

# Evaluating a new form of therapy for autistic individuals

May 18 2022, by Anna Svensson

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A doctoral thesis at Karolinska Institutet in Sweden has investigated whether Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) can be used for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The results show that the

treatment can be carried out in both a school environment and in psychiatric outpatient care and can have an effect on, among other things, perceived stress.

Autism is found in almost two percent of the population. Difficulties with [social interaction](#), adapting to new situations, and hypersensitivity mean that autistic individuals are at risk of suffering from stress and specific psychiatric symptoms to a greater extent than others.

"Because treatments that work and are adapted to autistic individuals are rare, there is a considerable need for new treatment models," says Johan Pahnke, psychologist who recently received his doctorate at the Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet.

In his [doctoral thesis](#), Johan Pahnke investigated the usefulness and effectiveness of a psychological treatment model called ACT for reducing [emotional distress](#) in autistic individuals.

ACT is a further development of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and has previously shown efficacy, for example, in reducing stress. The thesis evaluated an ACT-based group treatment program adapted for autistic adolescents and adults called NeuroACT that Johan Pahnke has developed.

The treatment program consists of weekly group sessions that last 150 minutes, with 12–14 sessions. Each session follows a similar set-up with a short mindfulness or acceptance exercise, followed by a review of homework assignments, an introduction to the session's theme, new homework assignments, and an evaluation of the group meeting.

The thesis investigated how the ACT-based group treatment worked for autistic students. Twenty-eight students aged 13–21 years received ACT treatment or regular schooling. The treatment program worked well

when implemented in a [school environment](#). Students who had completed the program experienced, among other things, reduced stress, depression, and anger, compared to the [control group](#). However, the treatment did not affect the students' anxiety and some other problems.

The thesis also examined the treatment for autistic adults in psychiatric outpatient care. One study included ten people and the other 39. The results showed that most participants underwent the whole treatment and were satisfied. In addition, those who received the treatment experienced improvements in stress and several mental health measures. However, for some problems, no differences were seen.

"ACT adapted to autism seems to be able to reduce [stress](#) and improve well-being in adolescents and adults with autism. The treatment also appears to help the participants overcome some key autistic difficulties. However, more research is needed to evaluate the effect of ACT in [autistic individuals](#)," says Johan Pahnke.

On May 12, Johan Pahnke defended his thesis, "Acceptance and commitment therapy for autism spectrum disorder: evaluation of feasibility, effectiveness, and validity of a novel contextual behavioral [treatment](#)" at Karolinska Institutet.

**More information:** Acceptance and commitment therapy for autism spectrum disorder: evaluation of feasibility, effectiveness, and validity of a novel contextual behavioral treatment.

[openarchive.ki.se/xmlui/handle/10616/48002](https://openarchive.ki.se/xmlui/handle/10616/48002)

Provided by Karolinska Institutet

Citation: Evaluating a new form of therapy for autistic individuals (2022, May 18) retrieved 24

May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-05-therapy-autistic-individuals.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.