

EMBRACING AFFIRMING CARE:

WORKING WITH THE QUEER COMMUNITY THROUGH ACCEPTANCE & COMMITMENT THERAPY



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Introduction: In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by individuals within the queer community. From discrimination to identity struggles, the need for specialized and affirming mental health care has become increasingly evident. One therapeutic approach that has shown promise in addressing these challenges is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). By combining principles of mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based action, ACT provides a framework that resonates deeply with the experiences of queer individuals. In this article, we explore the importance of affirming care within the context of working with the queer community and how ACT can be effectively utilized to support their mental well-being.

Understanding Affirming Care: Affirming care is rooted in the belief that every individual deserves to be respected, validated, and supported in their journey towards self-acceptance and fulfillment. *(continued on page 4)*



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Creating Wellness Habits

by Jamie Leslie

“Healthy habits are learned in the same way as unhealthy ones – through practice”

Wayne Dyer

Humans are habitual creatures. We will brush our teeth in the same direction. We cross our arms the same way. We will sit in the same spot at meetings, church, or other frequent locations. And changing up these habits or adding new habits is about as easy as pulling a tooth.

Yet, to decrease mental health suffering, we often need to review our unhealthy habits and work to implement healthy habits. This article will examine ways to do this that will hopefully lead to success! Also, we will look at healthy habits to consider and common unhealthy habits to replace.

According to Ilene Berns-Zare's Psychology Today article, 6 Powerful Ways to Build New habits, there are ways to build up healthy habits. The first step is to start building on awareness. This would mean paying attention to current habits. It could include making a list of daily habits that you already have. Then you can identify the habit you want to change.

The article goes further to note that if you attach the new habit or behavior to something you already do on a regular basis, you're more likely to develop a new habit. This is called habit stacking. My example of this is: I practice mindfulness when I take my shower. I already have the daily habit of taking a shower and to ensure that I will do my mindfulness practice, I do it while I take a shower.

The other suggestion is to start with small bites. If you try to develop a new habit and you don't chunk it down, you are more likely to not follow through and feel overwhelmed. My example for this is that I started my daily habit of exercising with chunks. First, I started with the use of an app that had 10 min – 2 hour exercise routines. I started with the 10-minute routines and slowly increased the time of the routines.

Give yourself a “WHY”. In the Psychology Today article it notes that during practice it helps to develop a sense of purpose. This will help increase your motivation to follow through with the continued habit. Make it something personal for you. My “Why” for exercising is that I want to be around for my daughter when she becomes an adult. This helps motivate me to not put off my healthy daily habits.

Hopefully this gives you some tips on how to develop healthy habits. The next part of this article will look at healthy habits to consider for yourself. The obvious start is to implement some form of daily exercise. Be realistic about what works for you. Not everyone has time to go to the gym. Recognize what resources you can use. Does your workplace have stairs? If so, consider making it a habit to use the stairs vs the elevator at your workplace. There are plenty of apps available that we can use to put in place an exercise routine. I use an app called BetterMe. The app allows me to log my calories. It also has a variety of workouts that the user can utilize. BetterMe has a 7day free trial and then costs about \$38.50 for 3 months. There are a variety of apps to check out that may do similar tasks. So, I encourage you to shop around and see what fits best for you.

Another healthy habit to consider is taking time outs from technology. This is especially important to do at least 30 minutes before bed. Technology can increase dopamine which can then lead to addiction. Consider making at least one mealtime a no technology time. Choose to read a book before bed instead of tuning into Facebook or TikTok.

Work on getting yourself outside in nature for at least 10 minutes a day. Exposure to sunshine can increase the body's natural development of melatonin and serotonin. This can help alleviate Seasonal Affective Disorder. Plus, just exposing yourself to nature will increase a positive mood for the day.

Add the practice of meditation as a weekly habit. There are many types of meditation. You can utilize candle meditation. This would involve lighting a candle and doing some light gazing at the flickering flame. Guided meditation would involve the use of someone walking you through a meditation exercise. You can find several of these on YouTube. Mindfulness meditation is another one to consider. It involves the focus of your 6 senses (Sight, Sound, Smell, Touch, Taste and Emotions).



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Consider creating a sleep hygiene habit. This may involve not watching television or engaging in technology 30 minutes before bed. It can also involve a nice bedtime tea to relax your body. Sleep hygiene can also involve creating an environment that is relaxing. You could have a sound machine playing to provide white noise. Also using a weighted blanket can optimize your sleep.

There are many healthy habits to consider, and this article barely touches the tip of the iceberg. To find more ideas, you can touch base with a friend to find out what healthy habits they use. Or you can look at Psychology Today & review the ones recommended there for mental health.

The last part of the article will explore common unhealthy habits to replace. One would include not getting enough water. This is a pretty common one among all of us. Instead of H₂O, we will imbibe soda, energy drinks, coffee, or alcohol. None of these provide the proper elements to hydrate our body. Buy a reusable water bottle that you can take with you and use. This will increase the likelihood of getting more water in your system.

Also, we are habitual creatures with the overuse of technology. This was discussed earlier in the article. Not only can it negatively impact your sleep, but it can decrease your communication skills.

Overeating or eating too much fast foods is another common bad habit. The constraints of time and not planning meals can lead to getting that Whopper from Burger King or grabbing the Little Debbie Snack off the counter. Consider using a meal plan. You can even have meals delivered to your door weekly and then prepare them for yourself and your family. Also have some healthy snacks in your car or at your work office.

Putting off wellness exams is another common bad habit. Time once again is a factor in the equation. Plus, these are often done maybe once or twice a year and therefore easier to forget about. When you do follow through a wellness visit with your doctor, dentist, or eye doctor, schedule the next year's appointment then. That way you already have one ready to go. Put the appointment into your phone to remind you!

Hopefully this article gets you working on decreasing your bad habits and helps you develop new healthy habits and KEEP THEM! Remember you can use the support of your Three Trails EFAP to keep healthy habits going strong!

Bowling for Jason's Friends

On a cold rainy day in March, five teammates found their way to Galloways for the annual Bowl for Jason's friends. The team Captain, Jennifer Bays, set up the adventure with Shelly McAlpin, Jamie Leslie, Kelly Clanton, and Jerel Bays attending. The scores were not ones to write home about, but it was a wonderful event to raise awareness and financial support for. If you are interested in contributing to a great cause, check out <https://www.jasonsfriends.org/>.

Jason's Friends has been pivotal in the fight against cancer by helping families with financial assistance. Over 90% of the dollars received goes directly towards the financial support of Wyoming families that enroll in their program. Or consider putting together your own bowling team for next year's Bowling for Jason's Friends! You won't regret it! Maybe you will see your friendly neighborhood Three Trails EFAP team hitting strikes like you wouldn't believe (actually probably gutter balls to be honest).



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For queer individuals, affirming care involves creating a safe and inclusive space where their identities, experiences, and feelings are acknowledged and honored without judgment or prejudice. It recognizes the systemic barriers and societal stigmas that queer individuals often face and seeks to counteract them through empathy, validation, and empowerment.

The Role of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT): ACT offers a holistic approach to mental health that aligns well with the principles of affirming care. At its core, ACT encourages individuals to cultivate psychological flexibility by accepting their thoughts and emotions, being present in the moment, and taking committed action towards their values. For queer individuals who may grapple with internalized shame, societal rejection, or identity-related distress, ACT provides a framework for embracing their authentic selves and living a life aligned with their values.

Key Components of ACT in Working with the Queer Community:

1. **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness practices are integral to ACT and can help queer individuals develop greater self-awareness and emotional regulation. By learning to observe their thoughts and feelings without judgment, individuals can reduce the impact of internalized stigma and cultivate a sense of inner peace and acceptance.
2. **Cognitive Diffusion:** Queer individuals often face negative self-talk and intrusive thoughts related to their identities. Cognitive diffusion techniques in ACT help individuals create distance from their thoughts and recognize them as passing mental events rather than absolute truths. This can be particularly beneficial in challenging internalized homophobia, transphobia, or other forms of self-doubt.
3. **Values Clarification:** ACT emphasizes the importance of identifying and clarifying personal values – the qualities and experiences that are most meaningful and fulfilling to an individual. For queer individuals, this process can be transformative as it allows them to connect with their authentic selves and envision a life that is congruent with their identity and aspirations.
4. **Committed Action:** ACT encourages individuals to take purposeful steps towards their values, even in the face of discomfort or adversity. For queer individuals, this may involve advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, building affirming relationships, or pursuing activities that bring them joy and fulfillment. By taking committed action, individuals can cultivate resilience and agency in navigating the challenges of being queer in a heteronormative society.

Conclusion: Working with the queer community requires a deep understanding of their unique experiences and a commitment to providing affirming care that validates and empowers individuals on their journey towards self-acceptance and well-being. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy offers a valuable framework for therapists and mental health professionals to support queer individuals in embracing their identities, navigating societal challenges, and living authentically according to their values. By integrating the principles of ACT with a culturally sensitive and affirming approach, we can foster resilience, empowerment, and psychological flourishing within the queer community.

Meet our new team members!



KELLY CLANTON

Kelly is an intern at our office, working on her Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling at the University of Wyoming's Casper College campus.

KATIE WILSON



Katie is a provisionally licensed social worker, currently under the supervision of Jamie Leslie, LPC. She holds a master's degree in social work from the University of South Dakota and a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Wyoming.

Learn more at ~ <https://threetrailsefap.org/staff.html>



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