SAC, we can create space between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings.

"I notice I'm having the thought ____"

"My mind is telling me the story that ____"




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Values

Identifying core values and using these to guide behavior and decision-making

Our alignment with values can shift when going through challenging times.

Clarifying values helps identify what matters most and illuminates areas in which we want to make changes.




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Committed Action

Setting goals and taking actions consistent with values, even in the face of difficult circumstances

We can increase our alignment with our values by creating an actionable plan and committing to following through with the plan despite our circumstances.

A good plan involves anticipating obstacles and identifying ways to overcome these obstacles.



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Telling yourself, "My mind is telling me the story that this symptom means the cancer is back" is a form of which ACT intervention?

Mindfulness 0%
 Cognitive defusion 0%
 Self-as-context 0%
 Contact with the present moment 0%

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So Why Choose ACT?

Cancer survivors can learn to:

- Acknowledge and accept cancer-related distress
- Reduce avoidance of thoughts, images, and emotions
- Clarify personal life values
- Implement behavior changes that facilitate moving towards these values.

This all leads to greater **psychological flexibility**, which is the aim of ACT.

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So Why Choose ACT?

According to the NIH National Cancer Institute website, ACT can teach skills that can help cancer survivors cope more effectively with the emotional and physical changes that occur after completing treatment (NCI staff, 2020).

A systematic review on ACT use with adult cancer survivors found that ACT significantly reduced anxiety, fear of cancer recurrence, and depression. It improves quality of life and produces psychological flexibility (Mathew, et al, 2021).

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Clarifying personal life values can be helpful in achieving greater psychological flexibility.

True 0%


False 0%

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Case Vignette – Mr. Jones

Mr. Jones is a 65yo man with history of bladder cancer. He reports debilitating anticipatory anxiety about the possibility of cancer returning. Impacts of anxiety include sleep disturbances, decreased appetite, attention/concentration difficulties, and restlessness. Mr. Jones also reported a significant preoccupation with his health and reported excessive worry about any uncomfortable bodily sensations. He frequently reschedules his surveillance appointments as an effort to avoid feeling anxious.



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ACT Course – Mr. Jones

Normalize fear of recurrence and explore ways in which prior efforts to control thoughts and feelings increase anxiety (i.e., *experiential avoidance*)

- Rescheduling appointments, trying to control/suppress worries

Teach mindfulness skills to help Mr. Jones acknowledge feelings without judgment and get back to the present moment



- A: Acknowledge what you're feeling
- C: Come back into your body
- E: Engage in what you're doing

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ACT Course – Mr. Jones



- Teach Mr. Jones how to unhook from unhelpful thoughts and feelings (i.e., cognitive defusion)
 - “The story I’m telling myself is that I would never be able to get through a cancer recurrence.”
 - “I notice I’m having the thought that going to my appointment means I’ll probably get bad news.”
 - “This is a feeling of anxiety.”



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ACT Course – Mr. Jones



- Clarify Mr. Jones core values and rate alignment with values on a scale of 1-10
 - Family (6/10)
 - Nature (3/10)
 - Spirituality (8/10)
- Assist Mr. Jones in creating a SMART goal to help increase alignment with values
 - S – Specific
 - M – Motivated by values
 - A – Adaptive
 - R – Realistic
 - T – Time-framed
- Ex. I will spend time with my grandson this Saturday morning planting on herb garden.



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ACT Course – Mr. Jones

- Anticipate obstacles and identify strategies to overcome obstacles
 - Negative mood/self-talk: mindfulness skills, cognitive defusion
 - Pain/physical discomfort: develop action plan
 - External limitations: flexibility in goal-setting



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Case Vignette – Mrs. Smith

Mrs. Smith is a 35yo woman with a history of breast cancer s/p double mastectomy, reconstructive surgery, and chemotherapy. She has difficulties with body image following surgery and is endorsing significant depressive and anxiety symptoms. She and her long-term partner have broken up, and she worries it is because he no longer finds her attractive. She shares that she "stress eats" and is gaining weight, which makes her feel worse. She has started isolating herself from her friends. She calls out from work a lot and fears she will lose her job. She can't sleep for more than 2 hours at a time. She has lost motivation to work towards a promotion at work.



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ACT Course – Ms. Smith

Help her clarify her unhelpful thoughts and feelings by asking:

What judgments does your mind make about yourself, your body, your mind, your behavior? "I'm not attractive." "My breasts feel strange." "It's ugly not to have nipples."

What stories about the past or future does your mind tend to hook you with? "He left me because of my ugly breasts." "I'm going to be alone forever."

What reasons does your mind give you as to why you shouldn't do the things that matter to you? "What's the point of moving forward if I'm going to be alone?"



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ACT Course – Ms. Smith

Here we may teach the following:

It's normal to have thoughts and feelings that are painful and that we all try to get rid of these painful thoughts and feelings

The Aim of ACT is to help reduce the impact of these painful thoughts and feelings and help learn how to live the life that we want to live

The key here is **acceptance**, which means opening up and making room for painful thoughts and feelings. We drop the struggle with these thoughts and feelings and allow them to be as they are.



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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Explore with her what she does to try to control these unpleasant thoughts and feelings.



"I call out from work all of the time—I don't want people to see me."

"I stress eat and I'm gaining weight."

"I stopped hanging out with my friends."

"I smoke marijuana everyday because it helps me forget about how awful I feel."

This is *Experiential Avoidance*, which is a normal psychological process where we try to get rid of our difficult thoughts and feelings.

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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

We know that higher levels of **experiential avoidance** leads to more depression, poorer work performance, an inability to learn, lower quality of life, and sometimes drug or alcohol addiction.

Teach her that trying to get rid of these feelings in the long-term is only going to make her life get worse.

Teach her about the power of mindfulness and how it can help people learn to pay attention to their thoughts and feelings with openness, curiosity, kindness, and flexibility (Harris, 2019).

Teach a mindfulness technique that she can practice daily, such as *Dropping Anchor*.



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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Cognitive Defusion—where we learn to step back and detach from our unpleasant thoughts or memories.

Potential Strategies:



- *Normalize* by saying, "Thoughts like these are normal when your body looks and feels different. We all want to feel comfortable in our bodies." This may help her feel like there is nothing wrong with her.
- We may get into *detective mode* by saying, "Usually when our minds are saying things about our appearance, there's an underlying purpose. What might these negative thoughts about your appearance be trying to help you get or avoid? Is it pointing out something that really matters to you?"

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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Provide psychoeducation about increasing psychological flexibility by changing our relationship with our thoughts and feelings and to see them in terms of how **helpful** or **unhelpful** they are. We are **NOT** our thoughts and feelings and we can learn to observe them from a distance without getting caught up in them.



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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Practice mindfulness and maybe take her through Leaves on a Stream exercise.

Help her to learn to say, "I notice I'm having the thought..." or "The story I'm telling myself is..."

Consider assigning this as homework where she can practice mindfulness and notice her thoughts without letting the thoughts control her.

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ACT Course — Ms. Smith



Discuss **values** and help her clarify what her values are. Values are your heart's deepest desires of how you want to behave and the qualities that you want to bring to your ongoing behavior (Harris, 2019).

With this patient, I would help her to tap into values of kindness, caring, and support and help her use kind self-talk, kind imagery, and kind deeds.

Self compassion would be helpful here. This involves acknowledging your pain and responding with kindness.

Help her discover which values she feels disconnected from and which ones she feels aligned with.

Ask her what it's like when you act on your values (showing self-compassion) instead of letting the negative thoughts about your appearance push you around.



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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Goal Setting:

Pick a Domain (health, work, education, leisure, personal growth, spirituality, parenting, friends, family, intimate relationship, other). *Personal Growth*

Choose your values. Choose 1 or 2 values that you want to bring into play with your chosen life domain. *Kindness*

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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Set a SMART Goal:

S = Specific



M = Motivated by values

A = Adaptive

R = Realistic

T = Time-framed

I will write down something beautiful about me every morning for 1 week.



 

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ACT Course — Ms. Smith

Review ACT with Ms. Smith

- A = Accept your thoughts and feelings, and be present
- C = Choose a valued direction
- T = Take action

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Thank You . . .

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Barbara Walsh, PhD MPH, MEd, RN - Nurse Planner

The song *Back 2 Back* written and performed by Don Pie

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Upcoming Live Webinars learns.auctca.org

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE  **May 22 12:00 PM**

The Selective Use of Radiation in Solid Malignancies
Kevin Pearlstein, MD

PATIENT-CENTERED CARE  **June 12 12:00 PM**

Chemotherapy-Induced Osteonecrosis of the Jaw
Ricardo Padilla, DDS

ADVANCED PRACTICE PROVIDER  **June 19 4:00 PM**

Assessing Anemia and Thrombocytopenia, and When to Be Concerned
Nancy Vogler, RN, MSN, AGPCNP

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Frances Collichio, MD

PATIENT-CENTERED CARE
Oncologic Emergencies
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