



# Inquiry & Acceptance — A Stress-Reduction Application

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## Introduction

### Background

Suffering is an integral part of the human experience, as recorded by the number of ancient and modern traditions that have addressed it as a human problem taking root within human cognition. Many methods or systems throughout history have tried to alleviate suffering. Within the context of this research, the origin of suffering is in line with the Stoics' view that "what disturbs men's minds is not events but their judgments on events" according to Epictetus; this premise having been expanded upon by Albert Ellis and REBT. The theory underlying this research is that the above-mentioned judgments create distress when they are in conflict with reality; the subject experiences negative emotions when attaching to how things should be rather than how they really are.

The method described here provides a direct means of disputing stressful thoughts in order to bring the subject in acceptance with what is, with a net result of diminished stress. It consists of a simple set of questions and an exploration of alternatives to the stress-generating belief. In this fashion, this inquiry process—akin to Socratic questioning—inherits itself quite naturally into the cognitive behavioral tradition, and further as an adjunct to the Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) toolbox. A distinguishing feature of this process is that no concept is immune from disputation, as long as it brings some level of stress. An axiom underlying this work is that the experience of suffering operates as a signal that lets an individual know that he or she has attached to a concept that is untrue for him or her. Increasing acceptance of what is leads to a lessening of this suffering. Rather than a cognitive restructuring, the questioning acts as a *deconstruction* of previously-uninvestigated constructs.



Arguing With Reality

## Results

### Statistics

Of the initial 91 participants in the study, 50 completed the postintervention assessments, and 39 completed the follow-up assessments. A set of 8 (4 DV x 2 sampling times) independent sample *t*-tests were conducted for postintervention and follow-up data. These analyses show significant changes on the postintervention measurements for perceived stress ( $t = 1.19$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and acceptance ( $t = 2.8$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and for follow-up measurements for anxiety ( $t = 2.07$ ;  $p < .05$ ), perceived stress ( $t = 4.15$ ;  $p < .001$ ), acceptance ( $t = 2.61$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and subjective well-being ( $t = 2.95$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

Paired sample *t*-tests between postintervention and follow-up showed no significant change on any of the variables and for either of the groups, indicating that the values remained stable during the follow-up period.

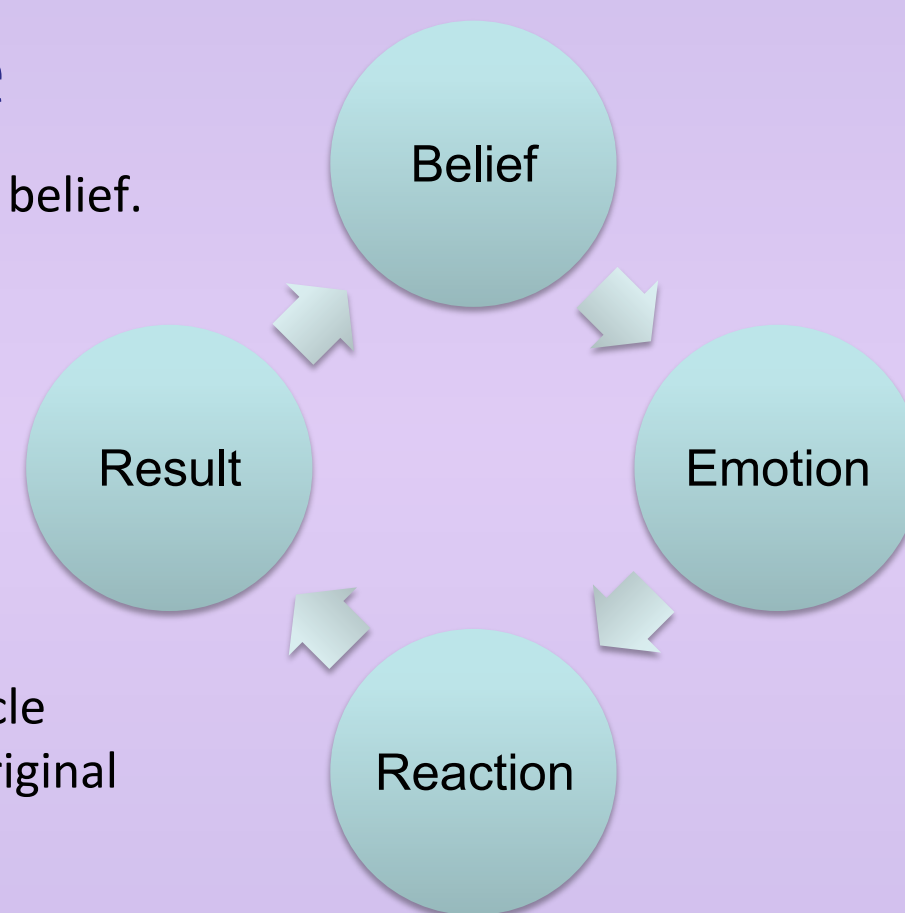
Covariates for the analysis of variance were selected using a forward model selection performed for each of the four dependent variables and the complete set of covariates, leaving the covariates with highest significance for the later ANCOVA. The results of the analysis are given in the table below with the effect sizes, as estimated by the partial eta-squared, showing significant changes on all DVs at postintervention and at follow-up, when controlling for the effect of the covariates.

Variable		Postintervention (N = 50)			Follow-Up (N = 39)			
		df	F	$\eta_p^2$	df	F	$\eta_p^2$	
STAI	Covariates	3	10.75***	0.417	Covariates	3	5.11**	0.311
	Group	2	11.08***	0.330	Group	2	12.59***	0.426
PSS	Covariates	2	3.86*	0.144	Covariates	3	5.85**	0.341
	Group	2	18.22***	0.442	Group	2	27.58***	0.619
AAQ	Covariates	3	2.65	0.150	Covariates	2	1.09	0.058
	Group	2	7.62**	0.253	Group	2	25.78***	0.596
SWLS	Covariates	2	1.75	0.071	Covariates	4	2.32	0.219
	Group	2	7.73**	0.252	Group	2	14.23***	0.463

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### The Stress Cycle

A stressful feeling is the effect of attaching to a prior belief. We think, experience a feeling, and then act on that feeling. In an attempt to alter our feelings, we reach outside ourselves (relationships, sex, food, alcohol, drugs) for temporary comfort and the illusion of control. And if we cannot manipulate our experience, we try to manipulate the environment. The resulting state of the world is then interpreted again through the filter of our beliefs, perpetuating the cycle with even more concepts springing forth from the original one. Inquiry interrupts this cycle at the belief level.



### The Four Questions

Write down your stressful thought(s):

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without that thought?

Turn it around.

## Methods

### Procedure

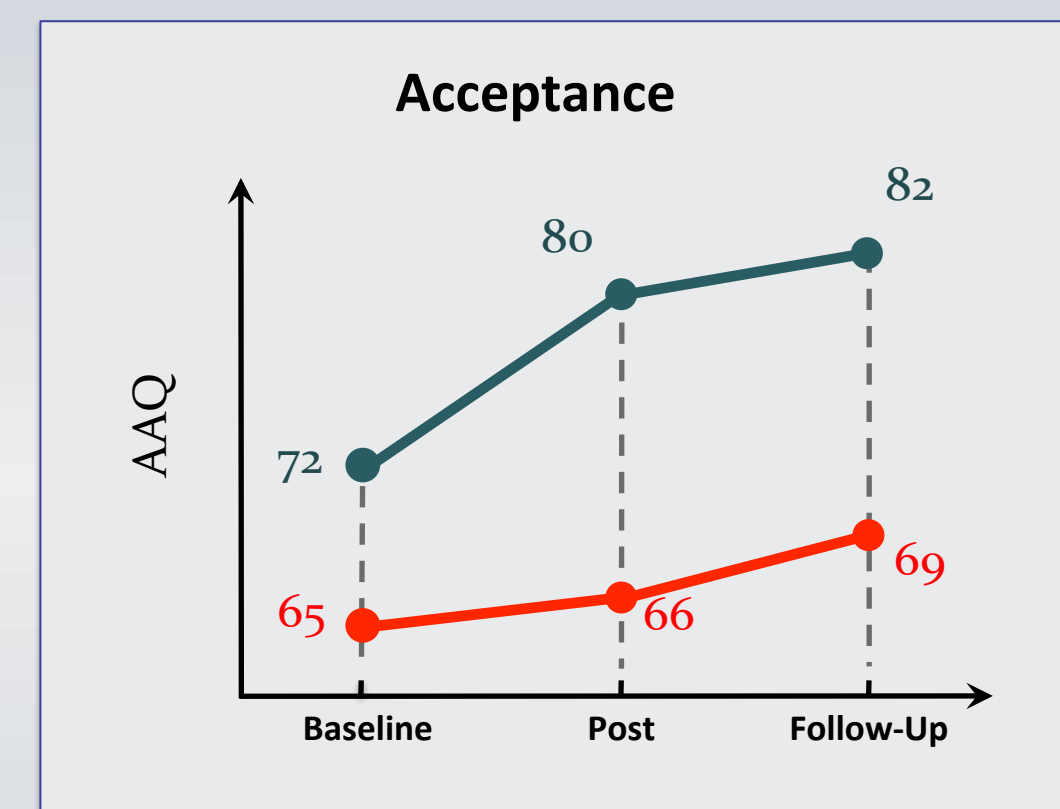
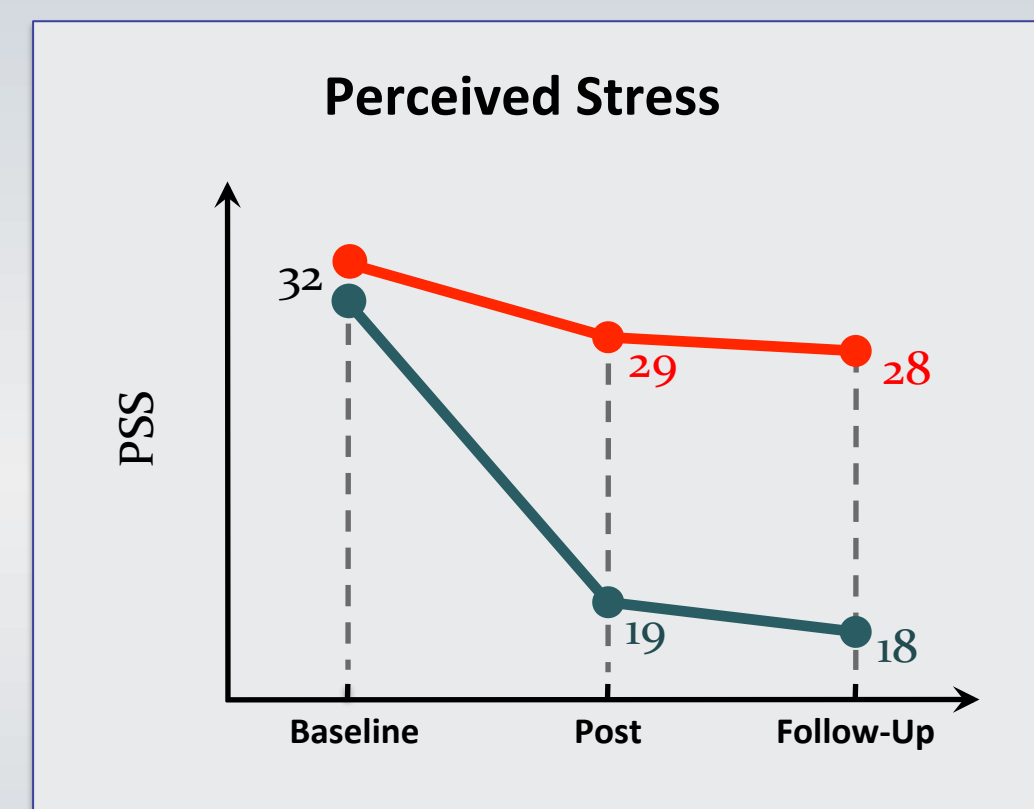
- 6 weekly, 2-hour group classes, with a day-long (6 hours) intensive workshop.
- Participants learned the underlying principles and the practice of Inquiry. Audio-visual demonstrations of Byron Katie facilitating Inquiry were played at some of the classes
- Participants wrote down their stressful thoughts, read chapters from the book *Loving What Is*, and called their partner at least once a week to practice Inquiry.

### Sample Characteristics

- 74 women (81.3%) and 17 men (18.7%) at baseline, 32 to 72 years old ( $M = 51.5$ ).
- 67 White (73.6%), 11 Asian (12.1%), 9 Hispanic (9.9%), 2 Black (2.2%), 2 Other (2.2%)
- 70% with a 4-year college degree or higher
- Recruited in the San Francisco Bay Area, in a region centered around Palo Alto, CA

### Measurements

- NEO-Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) administered as covariate
- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)
- Acceptance & Action Questionnaire-16 (AAQ-16)
- State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, State Scale (STAI-S)
- Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)



## Conclusions

### Discussion

The results from the *t*-tests were significant enough when using measured data, but when applying a conservative intention-to-treat analysis, because of the high attrition rate, the *t*-tests were no longer significant when applied to imputed data. The next set of analyses consisted of ANCOVAs. Once the results were controlled for the influence of covariates, statistics for each DV was significant on the treatment vs. control group assignment. This significance persisted when the ANCOVA analyses were applied to the imputed data. In spite of the relatively small population sample used in this study, this intervention can be described as effective with regards to participants' perceived stress.

During the forward model analysis, the Openness to Experience (O) factor of the NEO-FFI was found to account for a significant portion of the variance in all four dependent variables, both for measured and imputed values. This cannot be ascribed to the fact that participants scoring low on this factor tend to drop out of the study, because the dropout analysis did not show this factor to be significant in the mean difference between dropouts and nondropouts. One may consider that there is a predisposition to this type of intervention for people who score high on this factor. Williams, Rau, Cribbet and Gunn's (2009) research suggests greater stress resilience among individuals scoring high on O and greater vulnerability to adverse effects of stress among individuals scoring low on that factor.

Focus groups conducted by an independent interviewer yielded qualitative data corroborating that the training in Inquiry was associated with positive transformative experiences. The main finding from participants' reports was that the training in Inquiry was helpful to most, and led to a number of observed positive life changes. Among the improvements reported by the focus groups were more peace, less stress, a different attitude in response to the daily hassles of life, more compassion for oneself and for others.

### References

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