

Living Life to the Fullest

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All videos and mindfulness exercise can be accessed from the

Niagara North Family Health Team website at:

<http://niagaranorthfht.ca/resources/mental-health/living-life-to-the-fullest-group>

PRE-READING

The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Experience

- **Preparation** – Participation in any therapy can initially be both a stressful and anxiety-provoking experience. Talking about particularly difficult experiences and daily events can sometimes evoke powerful emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety, or anger. As you express your feelings over time and you develop new skills, your ability to utilize effective strategies to manage previously overwhelming situations will improve. It's important to establish realistic expectations of change, but have patience with your progress, as improvement does not always occur immediately, or in ways that you might expect.
- **Session Format** – In this group the sessions are structured. At the start of the session your therapists will set an agenda that provides an overview of how the time will be used in the session and what topics will be covered. You can also add items to the agenda. Following the agenda setting, your therapists will check in to see how you made out with any of the exercises that were assigned over the previous week. Next, the therapists will present new information or work on new skills that have been presented. Finally, you will discuss your exercises goals for the following week.

Patient Responsibilities

- *Confidentiality and Group Treatment* – If you are participating in group treatment, it is very important to keep the identity of the other group members private. Although it is fine to discuss the group with people you are close to, you should never discuss any information that would reveal the identity of specific group members (e.g., names, place of employment, etc.). By protecting others' privacy, you help to ensure that the group remains a safe and confidential space so that group members can feel comfortable with self-disclosure.
- *Weekly Task Completion* – Every session of Living Life to the Fullest consists of learning new processes that build on each other. We encourage you to practice these regularly to help you live the life you want to live. You are encouraged to practice on a daily basis. This may require setting aside time in your busy schedule to make this a priority.

- *Attendance* – 100% attendance is expected. If you cannot attend weekly sessions or will be late, please contact one of the group facilitators. It is understandable that events outside of your control may occur, which may prevent you from attending. Please try to inform us well in advance of any such situations, where possible. If you miss two or more sessions consecutively, we will need to determine whether or not you will be able to continue with the group at this time.
- *Be Organized* - Please bring material from the handouts and material from the previous weeks to each group. It can be helpful to organize the material in a binder or file folder.
- *Respect* – We strive to create an environment where others can share. It is important that feedback be kind, helpful and supportive.
- *Rescuing* - As you get to know one another, people will begin to share personal details about their lives; their feelings, thoughts and experiences. Oftentimes, a typical reaction when someone is suffering is to try to help them get away from their pain. We do this by urging them to look on the bright side, by offering solutions, or telling them “it's going to be all right”. This is known as "rescuing." As part of the group process, it's important not to engage in “rescuing” others from their pain. The concern is not that it's a bad thing to do, but rather, “rescuing” is a strategy used to control feelings. In this group, you will be encouraged to move toward pain without letting it be in charge of you. This might not make complete sense right now.
- *Confusion* - We will be discussing your relationship with your thoughts and feelings in a way that can seem quite different than what you're used to. Therefore, you may feel a little confused at times, especially in the beginning. You're encouraged to approach this confusion with openness and willingness. It is a normal part of the process. It's not important for you to understand everything perfectly in order to benefit from this therapeutic approach. There is a saying in ACT: Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional. We'll explain this concept more as we move through the weeks.
- *Participation* - We are going to do a lot of different things -- explore concepts, engage in experiential exercises (some which are kind of goofy), articulate what we really want out of life and encounter thoughts & feelings in various & novel ways. Do your best to put your whole self into the experience. The more you put into the group, the more you are likely to get out of it.

- *Patience* - Most of the strategies, experiences, skills and techniques of this group will come together gradually. It can take a while for their benefits to become obvious. "Improvement" happens at its own pace and often continues after treatment has ended.

Should you require emergency intervention, please contact the crisis supports in your area: COAST Niagara 1-866-550-5205

Counsellor Responsibilities

- **Confidentiality** – Maintaining the discussions in your group sessions in confidence is not only the law, but also important to an effective therapeutic relationship. The information obtained in your sessions will remain confidential. However, there are situations where your counsellor would be obligated, by law, to break confidentiality:
 1. If the counsellor learns that a child is at risk or is being sexually, physically, emotionally abused, or neglected. This information must be reported to the Children's Aid Society.
 2. If the counsellor deems you to be at risk of harming yourself or someone else or believes that you are unable to take care of your basic needs.
 3. If it is learned that another registered healthcare professional has sexually abused a patient or made sexually inappropriate comments to a patient. Your counsellor is required to report this information to the registered healthcare professional's governing college (your name would not be provided without your written permission).
 4. If a judge subpoenas your clinical record, we may be required to release information to the court.

- **Progress notes** – The counsellor is required to keep records of the contact made with you and include information about your response to treatment, any concerns, or issues. The information recorded in progress notes can be helpful in planning treatment strategies.
- The counsellors will do their best to ensure that the expected material is covered each week and that the session stays on track.
- The counsellor is responsible for providing the **highest quality of care** possible and keeping group appointments is a priority. Arrangements can be made to speak with your counsellor regarding your treatment if any significant changes in your symptoms should occur.

The Principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a powerful, newer form of psychotherapy that is based on cutting-edge research into how the human mind works. ACT has been clinically proven to be successful in treating a wide range of psychological problems. The key themes of ACT are embedded in the name: ***Acceptance*** of the things that are out of your control and then making a ***commitment*** to changing those things that can be changed in order to make your life better. This is a very active form of therapy. ACT is not talk therapy. It's a therapy in which you experientially and actively learn new skills to improve your quality of life.

There are two basic aims in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy:

One aim is to help you create a rich, full and meaningful life. To do that, we'll need to spend some time talking about what you really want out of life; what's important and meaningful to you, deep inside your heart. We call this 'clarifying your values'. Values are your heart's deepest desires for what you want to do and how you want to be during your short time on this planet. Then, using that information as a guide, we'll look at how you can set goals and take action to change your life for the better - and in the process, develop a sense of meaning, purpose and vitality.

A second aim is to teach you a set of skills that will allow you to handle painful thoughts and feelings in a far more effective way, so that they have much less impact and influence over you. This set of skills is called *mindfulness* – a mental state of awareness, openness, and focus. In a state of mindfulness, painful thoughts and feelings have much

less impact on us. In a state of mindfulness, you can effectively handle even the most difficult feelings, urges, memories, thoughts and sensations. As you learn to do so, you can break self-defeating habits & destructive patterns of behaviour; let go of self-defeating beliefs; rise beyond your fears and shift your attitude in life-enhancing ways.

Group Process – A key part of the group process will focus on experientially learning mindfulness skills and then taking them home to practice in between sessions. The more you practice, the more benefits you'll receive – and vice-versa. What this means is that in some sessions we will actually need to bring up some of those painful thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations and urges during the session. By practicing new mindfulness skills, you will learn to handle painful thoughts & feelings more effectively. Because of this, you may find this form of therapy to be very challenging at times. However, at all times we will be working collaboratively, as equal team-players – so you will never be pushed or coerced into anything you are unwilling to do. (Leoma, J.)