



Timor-Leste ACT Training 2024, 3-5 June

*Reflection by Wan Kah Mun
Education Fund Sponsorship Recipient*

In June 2024, I was invited to provide Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) training to mental health professionals and technical staff at PRADET (Psychosocial Recovery and Development in East Timor), a national non-profit organization dedicated to supporting mental health and psychosocial well-being in Timor-Leste. This project was in collaboration with two psychiatrists; Dr Nicholas Pang from HUMS and Dr Eugene Koh from UPM. Timor-Leste, previously known as East Timor gained formal independence in 2002. The World Bank categorises Timor-Leste as a low-income economy country. The travel and accommodation logistics were generously covered by PRADET. On the other hand, The ACBS Malaysia Chapter also provided some financial aid to facilitate our expenses, along with sponsorship for ACT books to support PRADET's staff in their ongoing professional development.

Our journey to Timor-Leste was filled with lots of roadblocks and uncertainties. Due to limited information available beforehand and less than ideal internet connectivity, we had to embrace a great deal of uncertainty in planning the training modules. This experience reinforced the importance of psychological flexibility, a core principle of ACT, as we adapted our approach on the fly. My usual, tightly scheduled training approach did not translate well to Timor-Leste's more flexible concept of time. I had to be flexible and adjust my approach on the spot to fit the needs of the participants. Language presented a significant barrier, as Tetun, the local language, is predominantly spoken in Timor-Leste. I delivered the training modules and live real-play demonstrations fully in Bahasa Malaysia, which posed as quite a challenge considering I attended ACT trainings and read ACT materials predominantly in English. To bridge the language gap, I tried to learn some common Tetun phrases, and the participants were very encouraging in correcting my pronunciation and even taught me additional terms. This experience highlighted the importance of cultural humility and the value of open communication, even with limited language fluency.

As our team comprised of a clinical psychologist (me) and two psychiatrists, we came representing a range of perspectives and therapeutic styles in ACT. We acknowledged these differences and found that by combining our strengths, we could provide a more well-rounded training experience for the participants. Through open communication and a shared commitment to our mission, we were able to effectively support each other and demonstrate the flexibility inherent in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. The participants also had the chance to experience in real time how all of us assimilated ACT in various settings and in clinical case managements. We were honest in sharing about our challenges and were open in making space to hold our personal discomforts while delivering the training.

Through group discussions with PRADET's technical staff and Director, a sense of camaraderie emerged. The challenges and pressures faced by mental health workers in Timor-Leste resonated with my own experiences as a clinical psychologist in Malaysia. The struggles, external pressure, compassion burnout faced by the staff were similar to what most clinical psychologists practicing in the field in Malaysia are facing. Community outreach usually would mean a 5-hour drive from PRADET's office in Dili to the venue to check-in on one person, stay overnight and make their way back to Dili the very next day. Follow-ups are scarce and very much dependent on weather and road condition, as well as manpower. While the experiences shared were filled with a sense of frustration, helplessness, disappointment



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over not being able to do enough and even exasperation, we also discovered the *Valor Moris* (Value in Tetun language) of the participants. They are motivated with a deep sense of compassion for the community, generosity in providing as much and as best as they can despite unfavourable conditions, and the willingness and eagerness to learn in service of personal professional growth, providing support to each other, and support to the community. This shared understanding further solidified the importance of supporting mental health workers and building capacity within the community.

An informal meeting with Dr Gaspar, Timor-Leste's one and only civil service psychiatrist in the entire country led to discussions over the limited resources available to service the community, his efforts in providing quality training to his staff and his way of living. It was an inspiring conversation as this reminds me of the clinical psychology profession in Malaysia, still a relatively young field with immense room for growth.

At the end of this memorable trip, I feel privileged to be given the opportunity to collaborate with other professions and to be able to provide insight over my profession. While this may be the very first time PRADET has had the opportunity to have a group of psychiatrists and clinical psychologist from Malaysia to provide ACT training for them, I look forward to continuing this working relationship we have and to be part of the initiative in lending our support for the future development of the mental health field in Timor-Leste.