

## **Timor-Leste ACT Training 2024, 3-5 June**

*Reflection by Nicholas Pang  
Education Fund Sponsorship Recipient*

As the Malaysian chapter of the Association of Contextual Behaviour Sciences (ACBS) grew from strength to strength, one issue that preoccupied us (or at least some of us) was the idea of helping another nation in our region grow. Due to the explosive growth of ACBS MY, we have become the regional leader in ACBS activities and it was time for a spot of missionary work. The opportunity presented itself at the least expected moment when Timor Leste PRADET (Psychosocial Recovery and Development, East Timor), the national mental health NGO of Timor Leste, invited ACBS MY to come for a three day national training workshop in Dili, the capital city.

Three of us signed up with varying levels of trepidation – Dr Eugene Koh, the past president, Ms Wan Kah Mun, the future president in waiting, and Nicholas Pang, the court jester. What made Nicholas an integral part of the team was that Nicholas was the psychiatrist in charge at Hospital UMS in 2021 when a trainee counsellor from Timor Leste who was severely lacking in consultation hours and crippled by COVID restrictions turned up in desperation at HUMS's doors asking for an internship. Fast forward nine months and Noviyanti became one of the only 4 in her programme to complete internship hours and graduate on time, in which duration we had injected a large dose of ACT and DBT skills and training into her. 3 years later, she finally made good on her promise to bring her ex-supervisors to Dili to pass down to the local populace and psychological workers the same skills that we had given her.

A few challenges presented themselves – firstly language issues. Timor Leste has a vast hodgepodge of languages which makes the Malaysia predicament look elementary in comparison. In Timor Leste, the national lingua franca is Tetum which is of distinct Austronesian roots and merely superficially shares a small proportion of vocabulary with other languages. However, the school system appeared to be entirely in Portuguese. To complicate things, due to 27 years of colonization by Indonesia from 1975-2002, and the fact that almost all media, music, radio and movies were in Indonesian, the language of popular culture was decidedly Indonesian. Given that we spoke none of these to any degree of fluency, we decided to go with Indonesian-accented Malay and take the rest of it with varying degrees of psychological flexibility.

Second challenge that we did not anticipate was that of fidelity. Due to the fact that ACT is largely language and relationships to thoughts and emotions via language and words, we found it hard to communicate some ideas across to the participants especially for more complex defusion and self as context concepts. We could of course have just gone for metaphor-based and exercise-based ACT training but that would then defeat the purpose of transmitting the core ideology of ACT, and instead what we would have done would have been to transmit the idea that ACT exercises can be used as experiential avoidance strategies as well. So that was an issue which can only be resolved by full adaptation into the target language of the Timor Leste population, which can again only be done with training of local trainers.

The final challenge of course was logistics. As Eugene has alluded to in his report, we were plagued with challenge upon challenge beginning with a rescheduling threat for the entire programme, and ending with an eye opening exposure to the idea of Timor Leste time (1 hour



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waits being common). However, we were gratified because the entire group was receptive to our teaching and were able to pick up particular skills without much hesitancy. They were a highly interactive audience and teaching sessions flowed effortlessly.

After 3 days, we came up with some continuity plans from ACBS Malaysia to ensure our efforts were not in vain. Firstly, ACBS MY promised to adopt the Timor Leste group under our wing, and allow them complementary access to all our training programmes. Also, ACBS MY will provide regular supervision to Timor Leste groups, done using a mix of synchronous and asynchronous methods. Finally, we hope to return to Timor Leste again, with the final aim of training up local trainers, so that we can have an indigenous Timor Leste ACBS organization with local materials in operation.