FROM SURVIVAL MODE TO VALUES-BASED LIVING:

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT TRAINING FOR ABI CAREGIVERS

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OBJECTIVES

- **Gain a deeper understanding of caregivers' needs and experiences with ACT**
- **Engage in ACT exercises** to learn how the ACT model can be applied to caregiver mental health and well-being
- **Learn about early findings from program evaluation**
- **Identify practical strategies for implementing a caregiver-focused mental health group program** in a community-based setting

RATIONALE FOR ABI CAREGIVER MENTAL HEALTH GROUP

Long-term caregiving carries **emotional weight and identity shift**

Caregiver feedback: gap between knowledge and well-being

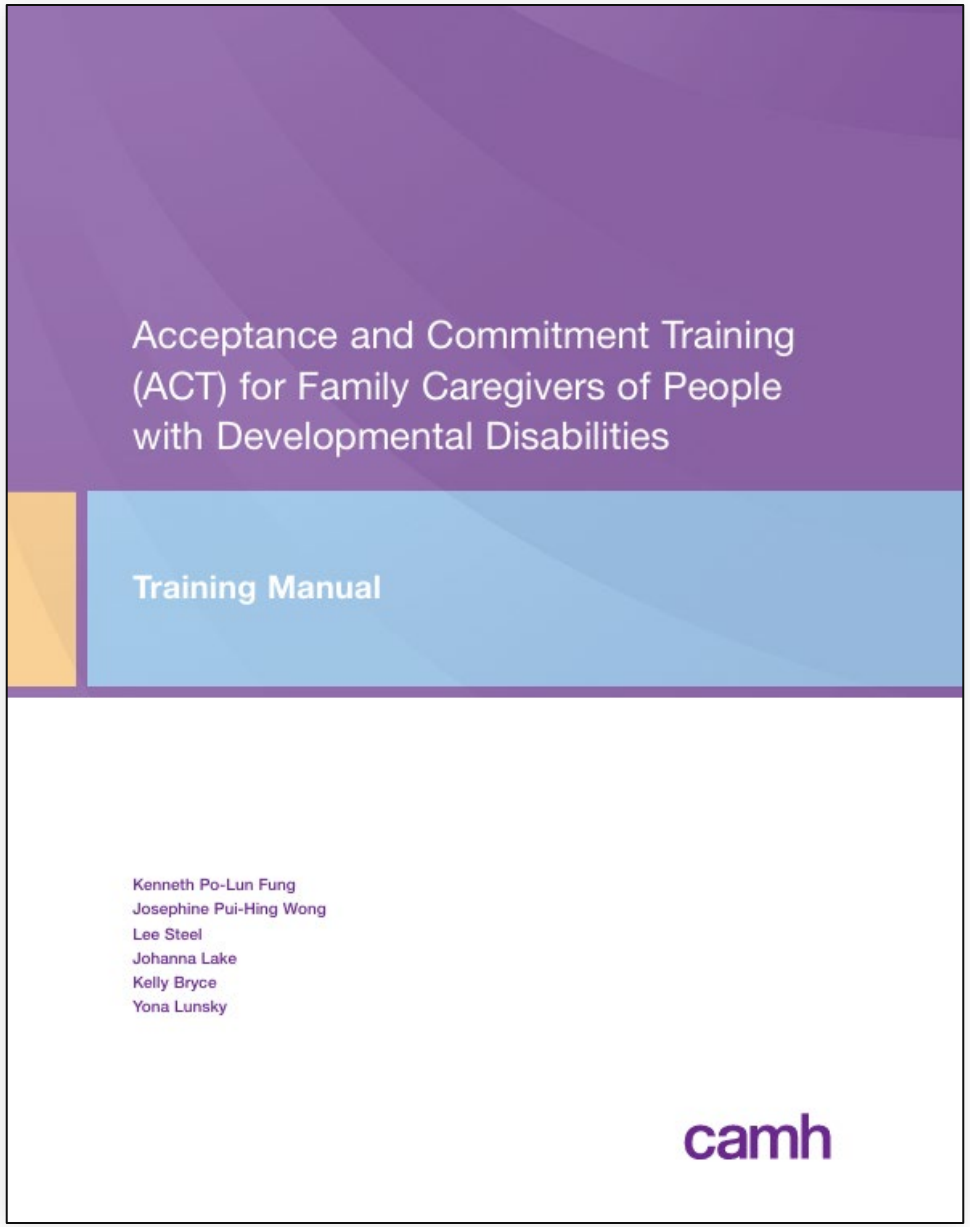
Traditional supports not enough to address psychological struggle

ACT is evidence-based psychotherapeutic modality for caregivers

Opportunities for **caregiver engagement, collaborative program design, future partnerships**

ABOUT THE "ACT FOR CAREGIVERS" PROGRAM

- **Skills group** created by clinicians, caregivers, and researchers at CAMH and UHN
- **Centers the caregiver experience**
- **Learn to manage difficult thoughts and feelings** that come with being a caregiver
- This is **not** a program focused on caregiving skills or resources
- **Grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** core processes

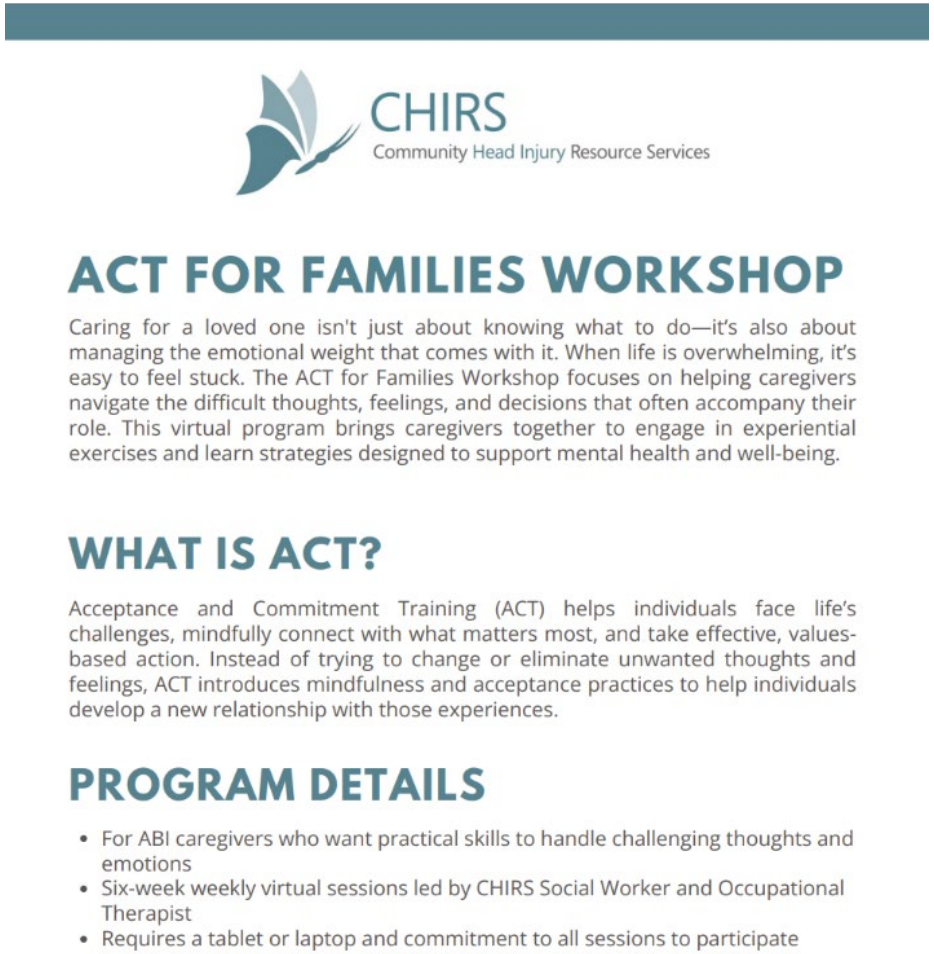


(Fung et. al, 2021)

CHIRS ACT FOR FAMILIES WORKSHOP

- **6 weekly sessions held over Zoom**
- Facilitated by RSW and OT
- **Participants work through experiential exercises**; small and large group reflective sharing
- Eligibility
  - Access to tablet/laptop, internet, private space
  - Commitment to 6 concurrent weekly sessions
  - Understanding of group purpose (not for resource-sharing or advice-giving)
- Recruitment → outreach to both staff and families

Flyer for screening & recruitment



CHIRS
Community Head Injury Resource Services

ACT FOR FAMILIES WORKSHOP

Caring for a loved one isn't just about knowing what to do—it's also about managing the emotional weight that comes with it. When life is overwhelming, it's easy to feel stuck. The ACT for Families Workshop focuses on helping caregivers navigate the difficult thoughts, feelings, and decisions that often accompany their role. This virtual program brings caregivers together to engage in experiential exercises and learn strategies designed to support mental health and well-being.

WHAT IS ACT?

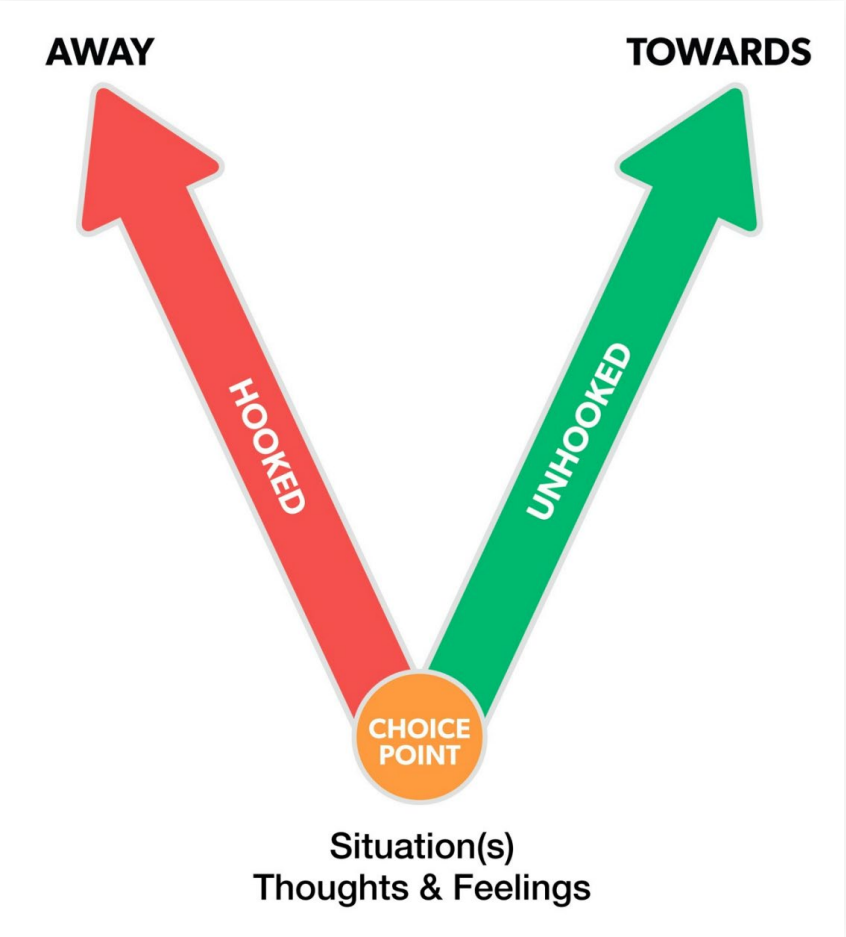
Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) helps individuals face life's challenges, mindfully connect with what matters most, and take effective, values-based action. Instead of trying to change or eliminate unwanted thoughts and feelings, ACT introduces mindfulness and acceptance practices to help individuals develop a new relationship with those experiences.

PROGRAM DETAILS

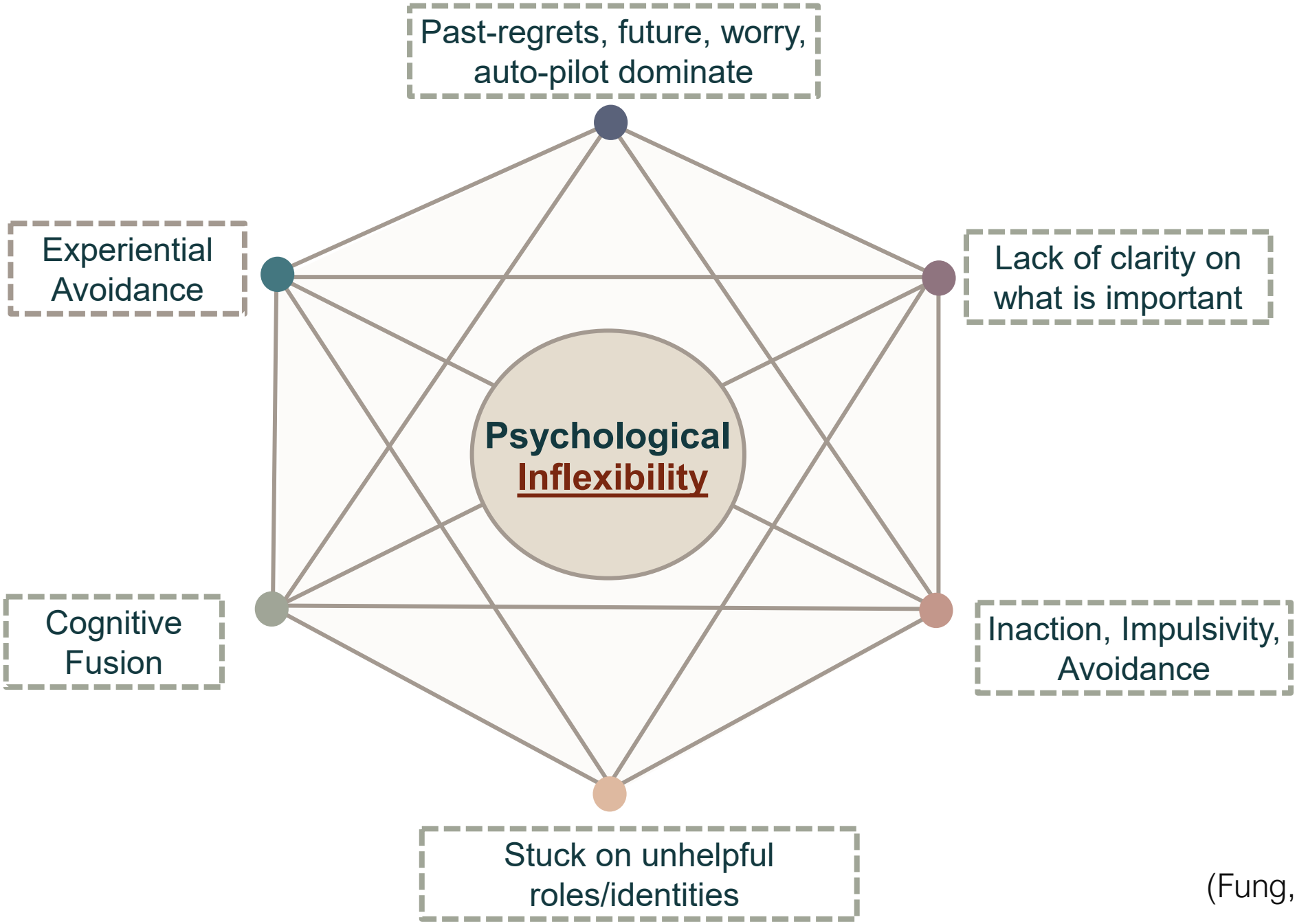
- For ABI caregivers who want practical skills to handle challenging thoughts and emotions
- Six-week weekly virtual sessions led by CHIRS Social Worker and Occupational Therapist
- Requires a tablet or laptop and commitment to all sessions to participate

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT)

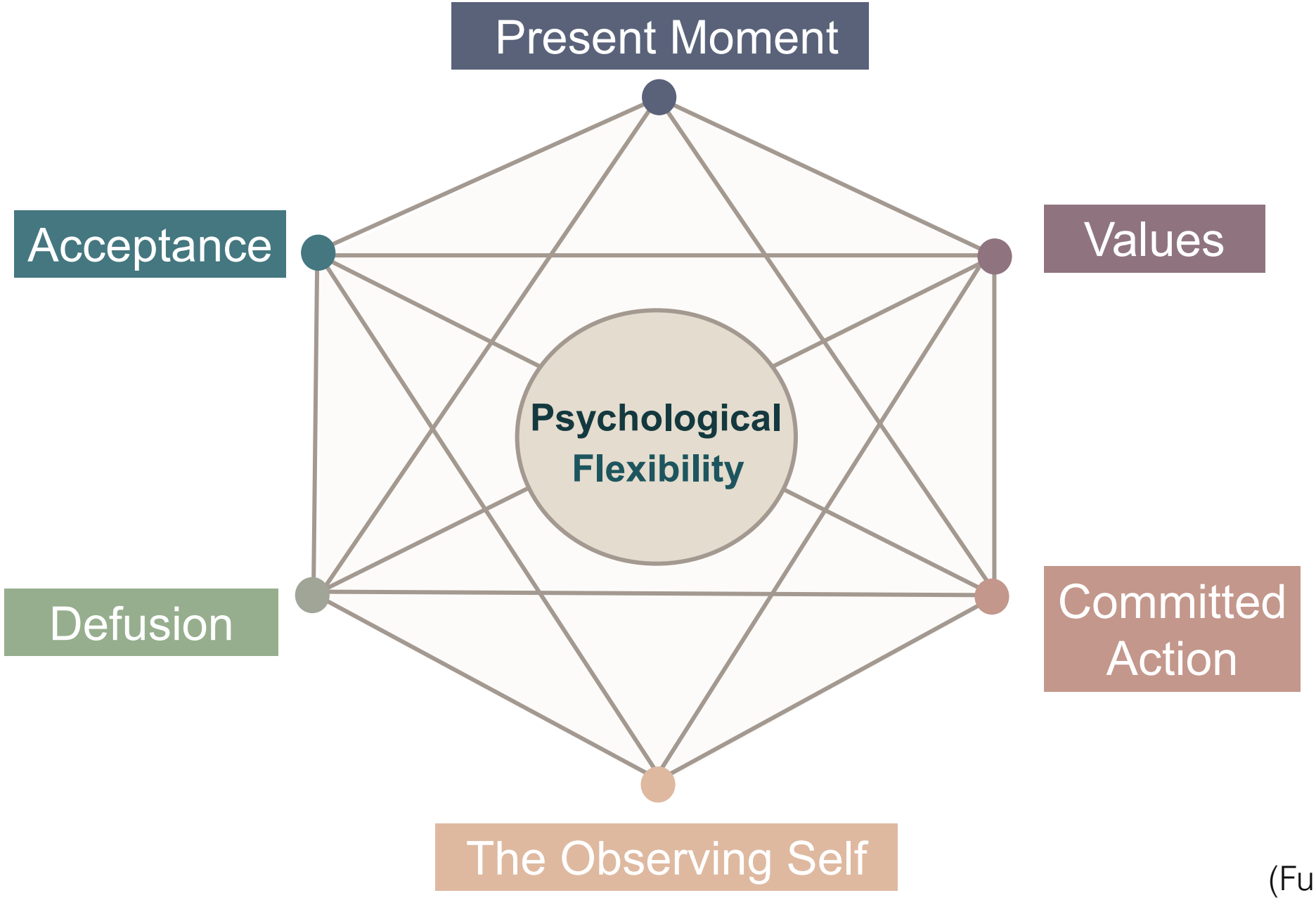
- Moves away from eliminating negative thoughts to changing how we relate to them.
- Psychological flexibility
  - Core goal: adapting to challenges while staying aligned with what is important
- “A process to be lived, not a problem to be solved”
- Workability over judgment
  - *Helpful or unhelpful*, not ”*good” or “bad”*.



(Harris, 2025)

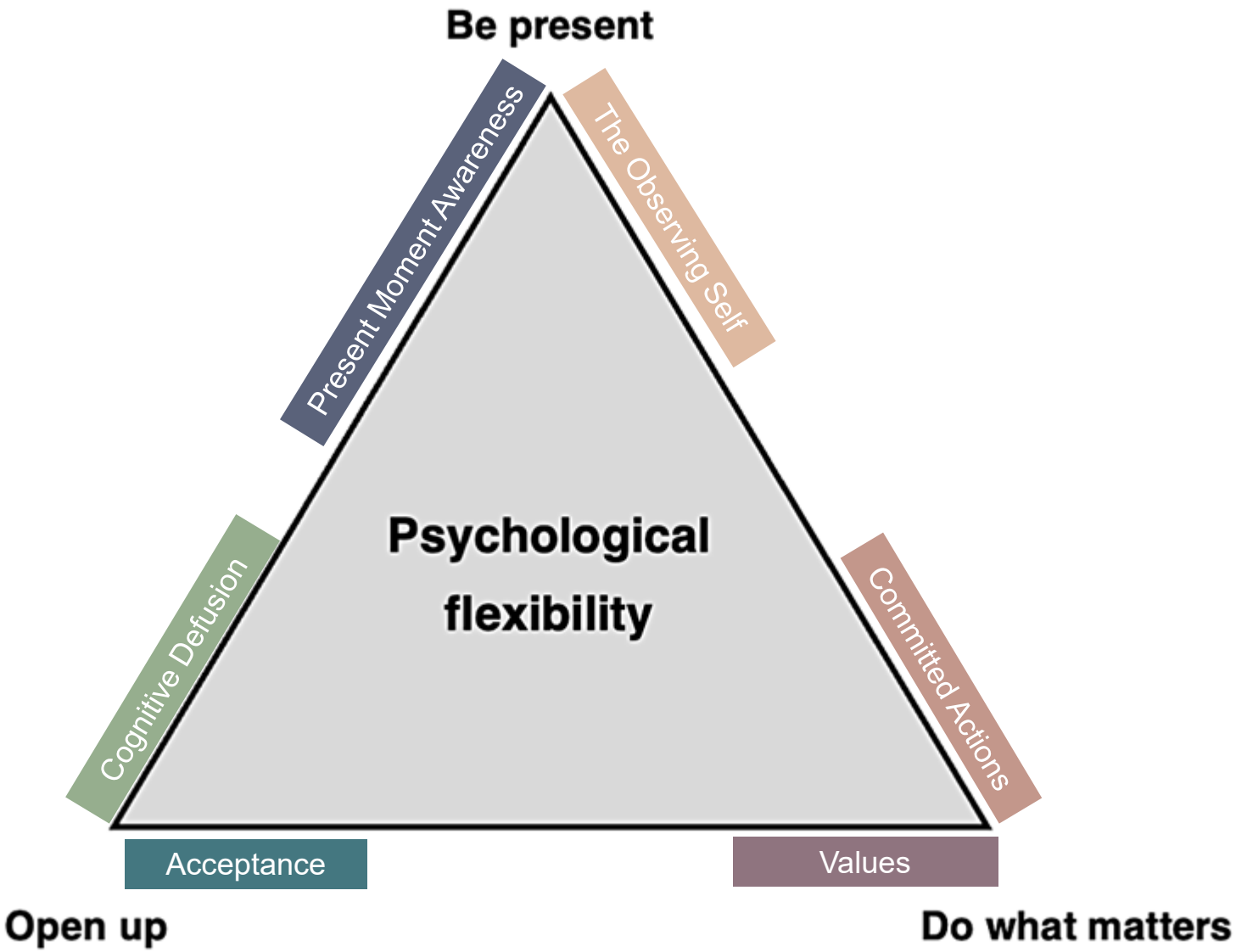

Past-regrets, future, worry, auto-pilot dominate
Experiential Avoidance
Lack of clarity on what is important
Psychological Inflexibility
Cognitive Fusion
Inaction, Impulsivity, Avoidance
Stuck on unhelpful roles/identities

(Fung, 2025)


Present Moment
Acceptance
Values
Psychological Flexibility
Defusion
Committed Action
The Observing Self

(Fung, 2025)

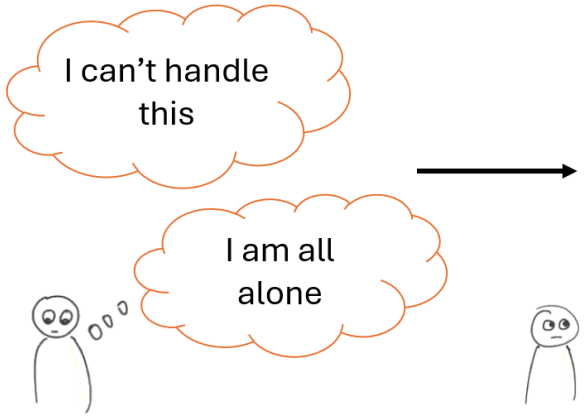
Adapted from Harris, R. (2019). *ACT made simple…*(2nd ed.)



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EXPERIENCE ACT: COGNITIVE DEFUSION

Thought Labelling



I'm having the thought that...

I notice I'm having the thought that...

The Mind





There goes my mind again



My Mind is acting like a director

Buying Thoughts...How Has that Worked for Me?

I guess I'm buying the thought that everything sucks



How has that worked for me?
Should I keep buying it?
Or should I put that thought back on the shelf?

Experience ACT

Present Awareness & Cognitive Defusion

EVALUATION – CAREGIVER FEEDBACK

- Results gathered from 12 total participants across 2 groups
- Collected via anonymized online survey

Quantitative

compACT-10 validated measure administered pre-post group to **assess 3 domains of psychological flexibility:**

- **Behavioural awareness** 
- **Values-based action** 
- **Openness to experience** 

Qualitative

Open-ended questions

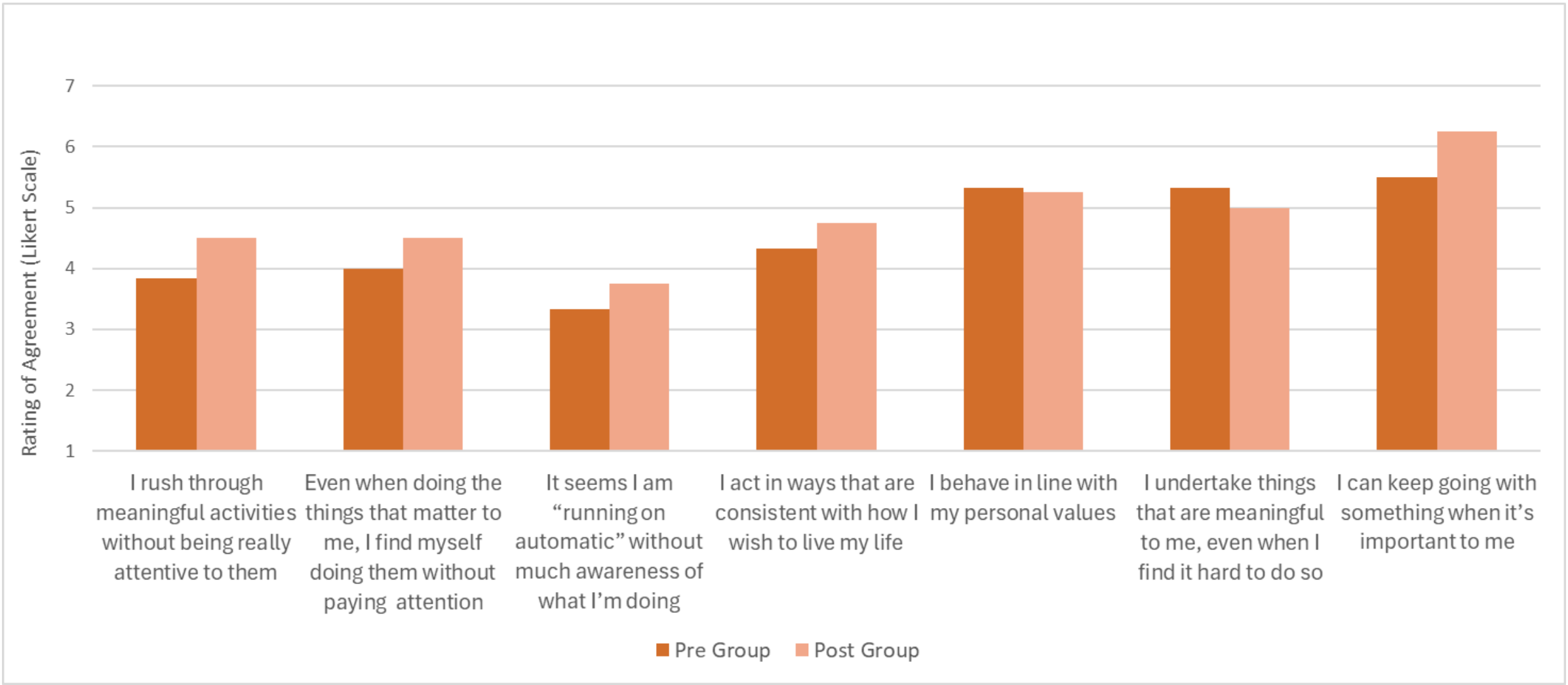
- Key takeaways
- Least helpful aspect of group
- Suggestions for improvement

Francis et al., 2016; Christopher et al., 2026

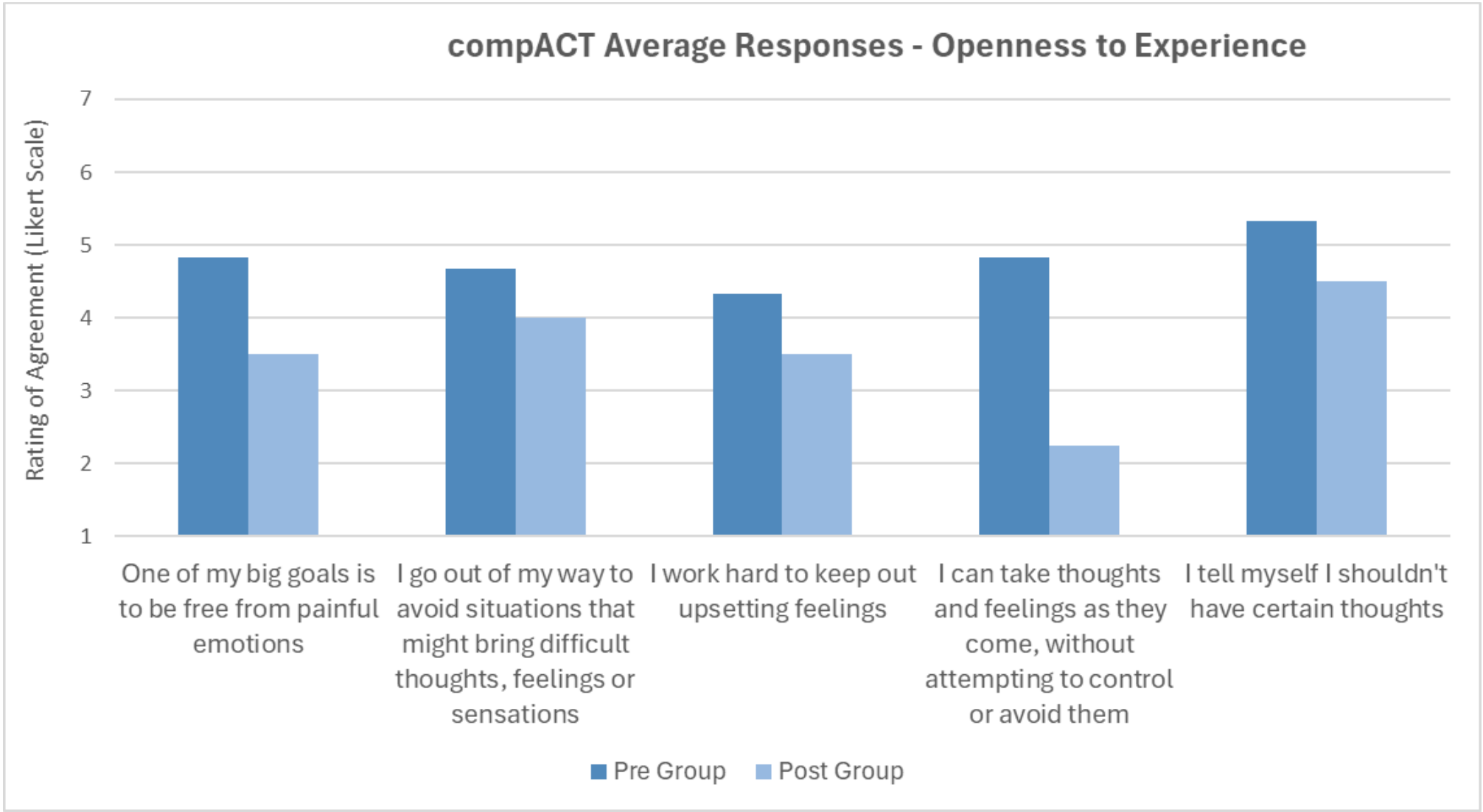
COMPACT-10 RESULTS:

BEHAVIOURAL AWARENESS

VALUED ACTION



COMPACT-10 RESULTS:
OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

THEME 1: CAREGIVERS FOUND CONNECTION VALUABLE, WANT MORE!

Need for community & ongoing connection

- **Commitment to attend** CHIRS' holiday party
- Interest in **Community of Practice** to sustain momentum
- Suggestion for **more breakout groups**

- **Launching Community of Practice in Fall 2026**
- Implemented **more breakout groups** in Cohort 2
- Continuing to highlight in-person opportunities

“The workshop was powerful. It taught immediately useful tools to deal with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. I would wish for regular ongoing support meetings to keep the practice vital.”

-ABI CAREGIVER PARTICIPANT

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

THEME 2: NORMALIZE WHY THIS FEELS CHALLENGING

Need for additional psychoeducation to add context to skills

Early discomfort and frustration with mindfulness and cognitive defusion

Acknowledging emotions that come up during experiential exercises

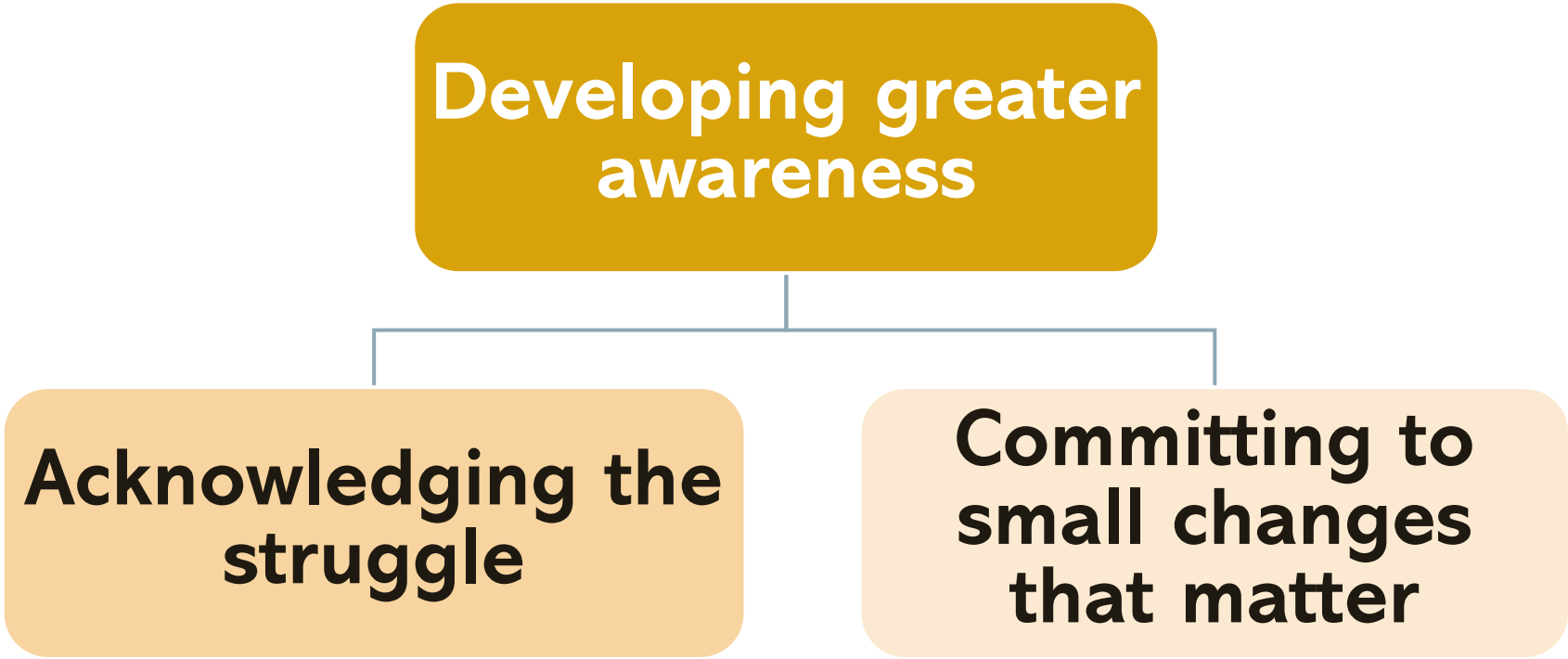
Implemented **updated curriculum** for cohort 2 with (brief) dedicated time to discuss physiological basis of mindfulness, nervous system regulation. Purpose: to **destigmatize the struggle, improve cognitive defusion**

"I think in a world of all sorts of self-help talk, books, and media that try to deal with complicated thoughts and emotions, ACT is the most realistic approach."

-ABI CAREGIVER PARTICIPANT

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

THEME 3: AWARE, EMPOWERED AND COMMITTED



- Participants identified committed actions to explore post-group (i.e., practicing self-compassion, continuing to explore ACT skills, prioritize socializing and being in community, etc.)

"I think this workshop will appeal to certain kinds of caregivers. You have to be ready to be reflective...that being said I love [the] models and theories and critical thinking, so I found this workshop really helpful. But I need more practise to continue to use these ideas and put [them] into a more deliberate practise."

-ABI CAREGIVER PARTICIPANT

NEXT STEPS



Iterate and expand program for sustainability, relevance, impact



Launch CHIRS **Community of Practice**



Train caregivers as co-facilitators

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Co-design with families: resources need to be **for families, by families**

Partner with frontline staff to build buy-in and strengthen referrals

Leverage existing resources rather than reinventing the wheel

Caregivers' commitment to participate is a step toward change

Use accessible, practical & experiential approaches over clinical/didactic

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QUESTIONS?