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Chapter

# Values-Flow in Contextual Psychotherapy: The ‘What’, ‘Why’, and ‘How’ of Sustainable Values-Based Behaviour

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## Abstract

Flow - enjoyed and fully absorbed engagement in meaningful and contextually bounded activities - is widely underutilised in psychotherapy and mental health settings. Two gold standard therapies, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), while powerful and effective in many ways, would benefit from systematic models that move from initiating positive change to sustaining meaningful change. This chapter introduces ‘Values-Flow’ – an approach aimed at building commitment and sustainable engagement in psychotherapy and values-based behaviour in working adults struggling with sub-optimal functioning. We first introduce Values-Flow and describe how it may benefit psychotherapy skills practice in everyday life. Next, we discuss why Values-Flow is relevant and enhances the practice of ACT and DBT strategies, helping to sustain engagement and creative practice of values-based actions outside of sessions. We then describe the ‘Values-Flow’ framework, which incorporates VIVA (Virtue, Involve, Vital, Accepting) and ARIA (Attend, Reflect, Inform, Act) tools that develop commitment for values-based practice in daily life. We conclude with a case-example of how Values-Flow can build commitment and sustainable engagement in homework completion in psychotherapy.

**Keywords:** psychotherapy, flow experience, dialectical behaviour therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, values-based behaviour

## 1. Introduction

More than anything else, individuals entering psychotherapy seek to be happy – commonly reaching out for help after a prolonged period of struggling with thoughts that the bulk of their lives have been wasted with efforts to attain happiness via, among other external means, money, power or prestige. Many eagerly enter the therapist’s room carrying a sense of futility with their long-term struggles and seem ready to face the fundamental truth of psychological treatment – accepting that happiness and a life of value needs to be prepared for, practiced, and depends

largely on how the challenges of daily living are negotiated within themselves [1–4]. Thus, often the first, (though often not explicitly stated) goal of psychotherapy is to develop an attractive redescription of ‘happiness’ [5, 6] as an individually resounding appreciation that happiness is a ‘circuitous path’ [taken] when one is fully involved with every detail of their lives whether good or bad’ ([1], p. 2). The current chapter offers a possible way in which sustainable happiness in psychotherapy can be achieved via the psychoeducation and daily psychotherapy skills practice based on the theory and research of flow experiences – a ‘leading activity-based theory of happiness, often traced back to the philosophical arguments of Aristotle ([7], p. 10), [8, 9].

We outline both processes and mechanisms that, when integrated with standard clinical psychology approaches, have the potential to sustain positive change within a psychosocial context. The focus is on monitoring and enhancing the experiential – especially optimal experiences of enjoyed absorption – during the process of practicing psychotherapy skills and values-based behaviour. We argue that this focus on understanding the use of attention of the individual is one of the most valuable ways of sustaining ‘cognitive flexibility throughout [daily] life and [being] better able to navigate a path of life long learning’ ([10], p. 465). Thus, the attainment of happiness – or the improvement of the quality of experience in values-based activity practice – is in many ways the ‘ultimate goal’ of psychotherapy and the ‘bottom line of existence’ ([7], p. 376).

### **1.1 ‘Creativity dialectics’ in happiness practice**

As will be elaborated further throughout the chapter, we outline a vision and techniques of sustainable happiness practice via the overriding goal of increasing creative patterns of dialectical behaviour among psychotherapy patients [2, 9]. A dialectical world view has been described to patients as an ‘attitude that one can develop...in order to have a direct relationship between one’s thought and one’s life’ ([6], p. 205). Furthermore, the aim is to help patients build a ‘psychological complexity...in the person that enable him or her to continually negotiate, and renegotiate, an optimally rewarding self-environment fit’ ([9], p. 482). Rooted in the ancient philosophies of Aristotle’s ‘golden mean’ [11] and Hadot’s and Foucault’s ‘spiritual exercises and the [creative] transformation of the self by the self, but also entails a more general configuration of power, knowledge and the techniques of the self’ ([6], p. 207).

We conceive of the term *creativity dialectics* as dialectical behaviours that ‘actually manifest by real [and eminent] person’s...who were successful on a cultural stage... [and are] modelling optimal developmental trajectories’ ([10], p. 484). The role of the therapist in this sense is arguably to help the patient redescribe, via optimal experiences, what it means to be happy, creative, and valuable. Via what Hatch [5] suggests is a pragmatic/hermeneutic process of redescription of happiness, the therapist must include active-interactive demonstrations and actions exemplifying creativity dialectics in the challenges of everyday life, rather than simply psychoeducation of what needs to be happier. A noteworthy point here is that the role of the therapist is to actively re-define terms like ‘self-care’, which has been widely overused and is frequently meaningless (if not shame inducing) [2], via frequent and interesting discussions of the value of virtuous practice and the ancient lineage and dialectical philosophies of the self-care practice [1, 2, 6]. In doing so, the practice of sustaining happiness, creativity, and values-based behaviour becomes a ‘way of being of individuals and realize the whole modification of their whole personality’ ([6], p. 207).

## 1.2 Values-flow in practicing a happy, creative, and valuable daily life

Values-Flow refers to the 'what', 'why', and the 'how' of sustainable values-based behaviour. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the originator of Flow [1] and a co-founder of the popular field of positive psychology [8, 12] is said to have taken a handful of his graduate students to a ranch where they stood together in the open landscape watching Mihaly's dog, Cedric, engrossed in a game of fetch with his owner. Several minutes later, Mihaly announced to the group, 'See even Cedric understands Flow's balance of challenge and skill' ([13], p. 7). The ongoing interaction in the challenges of daily life in ways which are skilful, enjoyable, and build one's valued-behaviour, exemplified in Cedric and Mihaly's symbiosis, is a fundamental tenant of Values-Flow - living a life of value in sustainable and creative ways.

Having passed away at the age of 87 in October 2021, Mihaly left a legacy of nearly a half century of research and collaboration on diverse topics related to emerging positive psychological science [8], including but not limited to creative personhood [10, 14], vital engagement [14, 15] and flow experiences [1, 7–10]. Also called optimal experience, Flow provides an experiential perspective on human development that represents a 'coordinated operation of stabilizing and broadening uses of attention' and is 'genetically based and transcultural' ([10], p. 469). Through the daily practice of self-regulation of these cognitive and affective capabilities, individuals are able to achieve vital engagement, which is 'an absorbing and meaningful relationship between self and the world, [which] can be found any sphere of life' ([10], p. 5). Through the 'ability to select, or help others select, a course of action that is optimal for survival and [psychological] growth in insight in regard to relevant life processes' ([15], p. 491), the individual establishes a creative way of routinely manage the challenges of daily life. In this chapter we argue that central to not only psychotherapy, but also to everyday functioning are skills that identify, sustain, and creatively develop values-behaviours in daily life.

In 1990, Csikszentmihalyi argued that; "The tools that make flow possible are common property, and [should be] knowledge recorded in books available to schools and libraries" ([1], p. 127). Yet despite his vast academic achievements, it seems that Mihaly wondered why his work had not, through his graduate students, achieved more prominence in the lives of everyday people [13]. Through the daily absorbed attention and joyful application of cultural information [16, 17], flow experiences represent primarily optimal attentional states that contribute to happiness and a life well-lived [1, 7, 8, 10]. In the realm of psychotherapy, evidence suggests that the use of flow in clinical and psychotherapy settings can assist in symptom reduction and rehabilitation as well as enhancing wellbeing and a life of value [18]. With the exception of Riva et al. (2014), who discussed how flow concepts could assist in psychodynamic therapy approaches, the flow concept has not been effectively translated into everyday lives of working adults, and even less has been incorporated into typical contextual cognitive behavioural therapies including Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT; 2) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; 3, 4).

We suggest that traditional attempts to apply flow among working adults, which we call Flow 1.0, have prescribed the benefits of optimal transmission of cultural information for everyday survival and the 'what' and 'how' of structuring optimal attention and experience [10]. This information remains highly valid, particularly as contemporary society makes it harder to focus attention in daily life. In many ways, Flow 1.0 efforts have been static and rigid translations of Flow theory, lacking the transforming impact for typical working adults – especially individuals of various

socio-economic and cultural backgrounds seeking the assistance of psychotherapy tools. That is, applications of flow have focused on the prominence of theoretical translations rather than using practice-based evidence frameworks from established psychotherapy traditions. Similarly, DBT, as a domain with a strong evidence base and applied focus, has faced similar ‘information transfer’ challenges [2]. We hence argue that ACT and DBT approaches are best positioned to bring flow to life to the everyday person seeking psychological assistance, with or without psychological dysfunction.

The Values-Flow approach represents the integration of clinical psychology practices – as specified by acceptance and mindfulness approaches [2–4] – with flow and creativity theory [1, 10, 16, 17]. In this chapter, we propose the flow tools that may encourage flexible and values-based application in clinical psychology skills, especially values-based behaviour practices during psychotherapy. Just like any service that is provided to the general public, therapists often struggle to engage the ‘full self’ of the (working) adult attending psychotherapy, especially outside of therapeutic sessions. The aim of the Values-Flow approach is to focus on sustainable engagement and creativity within the process of psychotherapy skills practice, especially as it relates to between session practices [2, 10]. Moreover, when the individual presents with clinical level symptoms, moments of Values-Flow, which we discuss below, may expand on what is meaningfully and practically possible in terms of psychotherapy skills application. We hence introduce Flow 2.0, which is an attempt to push past the generic prescriptions of what and how of the flow zone by bridging what’s known with sustainably applicable in terms of flow theory amidst daily challenges.

## **2. The importance of values-flow**

The Values-Flow approach integrates flow and creativity theory to expand the reach of standard contextual psychotherapy skills. Recent studies show that up to 50% of therapy clients do not show clinically significant change. One possible reason is that less than 1 in 4 therapists are setting homework in systemic ways [19] – failing to set the conditions for sustainable engagement and creativity in everyday homework practice [20]. Ignjatovic, Kern, and Oades [21, 22] investigated a population sample of Australian teachers – an occupation with high levels of stress nationally and internationally – to investigate the dynamics of sustainable engagement over months and years. Instead of examining the mechanics of pathology and weakness, the objective was to understand the mechanics of sustainable flow experiences in challenging settings. Despite being a profession of great stress, there were seemingly contradictory findings that flow in educational personnel occurred at a rate of 3 times the general population of working adults [23]. Additionally, Ignjatovic et al. [21] showed that school staff were periodically using personal strengths to experience flow in their work, even amidst the routine challenges of everyday life. Ignjatovic et al. [22] subsequently provided evidence of a processes of vital engagement in working adults over a three-year period, showing that sustainable engagement in values-based behaviour of character strengths use, daily vitality, and acceptance. These works offer promising research foundations to Values-flow- or sustainable engagement and creativity in values-based skills practice inside and outside of psychotherapy, which we build upon in this chapter.

Working adults comprise one of the most important subsection of every society. Even as working adults have a significant impact on economic and socio-cultural aspects, they are increasingly exhibiting frequent, intense, and symptoms of

depression [24] insomnia [25] and post-traumatic stress [26], among other psychiatric conditions. Third wave psychotherapies, including DBT [2] and ACT [3, 4], are among the evidence-based treatment for both ill-health and psychological symptoms management as well as developing a life of value. However, despite the effectiveness of these psychological treatments, Hayes suggested that when it comes to commitment-based aspects of ACT 'the hard work [has been] elsewhere' ([3], p. 310). Hayes further suggested that a more detailed functional structure is needed to fill the 'content vacuum' in bringing values work into the realm of sustainable behaviour change ([3], p. 311). In treating therapy interfering behaviours (especially lack of commitment to therapy skills practice), Linehan argued that 'behaviour therapists have given 'little empirical attention to the treatment of behaviours that interfere with therapy' ([2], p. 21). Currently, the 'response functions' within daily challenges and stressors of executing the skills of psychotherapy are not well specified and are left up to 'the creativity of therapist and the spontaneous comments [and/or actions] of the client' ([3], p. 311), arguably perpetuating low rates of continued practice of skills learned early in psychotherapy [19, 20].

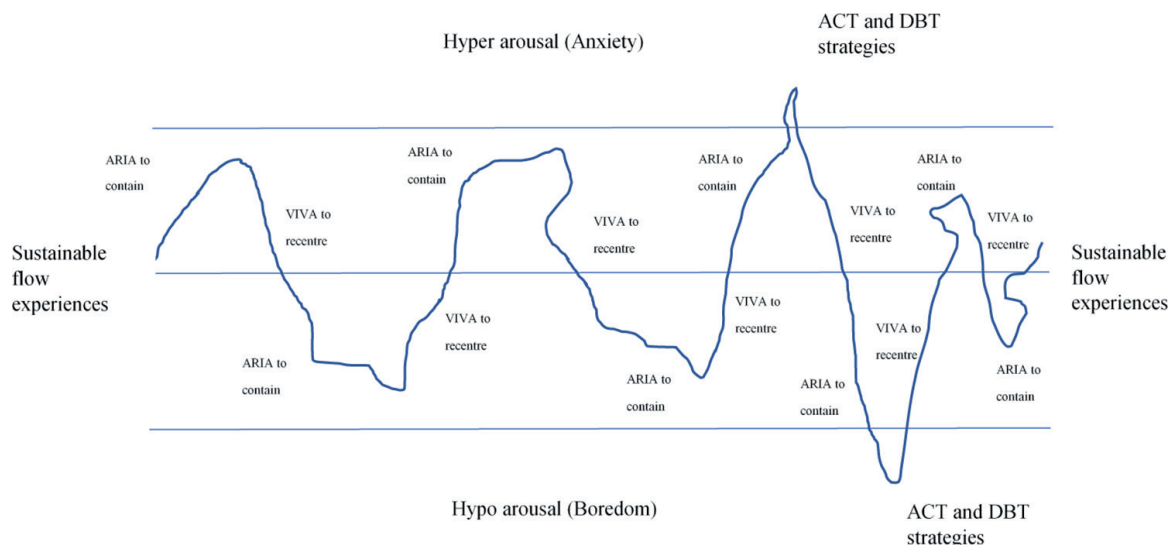
If it is indeed the case that creativity and flexibility is required within psychotherapy execution, then it makes sense to establish clear components for 'creative response functions' [3, 10] that can be 'extracted, from the sociocultural milieu' ([27], p. 47) surrounding the patient, therapist, and the psychotherapy process. To fuel human development, this chapter aims to further specify the patterns of symbolic interactions that allow a person to use cultural models for building a creative personal history [16, 17, 27]. We introduce the Values-Flow approach as the soil from which the goals and skills-based therapy practice grows and rises from. Much like fertile soil from which all living things must grow, Values-based behaviours – a commitment to 'live in accordance with what they care most deeply about' ([28], p. 245) – are what connect everything together and through which all else flows out from.

Moreover, the specific mechanisms and processes underpinning the optimal development of values over time are currently not well understood [29, 30]. We argue that the studies by Ignjatovic et al. [21, 22] on flow and vital engagement provide promising frameworks for establishing the mechanisms and processes of the Values-Flow approach in psychotherapy with working adults. Because the focus is on establishing the structural and developmental conditions of creative and adaptive behaviour [10], Values-Flow in psychotherapy may guide both therapist and clients in the sustainable engagement in psychotherapy and homework practice [2, 4].

To illustrate the mechanisms and processes of Values-flow in vitally engaging psychotherapy skills practice, we first contextualise our discussion within the concepts self-regulation, creativity dialectics, the VIVA (Vital, Involve, Virtue, Accepting, VIVA) or the ARIA (Attending, Reflecting, Informing and Actualising) models, before turning to how these processes might guide sustainable engagement in psychotherapy treatment.

## **2.1 Working adults'optimal development: the potential of self-regulation**

A major premise of both DBT and ACT is that gaps in skills related to emotional and cognitive regulation systems are key contributors to the dysfunctional behaviours and interactions that occur within social and cultural experiences. For instance, 'invalidating environments' in childhood fail to teach skills related to label and regulating arousal, tolerating emotional distress, and trusting emotional responses as reflections of valid interpretations of everyday events ([12], p. 42), which lead to



**Figure 1.**  
*The creativity window.*

ongoing dysfunction in adulthood [6]. Biosocial theories suggest that personality, human development, and self-regulation of one’s experience have important roles to play in healthy development. Similarly, Rathunde and Csikszentmihaly argued that flow theory is a ‘development [that] unfolds in time and is emergent phenomena... unfolding and provides a holistic level of integration between biology, person, and the cultural environment’ ([6], p. 471). Unlike both Hayes’ [11] and Linehan’s [12] perspectives, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde focus on the descriptions of how competent and highly creative persons ‘continually negotiate, and renegotiate, an optimally re-rewarding self-environment fit’ ([6], p. 482). The Values-Flow approach integrates these perspectives and provides an applied approach to ongoing self-regulation in optimal and sustainable ways, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1** illustrates that the variability of emotional regulation in daily practice of creative functioning using Values-Flow skills – specifically focussing on the sustainable flow experience centre. According to the creativity window, the capacity to sustain flow experiences results from an ‘active-interactive’ participation with challenging daily contexts via the ‘negotiating a better fit or synchrony of self with environment’ ([10], p. 481). In doing so the individual is said to possess the affective, cognitive, and behavioural skills to observe, describe, and participate in creative ways even during periods of higher (hyperarousal) or lower (hypoarousal) arousal. The ARIA skills (discussed below) are ‘containers’ of the variations of hyper or hypo arousal during efforts to sustain creative skills practice. However, the VIVA skills (discussed below) act as the re-entering process to values-based behaviour in sustainable ways.

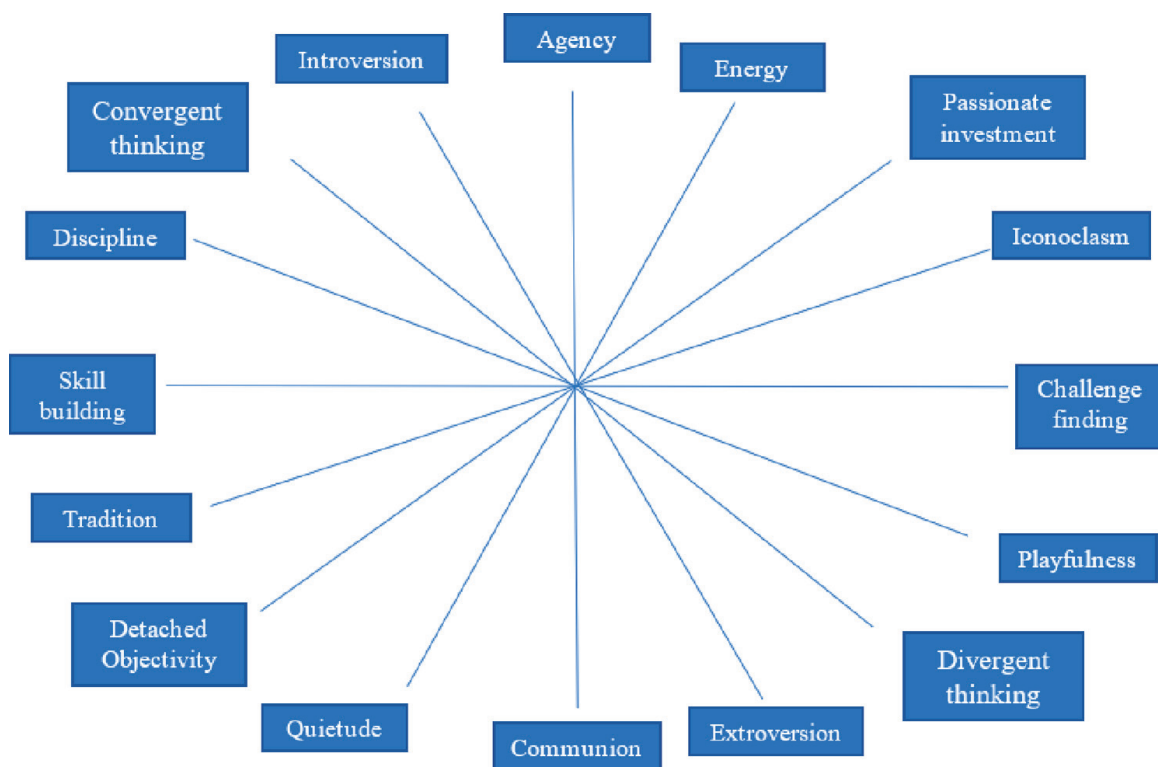
## 2.2 Creativity dialectics practice in working adults

Csikszentmihalyi suggested that creativity occurs ‘when a person makes a change in a domain, a change that will be transmitted through time’ ([17], p. 115). Whilst creativity is often viewed as an individual trait, it is the interactions of people with their culture and social groups – indicating the biopsychosocial nature of ongoing flow experiences. From the Creativity in Later Life study of eminent creators and innovators [16, 17], the daily practice of finding flow experiences was a recurrent theme. Although Csikszentmihalyi [16] cautioned that achieving creativity exhibited

by notable examples required extended periods of time and great access to the rules of extant domains, he nonetheless provided suggestions on how creativity processes could be encouraged in everyday people seeking to lead a more creative life.

In this chapter, we term 'creativity dialectics' to denote the 'polarities that reveal the capacity for finding optimal experiences through a process of differentiation and integration' ([10], p. 484). Sustainable engagement in creative practice involves several components. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, creative dialectics first require the ability to either 1) respond to 'new challenges with skills building rather than a retreat to familiar methods that alleviate anxiety without transforming the problem that it creates', or 2) responds to the conditions of monotonous ease and comfort by finding challenge that focuses attention in a transformative direction ([10], p. 473). Secondly, as per Linehan, there is a focus on the dialectics associating with human functioning – 'or a reconciliation of opposites and continual process of synthesis' ([2], p. 19). Thirdly, infusing contextual psychotherapy with a focus on the creative developmental histories that are part of the individuals discovered life themes and flow activity [27] of flow activity. Of note is Csikszentmihalyi's clear delineation between flow experiences – or forms of enjoyable experiences of immersion – and the function of flow activity – or 'sequences of action that make it easy for people to achieve optimal experiences' ([7], p. 31).

**Figure 2** illustrates the eight polarities of sustained flow activity and experience, or the application of the mechanisms and processes of Values-Flow approach to psychotherapy – i.e., the ARIA and VIVA skills. We argue that the most fundamental dialectic is the necessity of accepting the challenges just as they are within the context of trying to change them with the developing skills [10] – namely the active balance of skill building and challenge finding (and accepting). This is similar to Linehan's central dialectic of acceptance and change which is the 'moment-to-moment changes in the use of supportive acceptance versus confrontation and chance strategies' ([2],



**Figure 2.**  
*Creativity dialectics.*



p. 19). The term ‘creativity dialectics’ suggests the ability to ‘instigate development by flexibly working at the edges of order and novelty, without letting one or the other dominate’ ([10], p. 482). In other words, creativity dialectics help to educate psychotherapy clients of the pathways to attaining optimal self-regulation, and thereby more memorable moments of happiness, in the process of balancing the periods of both order and novelty in their daily lives.

We shall briefly review the dialectical dimensions of ‘psychological complexity’ as they provide a basis for further elaboration of the Values Flow approach to psychotherapy.

- Agency versus Communion – the juxtaposition between competing ‘drives toward independence and interdependence’ – in the domain of interpersonal domain, which has been linked to optimal developmental outcomes and competent performance because they help to creativity ‘negotiate the optimal experience through structure changing and building’ ([10], p. 485).
- Passionate investment versus Detached objectivity – this dimension juxtaposes the tension between ‘intense interest...intrigue...kind of rush of affect’ with ‘shaping...critiquing [and] detaching’ from one’s productive efforts. The fitting of initially ‘immense curiosity that you begin to shape over time’ ([10], p. 486).
- Divergent versus Convergent thinking – the ability to creatively think is said to be founded on the process of bringing synergy to different information occurs from intellectual problem solving together with problem finding; where cognitive fluency and the capacity to make unusual association are exhibited ([10], p. 486).
- Playfulness versus Discipline- this dimension characterises the ability to ‘at the same time be irresponsible and responsible’, a process of sustaining engagement during the ‘exciting’ parts of creativity and when the individual is intentional and considering practical ways to bring the ‘wonderfully wild ideas’ to life ([10], p. 487).
- Extraversion versus introversion – a dialectic that requires the skills of ‘radical acceptance’ ([2], p. 148) of the changing preferences, depending on the context, of being either ‘at the centre of action or at a spot along the periphery’ ([10], p. 488). This dialectical process between contact and solitude is central to maintaining the flexibility of behaviour to achieve as self-environment fit.
- Energy versus Quietude –this dialectic characterises the commitment and concentration of harmoniously balancing the physical needs of eminently creative individuals. Knowing and practicing an implicit ‘rhythm [s] of activity and idleness’, ([10], p. 489) optimally balancing rest in the form of sleep with exercise, was crucial on their journey of life-long discovery and invention.
- Iconoclastic versus traditional – this dialectic characterises the socio-cultural milieu that creative processes are continually revitalised and sustained. Creative persons have been reportedly as acutely respectful of important traditions in their domain of work, and that they ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’. However, at the same time they are also, in many ways in honour of the hard work of their predecessors, have sought to ‘blaze new trails, and find interesting, innovative, and often unpredictable ways of moving forward’ ([10], p. 489).

### **3. The values-flow approach: the what and how of sustainable and creative engagement in psychotherapy**

As discussed above, the Values-Flow approach, aligned with the objectives of Flow 2.0, is to develop applied and sustainable engagement models of change informed by systems theory approaches [2, 30] - focusing on ‘WHAT doing’ and ‘HOW doing’, versus what and how to DO. Moreover, the methodology of the ‘what doing’ doing and ‘how doing’ modelled on Linehan’s [2] approach to teaching mindful skills practice. A key facet of this applied approach to skills practice in psychotherapy is the continuous resolution of dialectical dilemmas inherent in daily life – the ceaseless harmonising of the challenges present in the context and skills available in the process of ‘daily doing’ that is creative and sustainable.

There are two core skill sets in Values-Flow that are equally shared within both the mindfulness and acceptance traditions of ACT and DBT and the Flow of Consciousness in clinical contexts [18]; 1) *Awareness, Focus and Action*, which are part of the ARIA skills [1, 10] and; 2) *Acceptance, Willingness, and Virtue*, as part of VIVA [1, 22]. We shall now review both the ARIA and VIVA skills in more detail – including the four ‘what doing’ skills (Attending, Reflecting, Informing, Acting; ARIA) and four ‘how doing’ skills (pursuing a life of virtue, being routinely involved in Flow activities, experiencing a sense of vital and accepting purpose; VIVA). Of note, these skills are listed on the Values-Flow Cards (see **Appendix 1**), which psychotherapy clients can complete and review in each session.

#### **3.1 Awareness and focus**

The first set of skills to consider are awareness and focus, which are part of the ARIA skills, and are fundamental to both routine self-care and happiness practice [2]. These initial skills begin with being observant and descriptive of the dynamic nature of daily life, the routine presence and creative opportunities in routine situational contradictions, and the attentional and psychological skills needed to bring harmony of challenges and skills in daily situations of life. For example, this could involve observing the rhythm of moment-to-moment events during parent–child interactions, with the benefits of observing affective challenges of young children’s emotional expression through the lens of opportunities to learn (and model) emotional processing.

These first set of skills follow the acceptance and mindfulness traditions [2–4], are the ‘what doing’ skills of Values-Flow, and are covered at the outset of contextual psychotherapy. They include developing the capacity to attend to, and be aware of, internal and external challenges by observing and describing them objectively, rather than subjective descriptions of the experience. That is, the Values-Flow approach focuses on the nexus between awareness of daily events and challenges and how to direct one’s focus toward responding in structured ways – i.e. using one’s ARIA skills. The individual is aiming to structure in adaptive and values-based ways in response to routine life challenges associated with values-based behaviours. Similar to values work in ACT, a core focus of Values-Flow is on the person’s sense of meaning and purpose in their daily lives. However, Values Flow approach goes a step beyond by creating a clear structure to remain committed to values-based behaviours in daily life in ways that are creative, and contribute to happiness.

The awareness skills are not just on external challenges, such as busy working schedule or difficulties managing parenting responsibilities, but also the internal

anxieties, boredom, and apathy that often occur in daily lives of psychotherapy clients. In short, most clients know that values-behaviour and psychotherapy homework practice is what they should do, but they often fail to follow through. Values-Flow supports them in the process of putting things into play in their everyday life. Being able to contain one's attentional and emotional experiences when they are distracted by previously learned unhelpful patterns of daily functioning is necessary when a new behaviour is being learned. For example, a working adult with severe anxiety may need to commit the ARIA acronym to their memory and their initial goal being only to be able to recall the acronym, without necessarily being able to apply it, in less challenging life situations. According to Values-Flow the first and foremost challenge in daily life of many clients is the ability to remember to use the skills learned in psychotherapy, and hence that is the primary goal of initial phases of Values-Flow. The reason for practicing Values-flow is recurrently highlighted and demonstrated in psychotherapy sessions and that it is possible to 'feel [and discover anew] a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory of what life should look like' ([1], p. 3), [27].

As suggested in **Figure 1**, the establishment of a 'ARIA container' is very similar to DBT and ACT in that when exposed to distressing events, people experience challenging situations, emotions, and information in observant and descriptive ways, rather than actively avoiding or attempting to suppress these experiences. This type of avoidant behaviour, whilst understandable, is the behaviour is targeted by the Values-Flow approach. Utilising the optimal transmission methods inherent in flow theory [9], the focus on experiencing challenges as they are in balanced by a focus on 'groove and rhythm' ([5], p. 80) inherent in previous Values-Flow experiences and life themes.

The Informing and Acting skills comprise the third and fourth 'what doing' skills – focusing on reframing daily challenging events from the 'creativity dialectics' lens and applying these in real time. Firstly, the process of apply verbal labels to current challenges, both internal and external, is essential for self-regulation and communicating with others [2]. Acknowledging and formulating the seemingly contradictory feelings and events clearly are the key initial actions that one takes in daily life in response to challenges they encounter. Secondly, the ability to reconnect with the memories and skills related to previous Value Flow themes in times of challenge can assist in fuelling the willingness to practice negotiating the relevant challenge the individual is facing. Both ACT and DBT help clients to 'observe and describe' challenging events, however provide inadequate structural detail in how to 'participate in [daily challenges] without self-consciousness' ([2], p. 284). For instance, by connecting to areas of current and past discovered life themes [27], the individual has a real-life experience to occasions when, despite the challenges they faced, they were able to exhibit adaptive problem solving, behaviours and flow experiences.

By merging of the Attending and Reflecting with Informing and Acting in the process of balancing the internal challenges of difficult emotions implies a willing participation with daily challenges – or engaging completely in the activities of the current moment, without separating oneself from ongoing events ([2], p. 148). In Values-Flow the process of values-based action is flexible and spontaneous, and the individual is responding to the challenges and demands of the task with awareness, the absence of self-consciousness, and with their full attention on the present challenges as they are. That is, the individual that can routinely apply the ARIA skills are setting the moment-to-moment structure for 'creativity dialectics' associated with the sustainable of values-based behaviour practice in daily life.

### 3.2 Core VIVA skills

The next four skills have to do with the 'What Doing' in the Values-Flow approach – expanding the creativity dialectics and providing a compass for where to take ARIA skills over extended periods of time. They include pursuing a life of virtue (Virtue), being routinely involved in Flow activities (Involve), experiencing a sense of vital (Vital) and accepting (Accepting) purpose over the months and years of their lives.

The first VIVA, or 'what doing', skill is being *Virtuous*. This is a capacity to be true to, and take care of, oneself [6] and to balance the challenges of daily situation and the strengths that are employed. The routine use of character strengths is based on the 'pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance' ([11], p. 9). Using the Values-Flow approach may enable the process of harnessing one's strengths in sustainable and creative ways, especially in challenging daily situations – a practice with rooted in age-old philosophical and ethical foundations [1, 2, 6]. Applying the skills learned in psychotherapy in routine challenges, especially in virtuously and with dialectical behaviours managing the 'empty spaces' of organising oneself [5] – putting virtues skills into play in daily life is the fundamental premise of Values-Flow.

The second VIVA, or 'what doing', is the *Involve* skill. Within Values-Flow, this involves the appreciation and practice of flow activity – a process which teaches routes of recurrent flow experiences. This is central to the Value-Flow approach, and the objective of Flow 2.0 in calling for more research and practice in applied mechanism of flow experiences. In the process of not only getting and understanding of flow experiences and pathways to their increased occurrence, it is just as important to have a 'groove and feel' of what they are. This requires an in-depth appreciation of the 'creativity dialectics' managing the process of building their therapy skills whilst also finding novel and interesting ways of challenging and refining them. From a Values-Flow perspective, focusing on enjoying the process of daily practice is what DBT calls 'playing the game' or 'doing what works' ([2], p. 147). In the process of 'using skillful means', the individual learns to enjoy being both responsible and irresponsible, depending on the context. It is indeed a known fact that eminently creative individuals routinely engage in 'serious play' ([10], p. 491). In the process of 'letting go' of the need to always be responsible, one can allow themselves to have opportunities for divergent mindsets.

The third VIVA, or 'what doing' skill, is the Vital skill. Values-Flow teaches the importance of taking care of one's physical and mental energy levels – ensuring that psychic energy levels stay at optimal levels over time. The notation of feeling energised by one's work requires that the individual understand that sustainable energy can only occur in the context of regular quietude. In order to sustain flow activity in ones' life in Values-Flow ways, the individual needs to sustain a sense of feeling energised by one's daily tasks. In order to sustain frequent flow experiences, one needs to ensure regular self-care practice, especially good sleep routines, and periods of rest and recharge throughout one's day.

In the Values-Flow approach, there is fundamental belief that working tirelessly for long hours in the context of enjoyment and meaning are possible, but only with equally valued times of rest and recharge. In seemingly contradictory ways, one must learn to harmoniously balance activity and rest – doing objective work in beautiful and inspirational settings and intense periods of work with naps, walks, bike rides, gardening, chopping wood' ([10], p. 489).

The fourth VIVA, or what doing skill is the Accepting skill. The 'Values-Flow approach suggests that in the process of emotion modulation skills are necessary

during the process of optimal self-environment fit in daily lives in most adults' lives. When engaged in intense and meaningful work experiences, individuals show they can engage in their work tirelessly for long hours and enjoyed their profession for the opportunities for optimal experience over the status and financial benefit it provides [1, 7–10]. When asked, apart from spending time with family, the tasks work associated with flow experiences are rated as the happiest times in their lives [23]. Developing skills to be at once serious and playful [10] in daily life, resulting in subjective happiness arising from putting psychotherapy skills into practice, largely based on an ongoing sense of acceptance and a feeling that one is being true to one's values. In many ways psychotherapy skills practice takes on a 'spiritual' dimension and becomes an ethical transformation of the self ([5], p. 207]).

#### **4. The values-flow approach to homework completion**

To bring this to life, we consider a case example. A client attends psychotherapy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis, having had previous experiences of completing acceptance and mindfulness therapies. However, whilst their more intense psychiatric symptoms have largely been stabilised, their difficulties have continued. One way of conceptualising the problems is that the patient may know 'what to do' but experiences challenges getting to the root of what is valuable in their life and the how of doing values work'. Despite knowing the various DBT or ACT skills like how to defuse from their thoughts, how to increase physical activation and skilful participation, and engaging in self-care, the key aspects of vital engagement have not been activated. As alluded to before, the soil in which all of their mindfulness and acceptance are embedded is Values-Flow – within which all psychotherapy skills are planted in and flow out to every other part therapy skills and daily challenges. What is needed is needed is both ARIA and VIVA skills that comprise the Values-Flow approach that will provide the 'why, 'what' and 'how' of sustainable engagement in values-based behaviour on a daily basis.

The Values-Flow approach is the key foundation to sustainable flow experiences – the soil – where all the nutrients and everything connects all living aspects together in valuable ways. That is, this approach connects all psychological skills development from DBT and ACT with the creative expression and use of these skills in daily life. We shall now go through the 3 facets the Values Flow approach – the why doing, how doing, and what doing – of our PTSD client. We also note the use of the Values-Flow Card (see **Appendix 1**) which facilitates structured learning, review and practice of ARIA and VIVA skills.

##### **4.1 'Why doing' homework discussion**

At the outset of psychotherapy, the value of practice outside of session and homework of skills covered in psychotherapy time should be discussed. The Values-Flow approach to practice is discussed as a process that should be immersive, and have a structure related to human creativity and enjoyment. The Values-Flow Card should be introduced as something that the therapist and client spend time at the start and end of each session discussing and reviewing; highlighting that practice is both valuable in itself and that Values-Flow comes from practice. Incorporating a balance of both playfulness and discipline to homework review and discussion between therapist and clients is a crucial aspect of the Values-Flow approach.

The definition of the terms of such as life theme discovery and character strengths use within Virtue section of VIVA are introduced and have specific practice activities which are specified (e.g., for Character strengths use, the first activity is for the individual to complete the free online Character strengths questionnaire, and to examine the challenges and opportunities related to using them in their daily life throughout the week). Being clear about the importance of homework completion and outside of session practice is further established by questions and troubleshooting considerations such as: Do you have any questions about the homework?; Can you see any barriers to that?; How will your work requirements impact your ability to complete the homework practice?, How will you make time for homework when your kids need's often come first?; Can we pre-empt some of these situations prior to our session ending today?

Some key considerations about how to shape the review and homework completion can be undertaken as follows. At the outset of every session, return to the Values-Flow Card and the review of which is done with an interested and encouraging demeanour from the therapist. If the client attempts to speak about other things other than homework completion, this can be briefly acknowledged as something that would be given ample attention, but then redirect the conversation to the priority of 'how did you go with your Values-Flow card, what worked, and what didn't? The therapists approach is to celebrate what was completed, even if this is incomplete or if the homework was only thought about. At the same time, their focus is on shaping skills to overcome the barriers that are observed. Statements such as 'this is wonderful that you started, so proud of you completing that part of the Values-Flow card' are balanced by the shaping and focusing behavior towards desired completion of goals that wasn't achieved. The tasks that were not completed are worked on the Values-Flow card are worked through with trouble shooting – statements like 'something happened to get in the way, I'm really curious, I'm really interested, and this is not a criticism, but I am really wondering what things got the way'.

There are a diverse challenges which clients encounter relating to homework completion. For instance, the client may have attempted the exercise set for them once and they did not find any enjoyment in doing it. In that case we take an accepting approach and inquire, 'ok how did you do it exactly, what was hard, what was getting in the way'? Another frequent consideration from the therapist is that clients often exhibit magical thinking relating to value of homework exercise, perceiving that the exercises set for them would make an immediate and extraordinary difference in their lives. The primary message to the therapist is the need to spend time clarifying the challenges related to completing the Values-Flow Card and specifying a support structure and skill set to matching these challenges.

#### **4.2 In-session modelling of overcoming challenges to homework completion**

What and how attention focused on the completion of the Values-Flow card should be discussed on a weekly basis in psychotherapy sessions. Apart from shaping behaviour, the process of intense focus and creativity of troubleshooting the challenges of practice signals to patients the value of to pay attention of what they did not do. As suggested above, what is completed is celebrated at one instance and in another should include questions like 'something got you undone here, something got in the way, what was it, let's have a look together' are put forward to the client. There should be review of what is not done is done with interest and compassion. Be mindful of body language, facial expression and tone of voice to indicate 'how wonderful it was they completed their homework and how

happy you are' whilst also directing the focus toward 'what happened in what did not get done, something did not happen here and I'm very, very curious, I'm very interested to know what was there?' You may also offer common examples for why homework does not get completed such as: children were crying; there was no money and they had to work extra shifts; the person felt a bit despondent; by the end of the week they got very tired and felt like everything was too much; or the person overused substances.

In Values-Flow the therapist looks at the challenges associated with homework and practice with an attitude and position of curiosity and interest rather than 'this was good and this was bad'. Black and white thinking is not going to encourage people to learn the value of homework completion, let alone help them enjoy balancing challenges with their skills. Rather, by acknowledging the challenges and opportunities that are there, it can guide the client toward a better way of being that is more attuned to their values and best interests.

It is absolutely crucial to work with the parts of the homework that is not done without the view of not furthering their past themes of being punished or shamed. Therapists need to recognise that it is very easy to induce a shame response within client. The aim of Values-Flow is to not engage in criticism that they got from school, parents, or coaches. The process of reviewing Values-Flow homework is a modelling of Accepting skills that are part of VIVA; bringing in an appreciation that life is full of barriers that get in the way of our best intentions.

Sometimes the therapist must practice acceptance skills in session by working on finding out if there was an intention to do the homework that wasn't completed. Practicing Acceptance skills in session provide essential feedback about whether the person 'thought about doing the homework' and/or 'did you feel that it was important?' Understanding the value-system underpinning both intention to, and the behaviour of, homework completion is crucial to the Values-Flow approach. It is through this process that the therapist can understand the transmission of information related to 'the value of doing homework in my daily life'.

Over time, the aim is to develop a collaboration between therapist and client around what is exactly being requested from them in the Value-Flow Card, the 'why are they doing it' and the 'how of accepting of challenges associated with using skills in daily life. As they get become increasingly immersed and understand Values-Flow, there's a deeper understanding of 'What Doing' and 'How doing' of homework.

Simply assigning homework often does not translate into a person's life, primarily because the usual patterns of behaviour take over and carry on life until the next appointment. The use of the Values-Flow Card within sessions models to the client what 'radical acceptance' [12] looks like in relation to daily challenges; radically accepting both the challenges that are liked and manageable and those that are not liked. The key lesson is that accepting 'liking and disliking' as part of Values-Flow is a way to better manage daily challenges and taking them on with an open heart, which ultimately guide the client toward healing and a better way of life.

## **5. Conclusion: The 'what' of values-flow: how to take care of yourself**

The process of accumulating positive experience is like collecting coins over time. The Values-Flow approach aims at helping that process of accumulation by keeping the individual within the creative window as often as possible in daily life. That means that when something difficult happens there is a cushion of accumulated good experiences. These are important because they help us to better tolerate periods

in daily life and when energy and enthusiasm become depleted by challenging situation that ‘get under our skin’. Hence, the Values-Flow approach is about working on accumulation of positive experiences and paying intense attention to ‘good stuff in life’. This might be having a playfulness demeanour that mirrors children playing and being funny. It could be expending the physical energy playing ball in a playful and lighthearted way. It could be being mindful and intensely interested in the clouds in the sky for instance. Or any other number of options of building heartfelt positivity into everyday life [31].

At its core, the collecting positive experiences in Values-Flow is an act of self-care [32]. Practicing collecting the good in your life and being absorbed in these things is crucial to that process – rather than always being too busy solving the challenges all the time. Coming to appreciate that solving the problems of daily life are done more effectively after time and energy is invested collecting positive experiences is fundamental to Values-Flow approach. The challenges that individuals are faced with in daily life are important. However, collecting positive experiences, or moments of happiness, before these challenges are addressed is not running away from them, but rather making space to taking care of oneself and creating a cushion from the hardships associated with them.

## A. Value flow card

# Values-Flow Card Name: \_\_\_\_\_ | Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the days on which you practiced each Values-Flow Skill

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Virtue skills</b>							
1. Life theme	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
2. Character use	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Involve Skills</b>							
3. Attending	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
4. Reflecting	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
5. Informing	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6. Acting	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Vital skills</b>							
7. Serious Play	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8. Workability	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Accept Skills</b>							
9. Optimal relating	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
10. Optimal regulation	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

Please describe how Values-Flow skills were put to play in your daily life on personal, social, and/or cultural level:

Individual Values- Flow skills notes: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Social Values-Flow skills notes: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Cultural Values-Flow skills notes: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
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# Values-Flow Card Name:

Date:

Please briefly describe and rate the process of practicing various aspects of the Values-Flow Skills in your daily life

	VIRTUE	INVOLVE	VITAL	ACCEPT	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES	Skills Practice Rating*
Mon							
Tues							
Wed							
Thurs							
Friday							
Sat							
Sun							

0 = Value-Flow skills not thought about or practiced	3 = Values-Flow Skills thought about, practice attempted, and focus was labored but also caring
1 = Value-Flow Skills thought about, practice thought about but not attempted	4 = Values-Flow Skills thought about, attempted, and experienced caring focus
2 = Values -Flow Skills thought about, practice attempted but felt labored	5 = Values-Flow Skills thought about, attempted, and focus was in flow (experienced flows)


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