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The Role of Acceptance and Commitment (ACT) Therapy in Addressing Future-Oriented Anxiety in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Future-related anxiety has become an increasingly prevalent psychological challenge among university students and adolescents, especially in the context of academic pressure, social demands, and global uncertainty. One promising intervention approach to address this issue is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which emphasizes psychological flexibility, acceptance of internal experiences, and commitment to personal values. This study aims to systematically review the effectiveness of ACT in managing future anxiety and its relation to psychological flexibility and future orientation. The research method employed is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the PRISMA framework, involving 20 selected articles obtained from various academic databases and filtered through rigorous inclusion criteria. Analysis was conducted through content evaluation, thematic synthesis, and visual bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer software. The findings indicate that ACT is effective in reducing anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma across various populations and delivery formats, including individual therapy, group interventions, online platforms, and in special populations. Furthermore, psychological flexibility and adaptive future orientation were consistently identified as key mediators contributing to improved psychological well-being. This study recommends the integration of ACT into higher education settings as a promotive and preventive mental health strategy for students facing future uncertainties.

ABSTRACT

Kecemasan terhadap masa depan merupakan salah satu tantangan psikologis yang semakin banyak dialami oleh mahasiswa dan remaja di tengah tekanan akademik, sosial, dan ketidakpastian global. Salah satu pendekatan intervensi yang relevan untuk mengatasi persoalan ini adalah Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), yang menekankan pada fleksibilitas psikologis, penerimaan pengalaman internal, dan komitmen terhadap nilai-nilai hidup. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meninjau secara sistematis efektivitas ACT dalam mengelola kecemasan masa depan serta hubungannya dengan fleksibilitas psikologis dan orientasi masa depan. Metode yang digunakan adalah Systematic Literature Review (SLR) dengan pendekatan PRISMA, mencakup 20 artikel yang diperoleh dari berbagai basis data ilmiah dan telah melewati proses seleksi berdasarkan kriteria inklusi yang ketat. Analisis dilakukan melalui penilaian isi artikel, sintesis tematik, dan pemetaan visual dengan bantuan perangkat lunak bibliometrik VOSviewer. Hasil tinjauan menunjukkan bahwa ACT terbukti efektif dalam mengurangi kecemasan, depresi, stres, dan trauma, baik dalam format individual, kelompok, daring, maupun pada populasi khusus. Fleksibilitas psikologis dan orientasi masa depan yang adaptif juga terbukti berperan sebagai mediator penting dalam meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologis. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan penerapan ACT dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi sebagai strategi promotif dan preventif kesehatan mental mahasiswa.

Keywords

Penerimaan Komitmen, Fleksibilitas ,Orientasi Masa Depan

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BACKGROUND

Each undergoes a developmental process that takes place gradually from birth to the end of life. One of the crucial stages in this development is adolescence. Adolescence is a stage of transition from childhood to adulthood that is characterized by very significant physical, psychological, and social changes in it and can cause psychological and emotional problems (Sulhan et al., 2024). Adolescence is not just a phase of biological growth, but also a moment of self-identity formation and character strengthening (Paputungan, 2023). The early adult phase is a transition from adolescence which is characterized by the search for self-identity and the emergence of various problems. The changes that occur in this phase can lead to feelings of sadness, isolation, inadequacy, self-doubt, fear of failure, not knowing the purpose of one's life, and comparing oneself to others (Naufal, 2022). Adolescence and young adulthood have been identified as a developmental period full of dynamics and emotional challenges, particularly in terms of identity search and future planning (Woodruff et al., 2021).

The phenomenon of future-oriented anxiety is increasingly becoming a serious concern, especially in adolescents and young adults. Based on the Global Burden of Disease report, the 10–24 year age group experiences a significant burden of anxiety disorders, with the highest prevalence in the 20–24 year olds, which is 7,132 per 100,000 for women and 4,243 for men (Javaid et al., 2023). In the United States, more than 40% of young adults aged 18–29 report symptoms of anxiety almost daily, much higher than the age group over 60 which is only 16% (LAOP Center, 2025).

Based on a recent meta-analysis study conducted by Zou et al. (2025) shows that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) significantly lowers anxiety symptoms (SMD = -0.43, $p < .05$) and improves psychological flexibility (SMD = 0.50, $p < .001$) in populations with psychological disorders (Zou et al., 2025). ACT is effective in addressing anxiety of a transdiagnostic nature, including anxiety about the future, due to its approach that emphasizes acceptance and the value of life. With increasing social pressures, economic uncertainty, and the impact of the pandemic, ACT-based interventions are becoming increasingly relevant to support the mental health of younger generations. This approach not only reduces symptoms but also strengthens psychological resilience in the face of life's uncertainties (Javaid et al., 2023; LAOP Center, 2025).

This condition shows that adolescence to young adulthood is a phase that is susceptible to anxiety related to the future (Firnando & Suhesty, 2024). The phenomenon known as future-oriented anxiety is anxiety that arises due to uncertainty about future life, such as education, work, social relationships, and the achievement of life goals. There are not many psychological intervention approaches specifically geared towards addressing this anxiety in adolescents and young adults, even though the impact can impair an individual's social and emotional functioning (Halim & Alfian, 2024). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is effective in reducing future anxiety in emerging adult groups, but similar studies are still limited to small participants and have not been widely studied in the context of typical adolescent and young adult psychological development. Therefore, it is important to further examine the role of ACT in depth as an adaptive and contextual intervention strategy in helping individuals manage future anxiety in this developmental phase (Ma et al., 2023).

Research conducted by Hayes et al. (2012) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) shows that this therapy is effective in managing anxiety and stress in various populations. ACT focuses on acceptance and commitment to act in accordance with life values, rather than striving to avoid or control unpleasant thoughts and feelings. Studies by Farley dan Twohig (2024) also revealed that ACT can help individuals experiencing future-related anxiety by reducing their dependence on desired outcomes, as well as improving their psychological flexibility. In addition, research by Swain dkk. (2013) reveals that ACT has great potential in improving emotional well-being by facilitating individuals to accept their feelings and act on their life values.

Research by Pouraboli dkk. (2022) shows that ACT can help reduce future-related anxiety by facilitating individuals to be more accepting of uncertainty and more focused on actions they can control. A study by Donald dkk. (2022) also confirmed that ACT can improve adolescents' psychological well-being by lowering the levels of anxiety and depression that often arise due to anxiety about the future. In addition, research by O'Sullivan et al.,2(021) emphasizes the importance of acceptance and commitment in the process of managing long-term anxiety, especially as it relates to future uncertainty. Although there is a body of evidence showing the effectiveness of ACT, the application of this therapy in the context of future-oriented anxiety in adolescents and young adults is still very limited.

This study aims to fill the existing research gap by providing a systematic review of the role of ACT in overcoming future-oriented anxiety in adolescents and young adults. The study also aims to identify specific mechanisms within the ACT that can assist individuals in accepting their anxiety as well as acting on their values, despite an uncertain future. It is hoped that this study can enrich the understanding of effective therapies in dealing with future-related anxiety in age groups that are undergoing significant life transitions.

With the increasing prevalence of future-related anxiety among adolescents and young adults, especially in contexts heavily influenced by technological developments and rapid social change, more innovative and contextual therapeutic approaches are needed. Acceptance and Commitment (ACT) therapy offers a promising approach to managing this anxiety, but it is still underexplored in existing studies. Therefore, it is important to conduct further research to explore the role of ACT in helping adolescents and young adults overcome anxiety about their future, so that they can live lives more calmly, openly, and better prepared for life's increasingly complex challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

The process of identifying and selecting articles in this study follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow, which consists of three main stages: identification, screening, and eligibility (Firmansyah & Dede, 2022).

At the identification stage, a total of 93 articles were found through an initial search in scientific databases. These articles are structured search results using keywords that are appropriate to the research topic being studied. Articles found at this stage are then further processed for screening.

At the screening stage, several stages of elimination are carried out. First, 65 articles were removed because they were not published in English, leaving 42 articles that met the language criteria. Furthermore, the 42 articles were eliminated as duplicates of the same database, so only 23 unique articles passed for further evaluation. The remaining articles were then evaluated through a full-text reading.

At the eligibility stage, out of 23 articles evaluated, 2 articles were excluded because they did not meet the content criteria, such as relevance, focus of intervention, or participant population. After methodological quality evaluation, 1 additional article was excluded because it did not meet the standards of study design validity or had unclear results. Thus, 20 articles were declared to meet all the criteria and were used in the systematic synthesis.

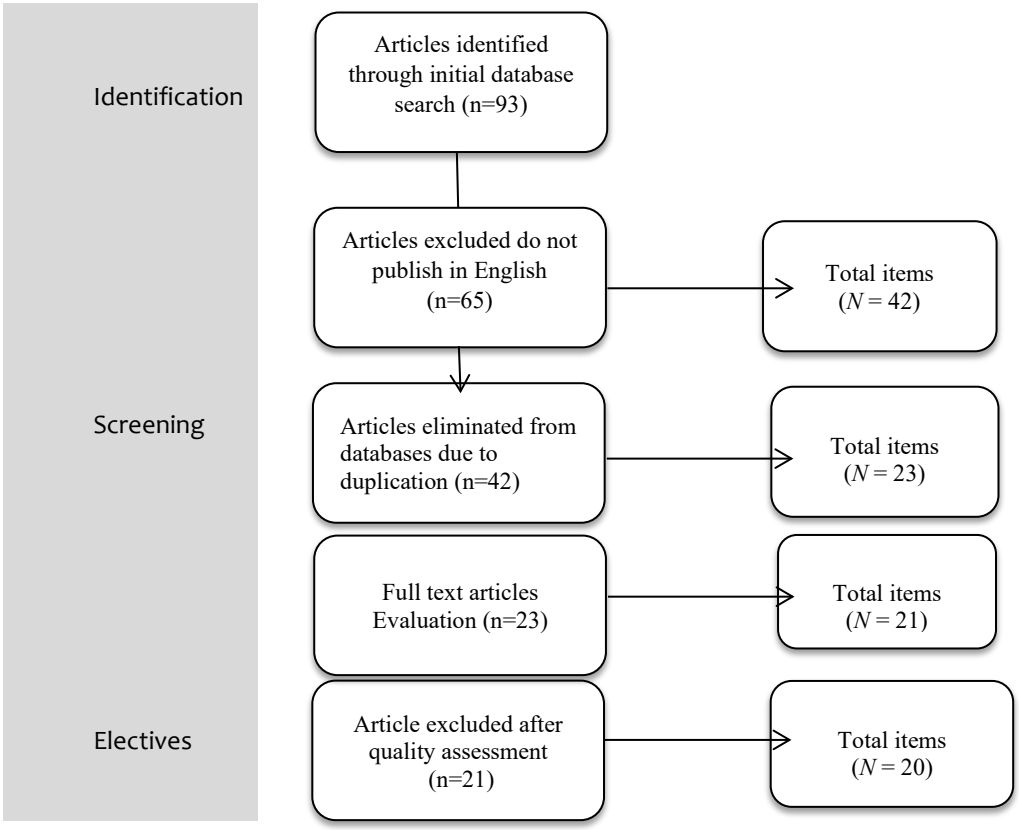


Figure 1. Article Selection

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is presented data on the number of publications indexed in Scopus by journal category and index, which is grouped by Q1 and Q2 rankings. This data provides an overview of the distribution of publications in various leading scientific journals in the field of psychology and mental health.

Table 1. Reputation of Review Articles

Scopus Index	Journal Name	Sum
Q1	*Journal of Adolescence*	2
	Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science	1
	Depression and Anxiety	1
	Journal of Mental Health and Addiction	1
	Time & Society	1
	Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science	1
	Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry	1
	Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science	1

	Journal of Affective Disorders	1
	Behaviour Research and Therapy	1
	Journal of Mental Health	1
	Behavior Therapy	1
	Scandinavian Journal of Psychology	1
	Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science	1
	Supportive Care in Cancer	1
Q2	*Frontiers in Psychology*	2
	Research in Developmental Disabilities	1

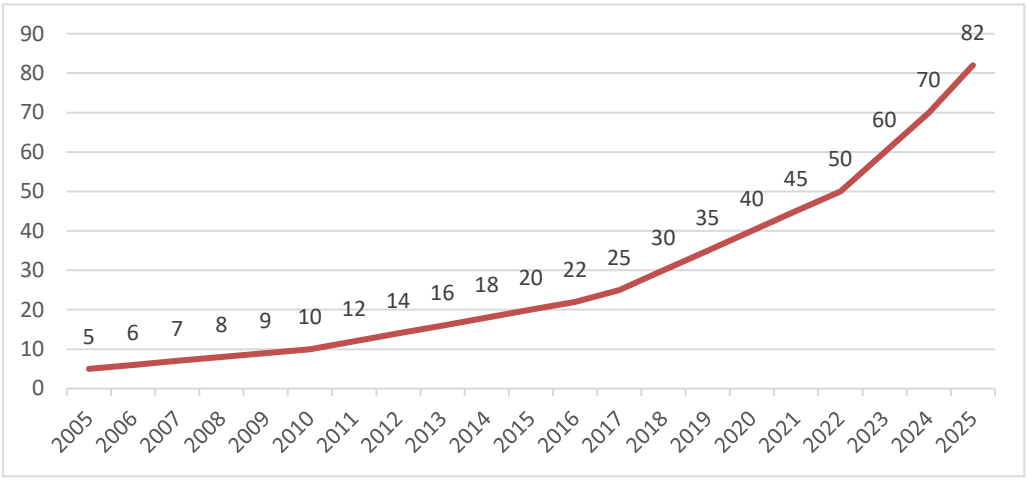


Figure 2. Increased publication on acceptance and commitment therapy

The graph shows an increase in the number of publications on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) from 2005 to 2025. In 2005, the number of publications was only about 5, but this figure has increased significantly in recent years, especially after 2015. A sharp increase was seen between 2018 and 2025, where publications are expected to reach 82 by 2025. This trend illustrates the growing interest and recognition of acceptance therapy and commitment in academia and clinical practice.

Table 2. Number of Article Citations

Paper	Total Citations	Paper	Total Citations
Artificial intelligence in Conquering future worries: How positive thinking training helps students overcome anxiety	*2*	Process of change and efficacy of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for anxiety and depression symptoms in adolescents: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials	*7*
Future-oriented coping: Dispositional influence and relevance for adolescent subjective wellbeing, depression, and anxiety	*27*	Effects of group Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on anxiety and depressive symptoms in adults: A meta-analysis	*101*
School-Based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Adolescents with Anxiety: A Pilot Trial	*28*	Association Between Future Orientation and Anxiety in University Students During COVID-19 Outbreak: The Chain Mediating Role of Optimization in Primary-Secondary Control and Resilience	*30*
Effect of acceptance and commitment therapy for depressive disorders: a meta-analysis	*25*	Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for adults with intellectual disabilities and/or autism spectrum conditions (ASC): A systematic review	*47*
Forgetting the Future: Emotion Improves Memory for Imagined Future Events in Healthy Individuals but Not Individuals With Anxiety	*13*	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to Reduce Depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis	*465*
Future anxiety, depression and stress among undergraduate students:	*4*	Evaluating ACT Processes in Relation to Outcome in Self-Help Treatment for Anxiety-Related Problems	*11*

psychological flexibility and emotion regulation as mediators			
Trepidation and time: an examination of anxiety and thoughts and feelings about the past, present, and future among adolescents	*14*	Promoting university students' well-being and studying with an acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)-based intervention	*64*
The empirical status of acceptance and commitment therapy: A review of meta-analyses	*770*	A preliminary comparison of the efficacy of online Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) stress management interventions for social and healthcare workers	*100*
Acceptance and commitment therapy as a transdiagnostic approach to adolescents with different anxiety disorders: study protocol	*2*	The effect of acceptance and commitment therapy on anxiety and depression in patients with cancer: A systematic review	*21*
Trauma-Informed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy With Peer Coaching for College Students: A Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial	*3*	Reciprocal developmental pathways between future-related thinking and symptoms of adolescent depression and anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies	*6*

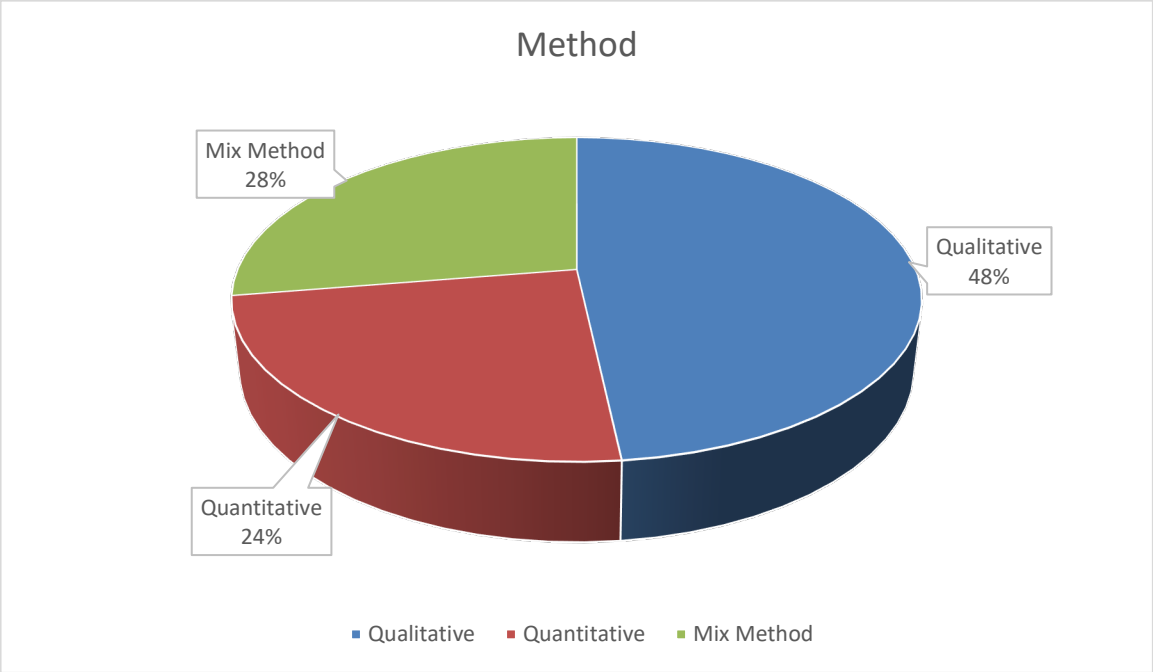


Figure 3. Application of Research Methods

The uploaded image shows a bar chart depicting three categories: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mix Method. Each category has a value recorded in the middle of the bar, with Quantitative having a value of 7, Qualitative having a value of 14, and Mix Method having a value of 8. This graph is presented with three dark gray vertical bars that represent the number for each category. Category labels are visible below each bar, while in the bottom right corner are the Back Wall button, which likely serves as a display control on this graph.

Table 3. Literature Review Results

Author/Year/Title	Purpose	Method	Findings	Similarities and Differences
(Levin & Haeger, 2014) Conquering future	Assess the effectiveness of	Positive thinking	Positive training reduces anxiety and	Focus on positive thinking training to

worries: How positive thinking training helps students overcome anxiety	positive thinking training in overcoming anxiety in students.	training interventions on students.	improves coping skills.	deal with anxiety, in contrast to acceptance-based therapy.
(O'Sullivan et al., 2021) Future-oriented coping: Dispositional influence and relevance for adolescent subjective wellbeing, depression, and anxiety	Analyzes the influence of future-oriented coping dispositions on adolescent well-being, depression, and anxiety.	Survey with a quantitative approach.	Future-oriented coping reduces anxiety and depression in adolescents.	The focus on future-oriented coping is in contrast to the broader ACT approach.
(Livheim et al., 2021) School-Based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Adolescents with Anxiety: A Pilot Trial	Testing the effectiveness of ACT in schools to address anxiety in adolescents.	Pilot trial with ACT in schools.	ACT successfully reduces anxiety symptoms in adolescents.	Focus on the school context with ACT, as opposed to individualized therapy.
(A-Tjak et al., 2015) Effect of acceptance and commitment therapy for depressive disorders: a meta-analysis	Assessing the effectiveness of ACT in treating depressive disorders.	Meta-analysis of studies related to ACT and depression.	ACT is effective in reducing symptoms of depression.	Focus on depression alone, while ACT is often used for anxiety and depression at the same time.
(Brown & Christoff, 2014) Forgetting the Future: Emotion Improves Memory for Imagined Future Events in Healthy Individuals but Not Individuals With Anxiety	Analyzes the influence of emotions on memories of future events in healthy and anxious individuals.	Laboratory experiments.	Emotions improve future memories in healthy individuals, not in individuals with anxiety.	It focuses on memory and future-related anxiety, while other research focuses on coping and therapy.
(Arslan, 2021) Future anxiety, depression and stress among undergraduate students: psychological flexibility and emotion regulation as mediators	Analyze the role of psychological flexibility and emotion regulation in reducing future anxiety in students.	Surveys and mediation models.	Psychological flexibility and emotion regulation help reduce anxiety, depression, and stress.	Compare psychological flexibility and emotion regulation as mediators, focusing on students.
(Stolarski et al., 2014) Trepidation and time: an examination of anxiety and thoughts and feelings about the past, present, and future among adolescents	Examine the relationship between anxiety and thoughts about the past, present, and future in adolescents.	Quantitative survey in adolescents.	Anxiety is related to the inability to cope with past, present, and future feelings.	It focuses on anxiety and time, in contrast to ACT interventions that focus on acceptance and commitment.
(Gloster et al., 2020) The empirical status of acceptance and commitment therapy: A review of meta-analyses	Present the empirical status and effectiveness of ACT through meta-analysis.	A meta-analysis review.	ACT has been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety, depression, and stress.	Summarize a variety of studies, in contrast to studies focusing on specific conditions.
(Walser & O'Connell, 2022) Acceptance and commitment therapy as a transdiagnostic approach to adolescents with different anxiety disorders: study protocol	Develop a protocol to test for ACT in adolescents with anxiety disorders.	Research protocol.	ACT research protocol for anxiety disorders in adolescents.	Using a transdiagnostic approach to anxiety disorders is different from therapy for certain conditions.

(Woodruff et al., 2021) Trauma-Informed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy With Peer Coaching for College Students: A Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial	Assess trauma-informed ACT with peer training on students.	Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) with peer coaching.	ACT effectively reduces symptoms of trauma and anxiety in college students.	Focus on trauma and peer coaching as an add-on in the ACT.
(Ma et al., 2023) Process of change and efficacy of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for anxiety and depression symptoms in adolescents: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials	Assessing the process of change and the effectiveness of ACT on adolescent anxiety and depression symptoms.	Meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials.	ACT is effective in reducing anxiety and depression in adolescents.	Emphasizing the effectiveness of ACT in general in adolescents, as opposed to more specific studies.
(Swain et al., 2013) Effects of group Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on anxiety and depressive symptoms in adults: A meta-analysis	To analyze the effectiveness of group ACT on adult anxiety and depression symptoms.	Meta-analysis of the ACT group study.	The ACT group is effective in reducing anxiety and depression in adults.	Provide strong evidence for the application of ACT in a group setting, as opposed to an individual approach.
(Zhou et al., 2022) Association Between Future Orientation and Anxiety in University Students During COVID-19 Outbreak: The Chain Mediating Role of Optimization in Primary-Secondary Control and Resilience	Examining the relationship between future orientation and anxiety in college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Surveys and mediation models.	Control and resilience optimization play a mediating role between future orientation and anxiety.	Including pandemic factors, in contrast to studies that do not take into account external contexts.
(Maddox et al., 2020) Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for adults with intellectual disabilities and/or autism spectrum conditions (ASC): A systematic review	Present a systematic review of the application of the ACT for adults with intellectual disabilities and/or autism spectrum conditions.	Systematic review.	ACT is effective in reducing anxiety and improving quality of life in individuals with intellectual disabilities or ASCs.	Focus on specific populations with intellectual disabilities and ASCs.
(Batra et al., 2023) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to Reduce Depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis	Assess the effectiveness of ACT in reducing depression.	Systematic review and meta-analysis.	ACT is effective in reducing symptoms of depression.	Focusing on depression as a primary condition, it does not include anxiety disorders.
(Rogge et al., 2019) Evaluating ACT Processes in Relation to Outcome in Self-Help Treatment for Anxiety-Related Problems	Evaluate the processes in the ACT related to the treatment outcomes of anxiety problems.	Evaluation of ACT self-intervention.	The process in the ACT is closely related to the outcome of anxiety treatment.	Focus on independent interventions, in contrast to professional therapeutic approaches.

(Salonen & Hiltunen, 2020) Promoting university students' well-being and studying with an acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)-based intervention	Promote student welfare with ACT interventions.	ACT-based interventions among students.	ACT improves students' well-being and academic achievement.	Emphasizing the welfare and academic achievement of students through ACT.
(Levin et al., 2021) A preliminary comparison of the efficacy of online Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) stress management interventions for social and healthcare workers	To compare the effectiveness of ACT and CBT in managing social and health worker stress.	Online ACT and CBT comparison experiment.	ACT and CBT are both effective, but ACT is superior in improving psychological flexibility.	Focus on the comparison of ACT and CBT in the context of social work and health.
(Levin et al., 2021) The effect of acceptance and commitment therapy on anxiety and depression in patients with cancer: A systematic review	Assessing the effect of ACT on anxiety and depression in cancer patients.	Systematic review.	ACT is effective in reducing anxiety and depression in cancer patients.	Specific to cancer patients, in contrast to the general application of ACT.
(Topçu et al., 2023) Reciprocal developmental pathways between future-related thinking and symptoms of adolescent depression and anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies	Examining the reciprocal relationship between future thinking and adolescent depression and anxiety symptoms.	Systematic review and longitudinal meta-analysis.	Future thinking is related to symptoms of depression and anxiety in adolescents.	Provides more in-depth longitudinal evidence, in contrast to a more transactional approach.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as an Effective Intervention to Manage Anxiety and Depression

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has gained widespread attention in the contemporary mental health literature due to its effectiveness in addressing various forms of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, stress, and even trauma (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). What distinguishes ACT from other therapeutic approaches is its basic philosophy that does not seek to erase or fight negative thoughts and feelings (Livheim et al., 2021). Instead, ACT teaches clients to accept the existence of those thoughts and feelings, and consciously choose actions that align with personal values even in the midst of emotional discomfort (A-Tjak et al., 2015).

In the studies reviewed, especially such as *Process of Change and Efficacy of ACT* and *ACT for Depressive Disorders*, it was seen that ACT had a significant effect in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety in different age groups (Arslan, 2021). Meta-analyses of the studies showed consistency of findings across designs and populations, signaling the empirical strength of ACT as an evidence-based intervention. One of the strengths of ACT is its ability to build psychological flexibility, which is the individual's capacity to remain present in the present moment and take value-appropriate actions, even when experiencing difficult emotions (Stolarski et al., 2014).

Psychological flexibility is considered the key to the success of ACT. In practice, individuals are not asked to reject or change negative thoughts, but rather to observe those thoughts as part of the human experience (Brown & Christoff, 2014). Using mindfulness techniques and cognitive diffusion, ACT helps clients create distance between themselves and their thoughts, so they can choose a more adaptive response to stressful life situations (Rogge et al., 2019). In addition to individual therapy, the effectiveness of ACT is also found in a variety of other formats such as groups, online, and in combination with peer support. The *Effects of Group ACT in Adults* and *Trauma-Informed ACT with Peer Coaching* studies show that when ACT is implemented in a social setting, the results are no less effective than traditional clinical formats. In fact, the existence of social support in groups or peer coaching sessions can strengthen engagement and the sustainability of expected behavior change (Woodruff et al., 2021).

ACT also proved its ability to deal with therapeutic challenges in specific populations. In studies related to individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum, ACT has been shown to improve quality of life, reduce

anxiety, and build confidence khusus (Batra et al., 2023). This demonstrates the flexibility of the ACT not only in its format, but also in its adaptability to the unique needs of different target populations (Salonen & Hiltunen, 2020).

In cancer patients, where emotional distress, existential anxiety, and future uncertainty are major issues, ACT has also shown significant effectiveness (Levin et al., 2021). ACT's approach that emphasizes the acceptance of the unchangeable reality and the construction of meaning in suffering becomes particularly relevant in this context. Patients who followed the ACT intervention showed improvements in quality of life, reduced emotional distress, and increased expectations (Pouraboli et al., 2022).

In the world of education, the application of ACT to students and students is also becoming more and more common (Topçu et al., 2023). The ACT can help students cope with academic stress, social anxiety, and future pressures in a more adaptive way. Instead of avoiding pressure, students are invited to accept their emotional experiences and still act on their academic and personal values (Sulhan et al., 2024).

ACT's ability to work on multiple levels, both preventive and curative, makes it incredibly versatile (Paputungan, 2023). In the school setting, ACT can be used as part of the character development and mental health curriculum, while in the clinic, ACT becomes the primary therapy for individuals with complex psychological disorders. This flexibility reflects the design of the ACT, which was originally designed for universality of application, not only as a therapeutic technique, but also as a way of life (Naufal, 2022).

ACT is not the only therapy that targets symptom reduction (Javaid et al., 2023). More so, ACT helps individuals to develop the capacity to function in life in the long term. The end goal is not just to "feel better," but to "live more meaningfully" even though the pain remains. This philosophy is rooted in the existential principle that suffering is part of life, and that man's task is to find direction even in limitations (LAOP Center, 2025).

The consistency of the results of studies on ACT in various contexts shows that ACT successfully bridges complex emotional needs in modern society (Zou et al., 2025). Whether in the educational, clinical, or community worlds, ACT comes across as an approach that is not only statistically effective, but also philosophically and functionally meaningful (Twohig & Crosby, 2010).

One of the other strengths of ACT is its ability to avoid pathologizing human emotions. In ACT, anxiety, sadness, and negative thoughts are not seen as problems to be "fixed", but rather as part of the human inner landscape that can be confronted with compassion and courage (Halim & Alfian, 2024). This brings a therapeutic approach in a more humanistic and empathetic direction . ACT shows excellence in terms of the sustainability of therapeutic effects and the development of the capacity to act under negative emotional conditions. This is important, especially in contexts where the avoidance of emotional experiences actually reinforces the symptoms of anxiety (Hayes et al., 2012).

ACT is also highly compatible with community-based intervention approaches and digital technologies. The success of the ACT program online and in a self-help format opens up great opportunities to expand access to mental health services to populations that have been difficult to reach by conventional services (Bohlmeijer dkk., 2011). ACT also shows excellence in supporting individuals during life transition periods, such as adolescence to adulthood, or in the face of major changes such as loss, job change, or a global pandemic. In situations like these, uncertainty becomes a major source of anxiety, and ACT is present as a tool to accept uncertainty while still moving in a meaningful direction (Lillis & Hayes, 2007).

Consistent findings from various studies suggest that ACT is not just a short-term solution to relieve symptoms, but is a long-term foundation for building a more balanced, authentic, and resilient life. This is urgently needed amid rising mental health problems globally (Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2016). ACT's philosophy of bringing together behavioral science, mindfulness, and personal values makes it ideal for cross-cultural application. This is important, since not all psychological approaches can be adapted well in the context of local values or collective culture as in Asia (Levin & Haeger, 2014).

Psychological Flexibility and Emotion Regulation as Mediators in Student Mental Health

The various studies in this systematic review have consistently shown that psychological flexibility and emotion regulation abilities play a crucial role as mediators in the dynamics between psychological distress and mental well-being, particularly among college students and adolescents (Levin & Haeger, 2014). In developmental phases that are highly susceptible to internal as well as external pressures, such as academic demands, identity searches, and future uncertainty, individuals with good psychological flexibility have an advantage in managing negative emotions while maintaining engagement in meaningful activities (Stolarski et al., 2014). Psychological flexibility allows a person not to get caught up in emotional reactivity to stressors, but rather to respond to them with a strong awareness and value orientation (Walser & O'Connell, 2022).

Research such as *Future Anxiety, Depression and Stress among Undergraduates* shows that psychological flexibility has a significant mediating effect in reducing the impact of future anxiety on stress and depression (Woodruff et al., 2021). This shows that it is not only external factors that affect students' psychological well-being, but also how they respond to their own thoughts and feelings. Students who are able to accept worries about the future without needing to change or reject them, but still act in alignment with their values and life goals, show higher emotional resilience and more stable academic performance (Ma et al., 2023).

According to Swain dkk. (2013) improvements, ACT processes such as mindfulness, cognitive diffusion, and commitment to values are closely correlated with decreased anxiety and improved well-being. It confirms that psychological flexibility is not just a theoretical concept, but

an active process that can be developed through appropriate practice and intervention. Even in self-help-based interventions, the ACT process remains effective in building an adaptive response to stress (Zhou et al., 2022).

Psychological flexibility and resilience are the main protections against a surge in anxiety symptoms. In the midst of global uncertainty and sudden changes in the learning system and future prospects, students who have a realistic and psychologically flexible future orientation are better able to adapt (Maddox et al., 2020). They can manage expectations, accept less-than-ideal circumstances, and still maintain a balance between productivity and mental health. The role of emotion regulation as an element that fuses psychological flexibility is also important to underline (Rogge et al., 2019). Emotion regulation is not just the ability to restrain or control emotional expression, but rather the ability to identify, understand, and respond to emotions constructively. ACT trains these regulations through mindfulness and acceptance techniques, which help individuals break out of the cycle of avoidance of emotional experiences (Salonen & Hiltunen, 2020).

The combination of psychological flexibility and emotional regulation makes individuals not only able to survive stress, but also thrive in it. This concept is especially important in the context of higher education, where academic and social pressures tend to be seen as inevitable (Levin et al., 2021). Therapeutic approaches that focus solely on cognition, such as classical CBT that seeks to replace negative thoughts with positive ones, have limitations when individuals are faced with irreversible realities, such as a pandemic or the uncertainty of the future of work (Salonen & Hiltunen, 2020).

Future Orientation and Acceptance as Key Determinants of Adolescent and Student Mental Health

Individuals who have a positive vision of the future and demonstrate a commitment to meaningful life values and goals tend to have lower levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Pouraboli et al., 2022). A person's capacity to imagine the future constructively correlates with emotional resilience as well as a better quality of life (Topçu et al., 2023).

A future orientation that is too focused on specific outcomes and successes without being balanced with the ability to accept uncertainty and the possibility of failure can instead become a new source of psychological pressure (Sulhan et al., 2024). Individuals who have high expectations for the future but are not prepared to face the possibility of a reality that differs from their plans tend to experience anxiety disorders, frustration, and even feelings of helplessness when reality does not meet expectations (Paputungan, 2023).

In this context, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers an approach that is not only values-oriented but also teaches acceptance of psychological and emotional realities that are difficult to control (Naufal, 2022). ACT not only encourages individuals to have a clear vision of the future and plans, but also emphasizes the importance of openness to inner experiences, including the fears, failures, and ambiguities inherent in the process toward the future. Thus, individuals are equipped with the ability to keep moving towards goals despite being in a challenging emotional state (Javaid et al., 2023).

In an era marked by global uncertainty such as economic change, technological disruption, and pandemics realistic and adaptive future orientation is becoming increasingly important (LAOP Center, 2025). Adolescents and young adults who are only taught to "think positively" without being equipped with uncertainty management skills are at risk of experiencing significant psychological strain when faced with obstacles in achieving their life goals. This is where the role of ACT becomes significant: it does not teach "pseudo-optimism", but rather builds value-based psychological resilience and acceptance of reality (Zou dkk ., 2025).

Healthy forward-thinking skills also known as *future-oriented thinking* need to be developed along with mindfulness skills (Halim & Alfian, 2024). Mindfulness helps individuals not to get caught up in excessive worry about the future, but rather to be fully present in current actions that are aligned with long-term goals. ACT bridges the two: connecting *present moment awareness* with the direction of a valuable future life, without ignoring or suppressing the feelings of anxiety that may arise in the process (Twohig & Crosby, 2010).

The strength of ACT lies in its ability to integrate two fundamental principles in the regulation of psychological life: commitment to the value of life and acceptance of subjective experience (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011). In adolescent education and development, these two things are very important. Adolescents are in a developmental phase that is heavily influenced by the search for identity and meaning in life. If they are only directed at the achievement of external goals (academic grades, career, social status), they are prone to feelings of emptiness and failure when reality does not go as expected (Lillis & Hayes, 2007).

ACT helps adolescents and young adults to realize that the value of life is more than just a target or outcome. Value is a direction of life that can be pursued continuously, even when results are not achieved. By changing the outlook towards future goals from something rigid to something flexible and process-based, ACT creates space to thrive without the pressure of perfectionism (Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2016). They no longer study solely to get high grades, but because values such as self-growth, curiosity, or social contribution are their main motivations. When they fail an exam or experience academic obstacles, they can still maintain emotional stability because their core values are not collapsed by temporary results (Levin & Haeger, 2014).

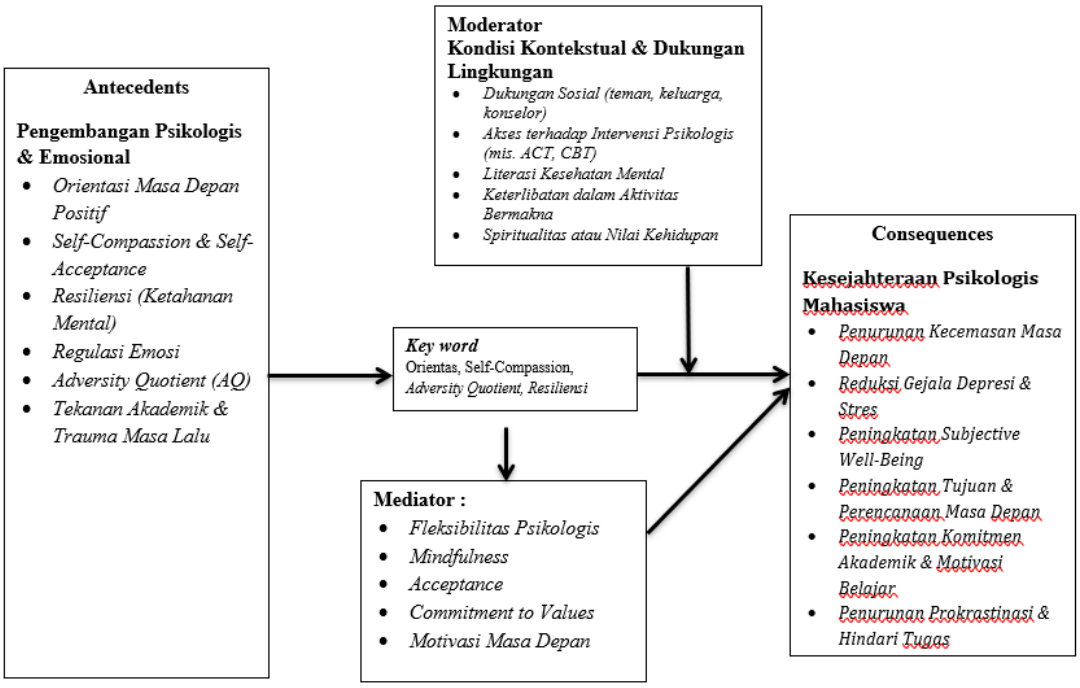


Figure 4. Findings of Research Results

CONCLUSION

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an effective and adaptive psychological approach in managing anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma, especially among adolescents and college students. ACT works by building psychological flexibility through acceptance, mindfulness, and commitment to the value of life, not by removing negative thoughts. The studies reviewed show that psychological flexibility and a healthy future orientation play an important role as mediators in improving long-term psychological well-being. For further research, it is suggested that ACT be explored in the form of a digital application (mobile-based intervention) applied to students with a longitudinal design, in order to measure its effectiveness in the long term. The implications of these findings suggest that ACT has great potential to be integrated into mental health programs in higher education settings as a preventive and curative strategy in building emotional resilience and readiness for the future adaptively.

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