

ACT Researchers Offer Remote Therapy for Adolescents with Health Anxiety

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Online Acceptance and Commitment Therapy can help adolescents who experience health anxiety.

Fueled by a desire to create more mental wellness services for adolescents, Psychology PhD candidate Julie Petersen is working on a landmark study of adolescents suffering from health anxiety.

Health anxiety is a broad term for a variety of conditions and symptoms centered around excessive worry regarding one's health. It often manifests in activities like frequently seeking online information about health conditions, fearing germs, or constantly trying to see a doctor — or, in the case of adolescents, the school nurse. Petersen hopes that the treatment she is examining could address a range of needs from those suffering from health anxiety, a group that has grown significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have seen really large spikes in health anxiety across all ages," Petersen said. "That's part of why I wanted to focus my dissertation on the topic."

While health anxiety is often treated using cognitive behavioral therapy in adults, there is substantially less research on the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for health anxiety, especially in children and adolescents. Petersen works closely with Dr. Mike Twohig, USU Psychology professor, to study the use of ACT for children under 18. This particular study will be one of the largest studies of ACT for health anxiety specifically.

Hoping to expand treatment options for adolescents, Petersen sees this study is an important step for future researchers. "There's a mental health crisis going on with youth, and I'm hoping to add another treatment option that is supported by research."

Participants in this study meet with a therapist over Zoom for ten sessions, each lasting an hour. Because the targeted age range for this study is adolescents age 12-17, participants are at a variety of different developmental levels. Adolescent participants in this research can choose whether they want to work alone with their therapist or bring a parent into the last part of their session as a more active participant in their therapy. While it is too early to tell if parental presence makes a notable difference in the success of this treatment, Petersen's other work with adolescents suggests that ACT treatment is effective whether or not a participant chooses to include a parent.



Julie Petersen

Petersen's main assessments for the effectiveness of this therapy program are what the participants think of it and how it affects overall quality of life in addition to health anxiety symptoms. "ACT is really about improving quality of life," said Petersen. "When you focus on your quality of life, naturally your symptoms improve. We measure how much participants engage with things that they want to, that they care about, that are fun for them, things that health anxiety was previously preventing them from doing."

Whether or not a child is experiencing a debilitating level of health anxiety, Petersen says there are a lot of ACT principles that parents can use to help their children cope with difficult feelings and worries related to their health. One of the best ways parents can support their children is by encouraging them to do what matters to them, even if health anxiety is present.

"If they are feeling anxious about hanging out with friends or something, encourage them to do those things in a safe way, even if they have to carry the anxiety with them," Petersen said. "Rather than focusing on what they can do to fix it, help them see that it's okay to feel anxious. Feelings come and go, and it's important to make space for them to do what they want to do."

Petersen is continuing to recruit study participants and encourages anyone in the state of Utah to consider whether this therapy could be helpful to their children or teens. "Waitlists to get treatment right now are long and it can be really expensive," she said. "This is a short waitlist and it's free to participate, so we're trying to get the word out because there is such a need."

Anyone interested in learn more about this study or signing up can do so by visiting the [USU ACT Research Group's](#) website.