

## **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)**

### **Introductory Workshop Handout**

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### **Definitions of Mindfulness**

The official ACT definition of mindfulness is: “The defused, accepting, open contact with the present moment and the private events it contains, as a conscious human being, experientially distinct from the content being noticed.”

Here are some alternative definitions:

“Bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis.” (Marlatt & Kristeller)

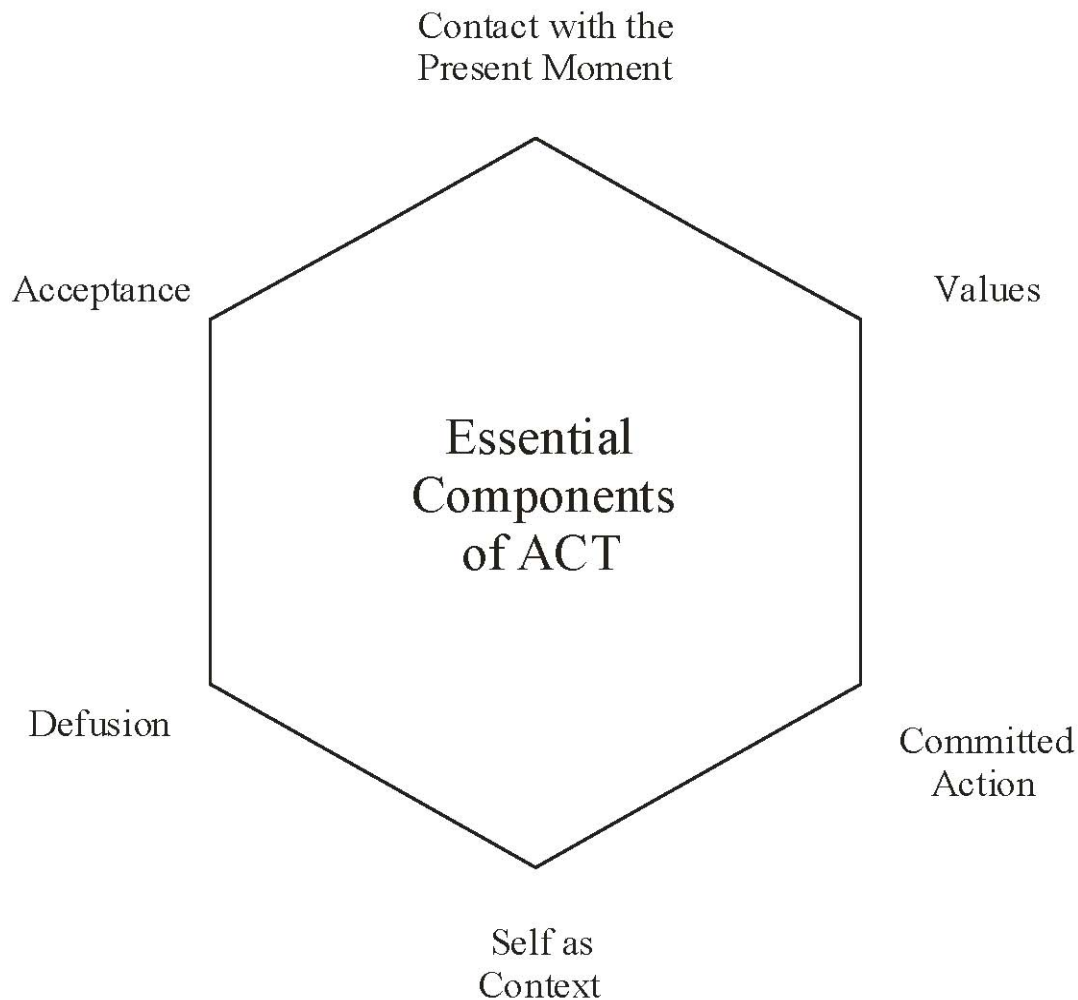
“Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn).

“The nonjudgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise.” (Baer)

“Awareness of present experience with acceptance.” (Germer, Segal, Fulton)

My own definition: “Consciously bringing awareness to your here-and-now experience, with openness, interest and receptiveness.”

**Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a mindfulness-based, values-directed behavioural therapy. There are six core processes in ACT:**



### **The Essence of ACT: 2 major goals**

- Acceptance of unwanted private experiences which are out of personal control
- Committed action towards living a valued life

In other words ... “Embrace your demons, and follow your heart!”

Put simply:

–The aim of ACT is to create a rich, full and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it.

Put more technically:

–The goal of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility has two components: 1) the ability to be psychologically present – i.e. aware, attentive, open to, and engaged in your experience; 2) the ability to control your behaviour to serve valued ends

Official ACT definition: The goal of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility: the ability to contact the present moment and the psychological reactions it produces, as a fully conscious human being, and based on the situation, to persist with or change behaviour for valued ends

**N.B. In ACT, there is no goal of symptom reduction. Symptom reduction frequently happens, but it is simply a fortuitous byproduct, not a goal.**

**There are six core processes in ACT:**

***1. Contact with the Present Moment***

Conscious awareness of your experience in the present moment enables you to perceive accurately what is happening

Gives you important information about whether to change or persist in behaviour

Enables you to ‘catch’ cognitive fusion ‘in flight’

Allows you to engage fully in what you are doing

***2. Acceptance***

Actively contacting psychological experiences directly, fully, and without needless defense

Definition: defused, open, undefended contact with the present moment, as a fully conscious human being.

Colloquial: ‘Opening yourself fully to experience, as it is, not as your mind says it is’

***3. Defusion***

Looking *at* thoughts, rather than *from* thoughts

Noticing thoughts, rather than being caught up in thoughts

Seeing thoughts as what they are, not as what they seem to be

Aim of Defusion is ***NOT*** to feel better, nor to get rid of unwanted thoughts

Aim of Defusion ***IS*** to reduce influence of unhelpful cognitive processes upon behaviour; to facilitate being psychologically present & engaged in experience; to facilitate awareness of language processes, in order to enhance psychological flexibility

***4. Self-as-context***

A transcendent sense of self: a consistent perspective from which to observe and accept all changing experiences. (Often called The Observing Self)

It is a process, not a thing: an awareness of awareness itself: ‘pure awareness’

***5. Values***

Chosen life directions

*‘Your heart’s deepest desires for the sort of person you want to be and the things you want to do in your time on this planet; in other words, what you want to stand for in life’*

Provide motivation & inspiration

Provide guidance for your actions

Give life meaning

Give a sense of abundance

Are different to goals

***6. Committed Action***

Overt behavior in the service of values

(may require skills training)

*Committed* action is: values-guided, effective & mindful

## **Mindfulness**

The official ACT definition of mindfulness is:

“The defused, accepting, open contact with the present moment and the private events it contains, as a conscious human being, experientially distinct from the content being noticed.”

My own definition, for clients:

“Consciously bringing awareness to your here-and-now experience, with openness, interest and receptiveness.”

In ACT, mindfulness = acceptance = willingness

### **The Assumption of Healthy Normality**

By their nature humans are psychologically healthy

Abnormality is a disease or syndrome driven by unusual pathological processes

We need to understand these processes and change them

### **The Ubiquity of Human Psychological Suffering**

High lifetime incidence of major DSM disorders

High treatment demand

High rates of divorce, sexual concerns, abuse, violence, bullying, prejudice, loneliness

Some extremely destructive behaviours are both common and non-syndromal, e.g. suicide

### **The Example of Suicide**

Unknown in nonhumans but universal in human society

About 10% incidence of attempts

About 20% serious struggles including a plan

About 20% serious struggles without a plan

About 50% not associated with DSM disorder

### **Alternative Assumption: Destructive Normality**

Normal psychological processes often are destructive

We need to understand these processes and work within them to promote health

The source of the problem is human language and cognition

### **In ACT, the word ‘Mind’ is a metaphor for human language**

In other words: Language = Cognition = Mind

The mind is not a ‘thing’. It is a complex set of cognitive processes, such as analysing, comparing, evaluating, planning, remembering, visualising etc...

These cognitions all rely on human language.

The human language: a complex system of symbols which includes words, images, sounds, and physical gestures.

Cognitions = language used privately = “mind”

### **Language is a double-edged sword: the positive side:**

Make maps & models of the world

Predict and plan for the future

Share knowledge

Learn from the past

Imagine things that have never existed, and then go on to create them

To develop rules that guide our behaviour effectively, and help us to thrive as a community

To communicate with people who are far away  
Learn from people that are no longer alive.

**Language is a double-edged sword:** the negative side:

Use it to spread libel and slander and ignorance  
To incite hatred and prejudice and violence;  
To criticise and condemn ourselves;  
To make weapons of mass destruction;  
To dwell on and 're-live' painful events from the past;  
To create rules for ourselves that can often be ineffective or destructive

**Unlike all Other Creatures on the Planet, You Cannot Avoid Pain Situationally**

Remember a time when ....  
Imagine a future where...  
Compare yourself to ...  
What if ...  
My life would have been so much better if ...

**Normal Cognitive/Verbal Processes Contribute to Psychopathology**

–Prediction of private events (e.g., pain, anxiety)  
–Knowledge of death  
–Living in the past or the future, and no longer in the moment  
–Comparison to an ideal  
–Wishing, wanting, and desiring: attachment  
–Social comparison / prejudice / stigma  
–Self-loathing  
–Social inhibition (e.g., fear of negative evaluation)

**Language developed primarily to anticipate and solve problems:**

- Food
- Water
- Shelter
- Sex

But above all else ... DON'T GET KILLED!

**Essence of problem solving:-**

Problem = Something we don't want

Solution = Figure out how to change it, get rid of it, or avoid it

This approach works well in the external world, but when we try this with our own unwanted thoughts, feelings, memories etc... it creates problems:

**Experiential Avoidance: simple definition** – trying to avoid, suppress, or get rid of unwanted private experiences, even when it's harmful, costly, or ineffective to do so

**Experiential Avoidance technical definition:** - the tendency to attempt to alter the form, frequency, or situational sensitivity of negative private experience (emotions, thoughts, memories, sensations, urges, images etc.) even when attempts to do so cause psychological and behavioural harm

## **Higher Experiential Avoidance is associated with:**

- Higher anxiety
- More depression
- More overall pathology
- Poorer work performance
- Inability to learn
- Substance abuse
- Lower quality of life
- High risk sexual behaviour
- BPD symptomatology and depression
- Greater severity of PTSD
- Anxiety sensitivity
- Long term disability

## **Why Experiential Avoidance is Basic:**

Humans have been taught a wide variety of strategies for avoiding negative events. These work very well in the material world

An unpleasant private experience is treated the same way as an external problem; it becomes a negative event to avoid or eliminate.

## **When Is Experiential Avoidance Detrimental?**

1. The process of deliberate avoidance necessarily contradicts the desired outcome
2. The regulation of private events is largely unresponsive to verbal/cognitive control
3. Avoidance is possible, but the control strategy is costly, unhealthy, or life-distorting
4. The avoided event is important

## **Healthy Change Often Produces Painful Experiences**

Change is often frightening.

What needs to be done may be avoided because it is experientially difficult.

This suggests a major reason experiential avoidance may lead to psychopathology: It restricts needed change.

“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.” –Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

**N.B. NOT all forms of experiential avoidance are unhealthy. Many are positively adaptive, and others make little difference to long-term life quality. ACT only targets experiential avoidance that persists when it is costly, useless, or life distorting. In these circumstances, experiential avoidance becomes pathological.**

Instead of encouraging clients to use more clever ways to fight and win this war with their own thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, ACT helps clients step out of this war altogether.

Acceptance-based treatments attempt to alter the impact of emotions and cognitions by stopping the struggle with them rather than by attempting to change their form or frequency.

In other words, in acceptance-based approaches, the client's original aim of controlling his or her

private experiences (e.g., emotions, thoughts, cravings, bodily states, etc.) is itself seen as modifiable

Acceptance in this context means actively contacting psychological experiences - directly, fully, and without needless defense - while behaving effectively.

An acceptance approach does not abandon direct change efforts: It simply targets them toward more readily changeable domains, such as overt behavior or life situations, rather than personal history or automatic thoughts and feelings (Hayes, 1994).

**In Summary: ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behaviour change processes, to produce greater psychological flexibility.**

### **Six Core Problems in ACT**

- Cognitive fusion
- Experiential avoidance
- Preoccupation with past or future
- Over-identification with conceptualised self (self-as-content)
- Disconnection from values
- Ineffective action

### **Five Basic Strategies in ACT**

- 1 Confronting the agenda (Creative Hopelessness)
- 2 Control is the problem
- 3 Willingness is the alternative (defusion/ acceptance/ the present moment)
- 4 Self-as-context
- 5 Values and action

### **Basic ACT Strategies: Confronting the agenda**

#### **Confronting the agenda (Creative Hopelessness)**

- What have you tried to get rid of your symptoms?
- Did you succeed in **permanently** getting rid of them?
- What has this cost you?
- Has this brought you closer to the way you want your life to be?

### **Basic ACT Strategies: Control is the Problem**

#### **Control is the Problem: Illusion of control**

- Don't think about favourite ice cream
- Don't feel your leg
- Forget what happened this morning
- Fall in love

#### **Control is the Problem: Psychoeducation**

If control is the problem, why does it persist? Because:

1. Control strategies can be useful
2. Our society encourages and models emotional avoidance
3. Emotions and cognitions are widely believed to **cause** or **control** behaviour. (We need to remember, that while they certainly can **influence** behaviour, they don't cause or control it.)
4. Short-term effects of experiential avoidance are often positive, even if negative in the long-term – therefore, powerful reinforcer of control strategies

## **Control is the Problem: Unworkability & Costs of control**

- Polygraph (lie detector)
- Struggle Switch
- Clean versus dirty discomfort
- Vicious cycles – struggling in quicksand/ digging your way out of a hole

## **Basic ACT Strategies: Willingness Is The Alternative**

(Willingness = Defusion, Acceptance, Contact with the Present Moment)

### **Cognitive Defusion**

Overall purpose: to catch language processes in flight, and bring them under contextual control, so that they can be looked AT rather than looked from.

(More simply: Looking *at* thoughts, rather than *from* thoughts

Noticing thoughts, rather than being entangled in thoughts

Seeing thoughts as what they are – just pictures, words, and sounds)

### **Defusion Techniques:**

- Leaves on a stream (or on a moving black strip)
- Repetition – eg Lemon, lemon, lemon
- Pop-up thoughts (children should be seen and ....)
- I'm having the thought that ...
- I notice that I'm having the thought that .....
- Hear thoughts sung to Happy Birthday – or other tunes
- Hear thoughts in silly voices
- See thoughts on a computer/TV screen – change font, case, colour (+/- bouncing Karaoke ball)
- Radio doom & gloom
- 2 radios metaphor
- Thank your mind
- Naming the story
- Say thoughts in ultra-slow motion, or silly voice; or sing them aloud

### **In Cognitive Fusion:**

Thoughts are Reality; it's as if what we're thinking is actually present, here and now!

Thoughts are The Truth; we literally believe them!

Thoughts are Important; we take them seriously, and give them our full attention!

Thoughts are Orders; we automatically obey them!

Thoughts are Wise; we assume they know best and we follow their advice!

### **In Cognitive Defusion:**

Thoughts are merely sounds, words, stories, bits of language, passing through our heads.

Thoughts may or may not be true. We don't automatically believe them.

Thoughts may or may not be important. We pay attention only if they're helpful.

Thoughts are not orders. We don't have to obey them.

Thoughts may or may not be wise. We don't automatically follow their advice.



## **Helpful questions for unhelpful thoughts**

Is this thought in any way useful or helpful?

Is this an old story? Have I heard this one before?

What would I get for buying into this story?

Could this be helpful, or is my mind just babbling on?

Does this thought help me take effective action?

Am I going to trust my mind or my experience?

## **Observing Thoughts**

Find a comfortable position. Close your eyes.

Imagine a stream, with leaves floating down (or a moving black strip)

As thoughts appear, place them on the leaves and let them float past (or place them on the moving black strip and let it carry them past)

Whenever you get hooked by thoughts, gently unhook yourself and carry on.

Do this once or twice a day for 3 to 5 minutes.

## **Contact With The Present Moment**

- Any mindfulness exercise, eg breath, stretching, sounds, food
- Notice your feet on the floor; your body; your breathing etc.
- 5-5-5 technique: Notice 5 things you can: hear, see, feel - right now

## **Acceptance**

- Acceptance = willingness = mindfulness
- Two countries at war metaphor
- Cultivate willingness to feel unpleasant emotions in order to do something of value
- Discriminate willingness from tolerating/ resignation
- You don't have to like it, want it, approve of it, in order to accept it.
- Acceptance = making peace, letting go of the struggle
- Demons on the Boat

## **Acceptance of Difficult Content**

- Mindfulness of physical sensations
- Observe; Breathe; Expand; Allow
- Pick the strongest sensation; observe it like a scientist – non-judgmentally, without trying to interfere; accept it; repeat with next sensation etc
- Visualise feelings as objects: shape, colour, weight, temperature, texture etc.
- I'm having a feeling of ...
- This is a feeling of \_\_ and I'm evaluating it as \_\_

## **Basic ACT Strategies: Self-as-context**

- Spirituality and transcendence as human experiences
- Chessboard
- Sky & weather
- Your Mind is the World's Greatest Documentary Maker
- Observer exercise: notice who is noticing; notice what doesn't change

## **Basic ACT Strategies: Values & Committed Action**

### **Values**

- What do you really want?
- What do you want your life to stand for?
- What sort of person do you want to be?
- What sort of relationships do you want to build?
- How do you want to act/behave in the world/ towards others/ towards yourself?
- What do you want to do with your life?
- Funeral / Tombstone / Old man looking back/ Celebration dinner/ Obituary
- Miracle question
- Values first - then goals/actions

### **Commitment**

- Not a promise.
- Not a prediction.
- Not an attempt to be perfect.
- It means: commitment to a valued direction.
- Take it for granted that you will go “off-course”, and “stuff up” again and again and again.
- Commit to getting back on track again, as soon as you realise what has happened.
- Clarify: values / goals / actions / barriers
- DAVE cycles (defusion/acceptance/ values/engagement) - build ever larger patterns of behaviour

**Committed action = mindful, valued, effective action**

### **Barriers to Action**

#### **My version of the FEAR acronym:**

**F**usion with unhelpful thoughts (especially evaluation and reason-giving)

**E**xcessive goals (e.g. goals too big; time frames too small; skills lacking; resources unavailable).

**A**voidance of discomfort

**R**emoteness from values

#### **Official ACT version of the FEAR acronym:**

**F**usion

**E**valuation

**A**voidance

**R**eason-giving

## Designing Mindfulness Interventions

1. To design a mindfulness intervention is simple. There are three basic steps:
  - a) pause for a moment
  - b) fix attention on breath, body posture, or some other “anchor”
  - c) observe- with openness, interest and receptiveness - whatever thoughts, feelings, or other private experiences are present
2. You can introduce mindfulness into a therapy session at any point where the client is experiencing emotional distress. Eg if the client seems distressed, you could say, “I can see you’re distressed. What are you feeling right now? Where are you feeling it? Let’s just sit with this for a while, and observe what’s happening here ...” and thus lead into a mindfulness exercise.
3. When client seems overwhelmed by emotion, memory or other private experiences, introduce mindfulness of the external environment, or of breath or body posture.
4. Most impulsive, self-defeating or self-destructive behaviours are attempts to escape, avoid, or get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness exercises can be designed to enhance client self-awareness of what they are trying to avoid. Eg clients can be assigned to notice their thoughts and feelings *before* they actually start doing the problem behaviour - such as drinking, binge-eating, self-harming, gambling etc. Eg. “Next time you’re about to start (doing the problem behaviour), stop for a moment, take ten deep breaths, and notice your thoughts/ feelings/ sensations. See if you can identify the thoughts or feelings you’re trying to push away/ escape from/ get rid of.
5. Mindfulness exercises can also disrupt problematic behaviours. Clients can be assigned to mindfully observe the way they do the problematic behaviour, to notice every aspect of it in great detail, and in particular, to notice what thoughts and feelings are present while they are doing so. Often, simply bringing full awareness to the behaviour disrupts it.
6. Once your client is familiar with mindfulness, you can regularly start or end sessions with mindfulness exercises.
7. Think about whether the clinical problem warrants a broader focus or a narrower focus for mindfulness.
8. For example, if clients are prone to worry and rumination, you may want to encourage a narrower focus: have them engage in some valued activity, and have them focus their attention primarily on that activity. They can let thoughts come and go in peripheral awareness, whilst repeatedly bringing their attention back to the activity itself.
9. In contrast, if the problem is chronic pain, you may want to encourage a broader focus. Whilst pain is acknowledged and accepted, awareness is broadened to encompass the five senses, the surrounding environment, and the current activity. Thus pain becomes only one aspect of a much broader experience.

*N.B. In the therapy room, (and also in homework, or during formal practise) clients are often asked to focus primarily on one aspect of their private experience, eg thoughts,*

*feelings, or sensations. It is important that they realise this is simply to teach them a skill. In the world of everyday living, the idea is that when distressing thoughts and feelings arise, they can be accepted as just one aspect of awareness (one performer among many on the stage) - rather than completely dominating awareness (one performer standing in a spotlight).*

## **A Few Words on Acceptance**

Clients often don't understand what acceptance is – so early on in therapy, I avoid the word. Instead I usually say something like:

“You don't have to like it, want it, or approve of it – simply ...

- ... allow it to be there (simply because it already is)
- ... give it permission to be where it already is
- ... let go of struggling with it
- ... stop fighting with it
- ... make peace with it
- ... make room for it
- ... soften up around it
- ... let it be
- ... breathe into it
- ... stop wasting your energy on pushing it away

### ***Exercise: What Is A Thought?***

Just take a few moments to think about what you're going to do on the weekend. And as you're thinking about it, take a good look at your thoughts, and notice what form they take. Close your eyes, and do this for about a minute.

\* \* \*

A simple analogy here is that images are more like pictures on a TV screen, whereas thoughts are more like voices on a radio, and sensations are what you feel in your body.

### ***Exercise: Thinking Versus Observing***

Close your eyes, and simply notice what your mind does. Stay on the lookout for any thoughts or images, as if you're a wildlife photographer, waiting for an exotic animal to appear from the undergrowth. If no thoughts or images appear, keep watching; sooner or later one will.

Notice where your thoughts seem to be located: out in front of you, above you, behind you, to one side of you, or within you.

Notice that one part of you is thinking while another part is observing that thinking.

There are your thoughts. And there's you observing them.

## **Metaphors to Facilitate Cognitive Defusion**

Thoughts are like:

Clouds floating, or birds flying, across the sky.

Waves arising from the sea, then falling back in. You can watch the waves from the shore, without being swept away.

Leaves and sticks floating down a stream. You don't have to dive in. You can watch from a bridge.

A passing parade. You can watch the floats pass by. You don't have to climb on board.

Trains coming and going while you stand watching from the platform.

A waterfall. You're standing behind it, not under it.

Guests entering a hotel. You can be like the doorman: you greet the guests but you don't follow them to their rooms.

Cars passing by while you wait at an intersection.

Suitcases dropping onto a conveyor belt at the airport. You can watch them pass by, without having to pick them up.

People passing by you in the street. You can nod your head at them, but you don't have to stop and have a conversation.

Wild horses running across the plains. You can admire them but no need to chase them.

Bubbles rising in a champagne bottle. They rise to the surface and then disappear.

Fish swimming in a tank. Watch them come and go.

Children running across a playground. You can stay still and watch, while they run wherever they want to.

Actors on a stage. You can watch the play; you don't need to get on stage and perform.

'Pop-ups' on the internet.

Junk e-mail. You can't stop it from coming in – but you don't have to read it!

Text messages on your mobile phone.

Luggage passing by on a conveyor belt.

## The Basic Mindfulness ‘Formula’

Start with focusing on an ‘anchor’ such as the breath or body. Then shift focus to another aspect of experience, eg sounds, or thoughts. Then expand focus to become simultaneously aware of multiple aspects of experience, e.g. sounds, thoughts, sensations, breathing, and body posture.

1. Find a comfortable position, feet on the floor, back straight, shoulders loose,
2. Close your eyes, or fix them on a non-distracting spot
3. Make it your intention for the next few minutes to purely and simply be present, here and now – and to notice what is happening, with an attitude of openness and curiosity.
4. Bring your awareness to X
5. Simply notice X without judging it, analysing it, fighting it or trying to change it. Observe X with curiosity. Learn as much about X as you can.
6. As you maintain your attention on X, thoughts will come into your awareness. Allow them to come & go freely, as they please. Don't try & hold on to them or push them away. Simply acknowledge their presence, let them be, and bring your attention back to X.
7. From time to time, urges, feelings and sensations will probably arise. When they do, simply acknowledge them, and let them be. Make room for them. Let them stay, or come & go freely, as they please. Don't try & hold on to them or push them away.
8. From time to time your attention will “wander off.” As soon as you realise this has happened, gently acknowledge it, briefly note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to X.
9. There is no need to be disappointed or frustrated. Our attention naturally wanders. Each time you notice your attention has wandered, simply note what distracted you, and gently bring your attention back to X.
10. Remember, you are learning a valuable skill so be gentle with yourself. If your attention wanders 1000 times, your aim is simply to bring it back 1000 times.
11. Now bring your attention to Y (Repeat previous instructions as desired.)
12. Now bring your attention to Z
13. Now notice X and Y and Z, all at the same time.
14. Now notice where you are, what you're doing, and everything you're aware of; then open your eyes and connect with the room around you, and hold onto that sense of being present, here and now.

## A Useful Metaphor For Observing

Observe as if you are a *friendly* scientist encountering a new phenomenon. As a friendly scientist, you are not trying to interfere with or destroy it. You are simply studying it; observing it with curiosity; trying to find out as much about it as you can. (This is a particularly useful metaphor for observing unpleasant sensations.)

## **Emphasising Self-as-Context (The ‘Observing Self’)**

In mindfulness exercises, we are observing all manner of experiences; thoughts, feelings, urges, memory, sensations, sights, sounds, smells, actions etc.. The question is, *who is doing the observing?* That aspect of ourselves which observes our experience, but is separate from it, is often referred to as 'The Inner Observer' or 'The Silent Witness'. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy it is referred to as 'Self-as-context' or 'The Observing Self'. While our thoughts, feelings, sensations etc. constantly change, the observing self does not. It can be very powerful to draw attention to this transcendent aspect of self.

To enhance awareness of the observing self, add phrases into mindfulness/ acceptance exercises such as: "And as you're noticing that, be aware that you're noticing....." Or "As you're observing this, notice who's doing the observing."

### **The Observing Self Exercise**

The aim of this exercise is to increase awareness of self-as-context, or the Observing Self: that aspect of us which is experientially distinct from whatever event is being observed. The basic formula is:

- 1) Bring your attention to X.
- 2) As you notice X, be aware that you are noticing it.
- 3) There is X, and there you are, observing it.
- 4) X changes.
- 5) The you that notices X does not change.
- 6) Once again, notice X, and be aware that you're noticing. There's X, and there's you.
- 7) I always conclude this exercise with the sky/weather metaphor. (See the section on metaphors, later).

X can include: thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges, memories, body, the roles you play. When you get to part 4) in the above formula, improvise a bit about how X changes.

Eg, your feelings change constantly. Sometimes you're sad, sometimes you're happy. Sometimes you're calm. Sometimes you're angry. Etc. etc.

Eg your body changes continuously. It's not the same body you had as a baby, as a child, as a teenager, as a young adult. You may have had bits put in or bits cut out. You have scars, and wrinkles, and moles and blemishes, that weren't there ten or twenty years ago. You get a whole new set of skin every 6 weeks. Over a period of 7 years, every single cell in your body gets replaced by new cells. At the atomic level, 95% of the atoms in your body are replaced by new ones in the space of one year.

Eg your roles change continuously. Now you're in the role of a client. At other times, you're in the role of a mother/father/son/daughter/ brother/sister/friend, rival, citizen, customer, worker, employer, employee etc.

Using this formula, you can make this exercise as long or as short as you like. The main ACT book (Acceptance & Commitment Therapy, by Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson) has a detailed and lengthy script for this on p 193-195. Many ACT therapists like to use that script. I personally find it is too long, and that clients often drift off into la-la land. (Don't tell Steve I said that!)

## **Mindfulness Of Eating A Sultana**

Throughout this exercise, all sorts of thoughts and feelings will arise. Let them come and go, and keep your attention on the exercise. If you realise that your attention has wandered, briefly note what distracted you, then bring your attention back to the sultana.

Take hold of the sultana.

First look at it as if you're a curious scientist who has never seen such a thing before. Notice the shape, the colour, the different shades of colour, the parts where light bounces off the surface, the contours, the pit where the stalk was attached.

Notice the weight of it in your hand and the feel of the skin against your fingers: its texture and temperature.

Raise it to your nose and smell it. Notice the aroma.

Raise it to your mouth and pause for a moment before biting into it. Bring your attention to what is happening inside your mouth: notice the salivation around your tongue and the urge to bite into it.

Now slowly bite it in half, noticing your teeth breaking through the skin and sinking into the flesh and the sound that makes, and the sensation of sweetness on your tongue.

Notice your teeth meeting, and the feel of the sultana falling onto your tongue, and the urge to chew it and swallow it.

Chew it slowly, noticing the taste and texture. Notice the movement of your jaws, the sound that chewing makes, the sensation of the flesh breaking down. Notice how your tongue shapes the food.

Notice your urge to swallow – and as you do swallow, notice the movement in your throat, and the sound it makes.

And after you've swallowed, pause and notice the way the taste gradually disappears from your tongue. Notice your growing urge to eat the remaining half.

Now eat the rest of the sultana in the same way.



## **Mindfulness of the Breath**

1. Bring your attention to your breathing
2. Follow the air as it comes in through your nostrils and goes down to the bottom of your lungs. Then follow it as it goes back out again.
3. Follow the air, as if you're riding the waves of your breathing
4. Notice the air moving in and out of your nostrils ... how it's slightly warmer as it comes out, and cooler as it goes in
5. Notice the gentle rise and fall of your rib cage
6. Notice the gentle rise & fall of your abdomen (belly)
7. Fix your attention on one of these areas, whichever you prefer: on the breath moving in and out of the nostrils, on the rising & falling of the ribcage, or the rising & falling of the abdomen (belly)
8. Keep your attention on this spot, noticing the movement - in and out - of the breath
9. Whatever feelings, urges or sensations arise, whether pleasant or unpleasant, gently acknowledge them - as if nodding your head at people passing by you on the street. Gently acknowledge their presence, and let them be. Allow them to come & go as they please, and keep your attention on the breath.
10. Whatever thoughts, images, or memories arise, whether comfortable or uncomfortable, simply acknowledge them and allow them to be. Let them come & go as they please, and keep your attention on the breath.
11. From time to time, your attention will become distracted by thoughts or feelings. Each time this happens, notice what distracted you, then bring your attention back to the breath. No matter how often your attention "wanders off" - whether a hundred times, or a thousand - your aim is simply to note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to the breath.
12. There is no need to be frustrated or impatient or disappointed when you get carried off by your thoughts. It is the same for everyone. Our minds naturally distract us from what we are doing. So each time you realise your attention has wandered, gently acknowledge it, notice what distracted you, and return your attention to the breath.
13. If frustration, boredom, anxiety, impatience or other feelings arise, simply acknowledge them, and maintain your focus on the breath.
14. No matter how often your attention wanders, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and gently bring your attention back to the breath.
15. When you are ready, bring yourself back to the room and open your eyes

### **Practise Instructions:**

Initially practise this for 5 minutes twice a day. Aim to increase the duration by 2 or 3 minutes every few days, until you can do this for 15-20 minutes at a time. Even if you only practise this for 1 minute each day, that is better than not practising at all.

## Accepting Emotions

- When you're feeling an unpleasant emotion, the first step is to take a few slow, deep breaths, and quickly scan your body from head to toe.
- You will probably notice several uncomfortable sensations. Look for the strongest sensation – the one that bothers you the most. For example, it may be a lump in your throat, or a knot in your stomach, or an ache in your chest.
- Focus your attention on that sensation. Observe it curiously, as if you are a friendly scientist, discovering some interesting new phenomenon.
- Observe the sensation carefully. Notice where it starts and where it ends. Learn as much about it as you can. If you had to draw a line around the sensation, what would the outline look like? Is it on the surface of the body, or inside you, or both? How far inside you does it go? Where is the sensation most intense? Where is it weakest? How is it different in the centre than around the edges? Is there any pulsation, or vibration within it? Is it light or heavy? Moving or still? What is its temperature?
- Take a few more deep breaths, and let go of the struggle with that sensation. Breathe into it. Imagine your breath flowing in and around it.
- Make room for it. Loosen up around it. Allow it to be there. You don't have to like it or want it. Simply let it be.
- The idea is to observe the sensation – not to think about it. So when your mind starts commenting on what's happening, just say 'Thanks, mind!' and come back to observing.
- You may find this difficult. You may feel a strong urge to fight with it or push it away. If so, just acknowledge this urge, without giving in to it. (Acknowledging is rather like nodding your head in recognition, as if to say 'There you are. I see you.')
- Once you've acknowledged that urge, bring your attention back to the sensation itself.
- Don't try to get rid of the sensation or alter it. If it changes by itself, that's okay. If it doesn't change, that's okay too. Changing or getting rid of it is not the goal.
- You may need to focus on this sensation for anything from a few seconds to a few minutes, until you completely give up the struggle with it. Be patient. Take as long as you need. You're learning a valuable skill.

\* \* \*

- Once you've done this, scan your body again, and see if there's another strong sensation that's bothering you. If so, repeat the procedure with that one.
- You can do this with as many different sensations as you want to. Keep going until you have a sense of no longer struggling with your feelings.
- As you do this exercise one of two things will happen: either your feelings will change - or they won't. It doesn't matter either way. This exercise is not about changing your feelings. It's about accepting them.

### 4 Quick Steps To Emotional Acceptance

1. OBSERVE. Bring awareness to the feelings in your body.
2. BREATHE. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe into and around them.
3. EXPAND. Make room for these feelings. Create some space for them.
4. ALLOW. Allow them to be there. Make peace with them

Some people find it helpful to silently say to themselves, *'I don't like this feeling, but I have room for it,'* or *'It's unpleasant, but I can accept it.'*

## **Informal Mindfulness Exercises**

### **1) Mindfulness in Your Morning Routine**

Pick an activity that constitutes part of your daily morning routine, such as brushing your teeth, shaving, or having a shower.

When you do it, totally focus on what you are doing: the body movements, the taste, the touch, the smell, the sight, the sound etc.

For example, when you're in the shower, notice the sounds of the water as it sprays out of the nozzle, and as it hits your body as it gurgles down the hole. Notice the temperature of the water, and the feel of it in your hair, and on your shoulders, and running down our legs. Notice the smell of the soap and shampoo, and the feel of them against your skin. Notice the sight of the water droplets on the walls or shower screen, the water dripping down your body and the steam rising upwards. Notice the movements of your arms as you wash or scrub or shampoo.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to the shower.

Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realise this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to the shower.

### **2) Mindfulness of Domestic Chores**

Pick an activity such as ironing clothes, washing dishes, vacuuming floors, and do it mindfully.

Eg, when ironing clothes: notice the colour and shape of the clothing, and the pattern made by the creases, and the new pattern as the creases disappear. Notice the hiss of the steam, the creak of the ironing board, the faint sound of the iron moving over the material. Notice the grip of your hand on the iron, and the movement of your arm and your shoulder.

If boredom or frustration arises, simply acknowledge it, and bring your attention back to the task at hand.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to what you are doing.

Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realise this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to your current activity.

## **Take Ten Breaths**

1. Throughout the day, pause for a moment and take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible, until the lungs are completely empty, and breathing in using your diaphragm.
2. Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying and your ribcage falling as you breathe out. Notice the rising and falling of your abdomen.
3. Notice what thoughts are passing through your mind. Notice what feelings are passing through your body.
4. Observe those thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad, and without trying to change them, avoid them, or hold onto them. Simply observe them.
5. Notice what it's like to observe those thoughts and feelings with an attitude of acceptance.

## **Notice Five Things**

This is a simple exercise to centre yourself, and connect with your environment. Practise it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Pause for a moment
2. Look around, and notice five things you can see.
3. Listen carefully, and notice five things you can hear.
4. Notice five things you can feel in contact with your body. (E.g. your watch against your wrist, your trousers against your legs, the air upon your face, your feet upon the floor, your back against the chair etc)



**Daily Willingness Diary:** At the end of each day, rate the following three dimensions about the day:

| Day       | UPSET (e.g. Anxiety, Depression, Worry, Anger, Grief)<br>0 - None to<br>10 - Extreme | STRUGGLE (How much effort was put into getting this to go away?)<br>0 - None to<br>10 - Extreme | WORKABILITY<br>If life were like this day, to what degree would doing what you did today be part of a vital, workable way of living?<br>0 – Not at all workable to<br>10 – Extremely workable | COMMENTS |
|-----------|--|---|---|----------|
| Monday    |  |   |   |          |
| Tuesday   |  |   |   |          |
| Wednesday |  |   |   |          |
| Thursday  |  |   |   |          |
| Friday    |  |   |   |          |
| Saturday  |  |   |   |          |
| Sunday    |  |   |   |          |
| Monday    |  |   |   |          |
| Tuesday   |  |   |   |          |
| Wednesday |  |   |   |          |
| Thursday  |  |   |   |          |
| Friday    |  |   |   |          |
| Saturday  |  |   |   |          |

| <b>Handling Your Thoughts And Feelings</b>              |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| Date/ time. Briefly describe the unpleasant experience. | What were you feeling <i>at the time</i> ? What were the sensations in your body? | What were your thoughts <i>at the time</i> ?             | What did you do to handle your feelings, thoughts, or bodily sensations? |
| Eg. Car broke down                                      | Frustrated, worried. Tight chest, clenched jaws, knots in stomach                 | 'Not again!' 'This stupid car!' 'I'll be late for work!' | Swore. Thumped the dashboard. Called the RACV. Smoked a cigarette.       |
|   |   |  |  |
|   |   |  |  |

## CLEAN VERSUS DIRTY DISCOMFORT DIARY

Instructions: Each time you run into a situation in which you feel “stuck” or in which you are struggling with your thoughts or feelings, please complete each column below.

| Situation                    | (Clean Stuff) My initial reaction  | Initial distress level  | (Dirty Stuff) What I did about my initial reactions  | Secondary distress level   |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| What happened to start this? | What immediately “showed up” in the way of thoughts, feelings, memories, or physical sensations? | Immediate distress level on a 0-100 scale<br>0 = none<br>100= extreme | Did I struggle with things I didn't like? Did I criticise myself? Did I try to shove my reactions back in, or pretend they weren't there? Did I try to distract myself with food, alcohol, TV etc? | Rate how your distress level changed as a result of 'dirty stuff'.<br>(On a 0 - 100 scale) |
|                              |  |   |  |  |
|                              |  |   |  |  |
|                              |  |   |  |  |
|                              |  |   |  |  |
|                              |  |   |  |  |
|                              |  |   |  |  |



## VALUES WORKSHEET

Deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others? Values are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life.

Values are not the same as goals. Values are directions we keep moving in, whereas goals are what we want to achieve along the way. A value is like heading North; a goal is like the river or mountain or valley we aim to cross whilst traveling in that direction. Goals can be achieved or 'crossed off', whereas values are an ongoing process. For example, if you want to be a loving, caring, supportive partner, that is a value – an ongoing process. If you stop being loving, caring and supportive, then you are no longer a loving, caring, supportive partner; you are no longer living by that value. In contrast, if you want to get married, that's a goal - it can be 'crossed off' or achieved. Once you're married, you're married – even if you start treating your partner very badly. If you want a better job, that's a goal. Once you've got it - goal achieved. But if you want to fully apply yourself at work, that's a value – an ongoing process.

The following are areas of life that are valued by some people. Not everyone has the same values, and this is not a test to see whether you have the "correct" values. Think about each area in terms of general life directions, rather than in terms of specific goals. There may be certain areas that you don't value much; you may skip them if you wish. There may be areas that overlap – e.g. if you value hiking in the mountains, that may come under both physical health and recreation. It is also important that you write down what you would value if there were nothing in your way. What's important? What do you care about? And what you would like to work towards?

1. **Family relations.** What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/auntie do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?
2. **Marriage/couples/intimate relations.** What sort of partner would you like to be in an intimate relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the 'ideal you' in this relationship?
3. **Parenting.** What sort of parent would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with your children? How would you behave if you were the 'ideal you'.
4. **Friendships/social life.** What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?
5. **Career/employment.** What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work? What sort of work relations would you like to build?
6. **Education/personal growth and development.** What do you value about learning, education, training, or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn? What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?
7. **Recreation/fun/leisure.** What sorts of hobbies, sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?
8. **Spirituality.** Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. It may be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. What is important to you in this area of life?
9. **Citizenship/ environment/ community life.** How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/ charity/ political party? What sort of environments would you like to create at home, and at work? What environments would you like to spend more time in?
10. **Health/physical well-being.** What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, etc? Why is this important?

## **The Willingness-and-Action Plan**

My goal is to

The values underlying my goal are

Thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges I'm willing to have (in order to achieve this goal):-

- Thoughts:

- Feelings:

- Sensations:

- Urges:

- It would be useful to remind myself that

- I can break this goal down into smaller steps, such as

- The smallest, easiest step I can begin with is

- The time, day and date that I will take that first step, is

## USEFUL METAPHORS

The pages that follow cover many of the metaphors I use in my introductory workshop. The text consists of extracts from my ACT-based self-help book, “The Happiness Trap.”

### QUICKSAND/ STRUGGLE SWITCH/ CLEAN & DIRTY DISCOMFORT

Have you ever seen one of those old movies where the bad guy falls into a pool of quicksand, and the more he struggles, the faster it sucks him under? If you should ever fall into quicksand, struggling is the worst thing you can possibly do. What you’re supposed to do is lie back, spread your arms, and lie as still as possible, floating on the surface. (Then whistle for your horse to come and rescue you!) Acting effectively in this situation is tricky, because every instinct tells you to try to escape; but if you don’t stop struggling, pretty soon you’ll sink beneath the surface. Sure, it’s not exactly fun to be floating on quicksand, but it beats the hell out of *drowning* in it!

The same principle applies to difficult feelings: the more we try to fight them, the more they smother us. Now, why should this be? Well, imagine that at the back of your mind is a switch—we’ll call it the “struggle switch.” When it’s switched on, it means we’re going to struggle against any physical or emotional pain that comes our way; whatever discomfort we experience, we’ll try to get rid of it or avoid it.

For instance, suppose the emotion that shows up is anxiety. If our struggle switch is ON, then that feeling is completely unacceptable. So we could end up with anger about our anxiety: “How dare they make me feel like this!” Or sadness about our anxiety: “Not again! This is tragic!” Or anxiety about our anxiety: “This can’t be good for me. I wonder what it’s doing to my body.” Or guilt about our anxiety: “I shouldn’t let myself get so worked up! I should know better. Once again, I’m acting like a child.” Or maybe even a mixture of all these feelings at once! What all these secondary emotions have in common is that they are unpleasant, unhelpful, and a drain upon our energy and vitality. And then we get angry or anxious or depressed about *that!* Spot the vicious cycle?

Now imagine what happens if our struggle switch is OFF. In this case, whatever emotion shows up, no matter how unpleasant, we don’t struggle with it. Thus, when anxiety shows up, it’s not a problem. Sure, it’s an unpleasant feeling, and we don’t like it, but it’s nothing terrible. With the struggle switch OFF, our anxiety levels are free to rise and fall as the situation dictates. Sometimes they’ll be high, sometimes low,—and sometimes there will be no anxiety at all. But more importantly, we’re not wasting our time and energy struggling with it.

Without struggle, what we get is a natural level of physical and emotional discomfort, depending on who we are and the situation we’re in. In ACT, we call this “clean discomfort.” There’s no avoiding “clean discomfort”; life serves it up to all of us in one way or another. But once we start struggling with it, our discomfort levels increase rapidly. And all that additional suffering, we call “dirty discomfort.”

Our struggle switch is like an emotional amplifier—switch it on, and we can have anger about our anxiety, anxiety about our anger, depression about our depression, or guilt about our guilt. We could even have guilt about our anger about our anxiety—and then depression about that!

But it doesn’t stop there. With our struggle switch ON, we are completely unwilling to accept the presence of these uncomfortable feelings, which means, not only do we get emotionally distressed by them, we also do whatever we can to get rid of them, or distract ourselves from them. For some people, this means turning to drugs or alcohol, which then leads to addictions, relationship issues, and a whole host of other messy problems. Others may turn to food as a distraction, which can then lead to obesity or eating disorders. Humans find an almost infinite number of ways to try to avoid or get rid of unpleasant feelings: from smoking to sex, from shopping to surfing the Internet. As we saw earlier, most of these control strategies are no big deal, as long as they’re used in moderation - but *any* of them is problematic if used excessively. For example, I’ve had clients who developed huge credit card debts from excessive shopping, and others who destroyed their relationships by making unreasonable sexual demands. All these secondary problems, and the painful feelings associated with them, fall under the

heading “dirty discomfort.”

**With the struggle switch OFF:**

- Our emotions are free to move.
- We don’t waste time and energy fighting or avoiding them.
- We don’t generate all that “dirty discomfort.”

**With the struggle switch ON:**

- Our emotions are stuck.
- We waste a huge amount of time and energy struggling with them.
- We create a lot of painful and unhelpful “dirty discomfort.”

**SCRATCH AN ITCH (control is the problem)**

What do you do when you have an itch? You scratch it, right? And usually this works so well you don’t even think about it: scratch the itch and it goes away. Problem solved. But suppose one day you develop a patch of eczema (a common skin condition). The skin is very itchy, so naturally you scratch it. However, the skin cells in this region are already inflamed and therefore highly sensitive. And when you scratch them, they release chemicals called histamines, which are highly irritating. And these histamines inflame the skin even further. So after a little while the itch returns—with a greater intensity than before. And of course, if you scratch it again, it gets even worse! The more you scratch, the worse the eczema, and the bigger the itch. If you go and see a doctor, what’s the first thing they’ll tell you to do? That’s right: “Stop scratching!”

**YOUR MIND, THE DOCUMENTARY MAKER (self-as-context)**

Have you ever watched a documentary on Africa? What did you see? Lots of crocodiles, lions, antelopes, gorillas, and giraffes? Tribal dances? Military conflict? Political upheaval? Colourful marketplaces? Amazing mountains? Beautiful, placid villages in the countryside? Poverty-stricken shantytowns? Starving children? You can learn a lot from watching a documentary, but one thing is for sure: a documentary about Africa is not Africa itself.

A documentary can give you *impressions* of Africa. It can certainly show you some dramatic sights and sounds. But it wouldn’t even come close to the actual experience of travelling there in the flesh. No matter how brilliantly filmed, no matter how “authentic” it is, a documentary about Africa is not the same thing as Africa itself.

Similarly, a documentary about you would not be the same thing as you yourself. Even if that documentary lasted for a thousand hours and included all sorts of relevant scenes from your life, all sorts of interviews with people who know you, and all sorts of fascinating details about your innermost secrets, even then the documentary would not be *you*.

To really clarify this, think of the person you love most on this planet. Now, which would you prefer to spend time with: the actual living person or a documentary about that person?

So, there’s this huge difference between who we are and any documentary that anyone could ever make about us—no matter how “truthful” that documentary may be. And I’ve put “truthful” in quotation marks because all documentaries are hopelessly biased in that they only show you a tiny part of the big picture. Since the advent of cheap video, the typical hour-long TV documentary is the “best” of literally dozens, if not hundreds of hours of footage. So inevitably it’s going to be quite biased.

And the bias of a human film director is *nothing* compared to the bias of our thinking self. Out of an entire lifetime of experience—literally hundreds of thousands of hours of archival “film

footage”—our thinking self selects a few dramatic memories, edits them together with some related judgments and opinions, and turns it into a powerful documentary, entitled “This Is Who I Am!”

And the problem is, when we watch that documentary we forget that it’s just a heavily edited video. Instead, we believe that we *are* that video! But in the same way that a documentary of Africa is not Africa, a documentary of you is not you.

### **DEMONS ON THE BOAT (a variant on “Passengers on the Bus”)**

Imagine you’re steering a ship far out at sea. Below the deck, out of sight, lie a vast horde of demons, all with enormous claws and razor-sharp teeth. These demons have many different forms. Some of them are emotions, such as guilt, anger, fear, or hopelessness. Some are memories of times you’ve failed or been hurt. Others are thoughts like “It’s too hard,” “I’ll make a fool of myself,” or “I’ll fail.” Some of them are mental images, in which you see yourself performing badly or getting rejected; others are strong urges to drink too much, smoke, harm yourself, or overeat. And still others are unpleasant sensations, such as tightness in your chest, or a knot in your stomach.

Now, as long as you keep that ship drifting out at sea, the demons will stay below. But as soon as you start steering toward land, they clamber up from below deck, flapping their membranous wings, baring their fangs, and generally threatening to tear you into little pieces. Not surprisingly, you don’t like that very much, so you cut a deal: “If you demons stay out of sight, down below, I’ll keep the ship drifting out at sea.” The demons agree, and everything seems okay—for a while.

The problem is, eventually you get fed up of being at sea. You get bored and lonely, miserable, resentful, and anxious. You see plenty of other ships heading into shore, but not yours. “What sort of life is this?” you think. “That land over there—that’s where I want to be heading.” But the demons down below aren’t particularly interested in what you want. They want to stay out at sea, and that’s final! So the moment you start heading for land, they swarm up onto the deck and start threatening you again.

The interesting thing is, although these demons threaten you, they never actually cause you any physical harm. Why not? Because they can’t! All they can do is growl and wave their claws and look terrifying—physically they can’t even *touch* you. And once you realise this, you’re free. It means you can take your ship wherever you want—as long as you’re willing to accept the demons’ presence. All you have to do to reach land is accept that the demons are above deck, accept that they’re doing their level best to scare you, and keep steering the ship toward shore. The demons may howl and protest, but they’re powerless, because their power relies totally on your belief in their threats.

But if you’re not willing to accept these demons, if you’ve got to keep them below deck at all costs, then your only option is to stay adrift, at sea. Of course, you can try to throw the demons overboard, but while you’re busy doing that no one is piloting the ship, so you run the risk of crashing into rocks or capsizing. Besides that, it’s a struggle you could never win, because there’s an infinite number of those demons in the hold.

“But that’s horrible!” you may well protest. “I don’t want to live surrounded by demons!” Well, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you already are. And those demons will keep showing up, again and again, as soon as you start to take your life in a valued direction. Now here’s the good news: if you keep steering your ship toward shore (no matter how much the demons threaten you), many of them will realise they’re having no effect, and will give up and leave you alone. As for the ones that remain, after a while you’ll get used to them. And if you take a good, long look at them, you’ll realise they’re nowhere nearly as scary as they first appeared. You’ll realise they’ve been using special effects to make themselves look a lot bigger than they really are. Sure, they’ll still look ugly; they won’t turn into cute fluffy bunny rabbits; but you’ll find them much less frightening. And you’ll find that you can let them hang around without being bothered by them. (Furthermore, as you continue on that voyage, it’s not just demons that show up. You’ll also encounter angels, and mermaids, and dolphins!)

And it doesn’t matter how far away from the shore you are. The instant you start heading towards it, you’re living life; you’re having an adventure; you’re moving in a valued direction. As Helen Keller said, “Life is a daring adventure, or nothing at all.”

## THE SKY AND THE WEATHER (self-as-context)

The observing self is like the sky, while thoughts, sensations, and images are like the weather. The weather constantly changes throughout the day. And whatever it is, the sky always has room for it. No matter how bad the weather, no matter how violent the thunderstorm, no matter how severe the sun, the sky cannot be damaged in any way. Even hurricanes and tsunamis, which may wreak death and destruction on the land—even they are unable to hurt the sky. And of course, as time passes, the weather will change again and again, while the sky remains as pure and clear as ever.

## WILLINGNESS – INJECTIONS FOR CANCER

Willingness doesn't mean you like, want, enjoy, desire, or approve of something. Willingness means you'll allow it, make room for it, or let it be, *in order to do something that you value*.

If I said, "Do you want a course of injections that will make you feel weak and tired for several months, make all your hair fall out, and make you vomit repeatedly?" I'm sure you'd say, "No way!"

But if you had cancer and this course of injections would totally cure it, you'd take it willingly, and side effects be damned. Why would you put yourself through all that? Not because you like it, want it, or approve of it, but in order to keep on doing something that you value: *living*.

Willingness means we make room for the negative side effects, such as unpleasant thoughts and feelings, in order to create a meaningful life.

## YOUR MIND IS LIKE A RADIO

Our mind is a bit like a radio, constantly playing in the background. Most of the time it's the *Radio Doom and Gloom Show*, broadcasting negative stories twenty-four hours every day. It reminds us of bad things from the past (*You really screwed up there!*), it warns us of bad things to come in the future (*You're going to fail again!*), and it gives us regular updates on everything that's wrong with us (*Your life's a mess!*). Once in a while it broadcasts something useful or cheerful, but not too often. So if we're constantly tuned in to this radio, listening to it intently and, worse, believing everything we hear, then we have a sure-fire recipe for stress and misery.

Unfortunately, there's no way to switch off this radio. Even Zen masters are unable to achieve such a feat. Sometimes the radio will stop of its own accord for a few seconds (or even—very rarely—for a few minutes). But we just don't have the power to make it stop (unless we short-circuit it with drugs, alcohol, or brain surgery). In fact, generally speaking, the more we try to make this radio stop, the louder it plays.

But there is an alternative approach. Have you ever had a radio playing in the background, but you were so intent on what you were doing that you didn't really listen to it? You could hear the radio playing, but you weren't paying attention to it. In practicing defusion skills, we are ultimately aiming to do precisely that with our thoughts. Once we know that thoughts are just bits of language, we can treat them like background noise—we can let them come and go without focusing on them and without being bothered by them. This is best exemplified by the "Thanking Your Mind" technique: an unpleasant thought appears, but instead of focusing on it you simply acknowledge its presence, thank your mind, and return your attention to what you're doing.

So here's what we're aiming for with all these defusion skills:

- If the thinking self is broadcasting something unhelpful, the observing self need not pay attention. The observing self can instead focus its attention on what you are doing here and now.
- If the thinking self is broadcasting something useful or helpful, then the observing self can tune in and pay attention.

This is very different from approaches such as positive thinking, which are like airing a second radio show, *Radio Happy and Cheerful*, alongside *Radio Doom and Gloom*, in hopes of drowning it out. It's pretty hard to stay focused on what you're doing when you have two radios playing different tunes in the background.

Notice, too, that letting the radio play on without giving it much attention is very different from actively trying to ignore it. Have you ever heard a radio playing and tried *not* to listen to it? What happened? The more you tried not to hear it, the more it bothered you, right?

## **TWO COUNTRIES AT WAR (acceptance versus resignation/tolerance)**

Imagine you live in a small country that shares a border with a hostile neighbour. There is long-standing tension between the two countries. The neighbouring country has a different religion and a different political system, and your country sees it as a major threat. There are three possible scenarios for how your country can relate to its neighbour.

The worst-case scenario is war. Your country attacks, and the other one retaliates (or vice-versa). As both countries get pulled into a major war, the people of both nations suffer. (Think of any major war, and the huge costs involved, in terms of life, money and wellbeing.)

Another scenario, better than the first but still far from satisfactory, is a temporary truce. Both countries agree to a cease-fire, but there is no reconciliation. Resentment seethes beneath the surface, and there is the constant underlying threat that war will break out again. (Think of India and Pakistan, with the constant background threat of nuclear war, and the intense hostility between Hindus and Muslims.)

The third possibility is genuine peace. You acknowledge your differences, and allow them just to be. This doesn't get rid of the other country, nor does it mean that you necessarily like it or even want it there. Nor does it mean that you approve of its politics or religion. But because you're no longer at war, you can now use your money and resources to build up the infrastructure of your own country, instead of squandering them on the battlefield.

The first scenario, war, is like the struggle to get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings. It's a battle that can never be won, and it consumes a huge amount of time and energy.

The second scenario, a truce, is definitely better, but it's still a long way from true acceptance. It's more like a grudging tolerance; there's no sense of moving forward to a new future. Although there is no active warfare, the hostility remains, and you are resigned to the ongoing tension. A grudging tolerance of thoughts and feelings is better than an outright struggle, but it leaves you feeling stuck and somewhat helpless. It's a sense more of resignation than of acceptance, of entrapment rather than freedom, of being stuck rather than moving forward.

The third scenario, peace, represents true acceptance. Notice that in this scenario your country doesn't have to like the other country, approve of its being there, convert to its religion, or learn to speak its language. You simply make peace with them. You acknowledge your differences, you give up trying to change their politics or religion, and you focus your efforts on making your own country a better place to live. It's the same when you truly accept your uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. You don't have to like them, want them, or approve of them. You simply make peace with them and let them be. This leaves you free to focus your energy on taking action—action that moves your life forward in a direction you value.

## Working From Goals To Values – Useful Questions

Clients often give you a goal, when you ask about their values.  
They may describe the partner they want, or the job they want.  
They may describe a feeling they want, such as happiness, self-confidence, self-esteem.  
They may want fame, wealth, status, success.

It's useful to point out that all of these are goals, because they can be ticked off a list, achieved, accomplished. (E.g. you can have a feeling of happiness, or self-confidence, or a good job, or high status. These things can all be "ticked off". Done. Completed..)

If clients give you a negative goal – something that they don't want, you need to transform it into a positive one, by asking "What do you want instead?"

Eg, client says, "I want to stop using drugs."

Q: So what would you like to do instead? How would you prefer to spend your time?

Eg, client says, "I want to stop feeling depressed"

Q So if you felt less depressed, what would you do with your time? How would your life be different? What would you do differently? What would you do more of, and less of?

If clients give you a positive goal, useful questions to get to the underlying value include:

What's that in the service of?

What's important/ meaningful about that?

What is it you value about achieving that goal?

If you achieved that goal, how would you be different? What would you do differently?

If client's goal is a feeling (eg to be happy), ask:

Q: If you did feel more (whatever the feeling is), how would you be different? What would you do differently? How would you act differently in work/relationships/ family life etc.? What tasks/projects/activities would you undertake? What changes would you make in your life? (If this leads to more goals, we then ask, 'And what is it you value about that? What's important/ meaningful about that? What's that in the service of etc.)

If client gives a material goal such as a job, house, overseas holiday etc, again we ask:

Q: What's important about that? What would having that enable you to do? (For example, the value underlying a holiday may be about making time to relax, and/or about spending quality time with the family, etc)

If client says, I want my wife/husband/mother/boss/ colleague to be more cheerful/cooperative/friendly/loving/respectful etc (or less abusive/lazy etc.), we may ask:

Q: Let's assume I have a magic wand, and I can instantly change this person to fit your ideal. If you did have that ideal relationship, how would you act differently? What personal qualities would you like to develop/ bring into that relationship? What sort of friend/relative/colleague would you like to be?

If client says, I want fame, success, wealth, status:

Q: Let's assume you have it. You have all the wealth/success/ fame etc you could want. How would you be different? How would you act differently with your family/friends/work etc? What would you do differently?

If the client then starts telling you about projects they'd undertake, or things they'd do, or things they'd buy, you can then ask, "And what's important or meaningful about that? What's that in the service of?" etc.



If the client says, “I’d be more relaxed/ more at ease/ I wouldn’t have to impress anyone” again we ask “Let’s assume you are more relaxed /more at ease. How would you be different? How would you act differently with your family/friends/work etc? Usually, your client will eventually come up with a value about being more open/honest/sharing more of themselves/ being more authentic etc.

If client says, I want respect/approval/love from others – again we ask: Let’s assume you have it. You have all the respect/approval/love etc you could want. How would you be different? How would you act differently with your family/friends/work etc? What would you do differently?

A very useful question is: Suppose I waved a magic wand so that you automatically had the approval of everyone in your life; that whatever you did, they approved and encouraged it; you never had to impress anyone, or try and please anyone ever again – then what would you do with your life? How would you act in your relationships? Etc.

Once you’ve identified a value, a useful question is “What’s the smallest simplest easiest action you could take, in the next 24 hours, that’s consistent with that value?”

From there, go to short-term, medium-term, long-term goals.

I frequently say something like, “I don’t want you to give up on that goal. If it’s important to you, I’ll do whatever I can to help you achieve it. But I’d hate you to think that you can’t lead a rich and full life until that goal is achieved. I want to help you to lead a full, meaningful life right now. So if the value(s) underlying your goal is (are) X,(Y & Z), then what’s a small thing you can do right now, that’s consistent with that value?”

If client identifies values in the domain of parenting, but doesn’t have children, we may then ask “Okay, how can you act on those values without having your own kids? If you value (for example) being nurturing, caring and supportive, do your friends and relatives have kids you can interact with? Or do you have any interest in voluntary work with children?”

We may then brainstorm how the client can go about creating a family of their own – if possible. Eg we may have to look at ways of meeting eligible partners, building social networks, developing relationship skills etc. But the point is, don’t wait until you have kids of your own – you may be waiting months, years or forever. While you’re pursuing the big goal (of starting a family), act consistently with the underlying value right now.

If client identifies values in the domain of intimate relationships, but doesn’t have a partner, we can ask: “Okay, how can you act on those values without having a partner? If you value (for example) being loving and supportive, who else is there in your life right now, that you could act that way with?” (If the value is around exploring and enjoying sexuality/sensuality – again, we’d ask: Q how can you act on those values even without a partner? (Eg erotic literature, masturbation, fantasy/ sensual massages etc)

We may then brainstorm how the client can go about getting into an intimate relationship – as in the previous example. Eg we may have to look at ways of meeting eligible partners, building social networks, developing relationship skills etc. Again, the point is, don’t wait until you have a partner – you may be waiting months, years or forever. While you’re pursuing the big goal (of finding a partner), act consistently with the underlying values right now.

If client identifies values in the domain of work, but doesn’t have a job, we can ask: “Okay, how can you act on those values without having a job? If you value (for example) being productive/ helping others/ being focused and engaged in what you are doing, in what areas of your life can you do that right now, even without a paid job? If the value is around caring for family, again: How can you care for your family right now, in little ways, even without having a job?”

We may then brainstorm how the client can go about finding a job. Eg we may have to look at ways of retraining, developing new skills, career counseling, where to look for work etc. But the point is, don't wait until you have a job – you may be waiting months, years or forever. While you're pursuing the goal, act consistently with the underlying value right now.

## More On Working From Goals To Values

(The text that follows - on pp 34 & 35 - consists of extracts from "The Happiness Trap." Therefore please don't reprint or copy any of these extracts: they are all under copyright.)

Suppose you really want to buy a house. Buying a house is a goal (that is, something that can be achieved and "crossed off the list"). But suppose that because of your current finances it will be a long time before you can actually buy that house. If you believe you can't be happy until you've achieved that goal, life will be pretty miserable..

Ask yourself, "What's this goal in the service of? What will it enable me to do that's truly meaningful?" If the answer is "To provide security for my family," then you've identified a core value: taking good care of your family. And taking care of your family is something you can do right now, in a hundred and one different ways. For example, you can cook a healthy dinner, read a story to your kids, or give your partner a hug and some words of support.

This doesn't mean you give up on your goals. If you want to buy a house, start saving! But you don't have to wait until you buy that house to have the satisfaction of caring for your family.

Let's take another example. Suppose you have the long-term goal of being a doctor. The training will take some time, and I'd hate for you to spend ten years of your life doggedly focused on that goal, thinking you can't be happy until you've achieved it. Now, ask yourself, "What is this goal in the service of? What will it enable me to do that's truly meaningful?"

Let's say you answered, "I'd be able to help people." Now you've identified a core value: helping others. And helping others is something you can do right now, in a myriad of ways: you can visit an elderly relative, contribute money to a worthy cause, help a fellow student with their homework, or even do some volunteer work.

This doesn't mean you give up your goal of becoming a doctor. What it means is, for the next ten years, while you're working toward that goal, you have the ongoing satisfaction of living by your values—in this case, helping people.

"But suppose my motivation *isn't* helping people," you may be saying. "Suppose I just want to get rich." Well, for starters, being rich is a *goal*, not a value. It's a goal because it can be achieved and crossed off the list: "Yep, done that! I'm rich now!" But to answer this question more fully, here's a transcript of a session I had with Jeff. Jeff was a businessman in his mid-thirties, making a reasonable living but obsessed with earning more. He was making himself miserable by constantly focusing on all the people he knew who were richer than he was. I asked Jeff, "What do you *really* want?"

*Jeff:* To be absolutely honest, I want to be stinking rich.

*Russ:* Fair enough. If you were stinking rich, what would that enable you to do?

*Jeff:* Lots of things.

*Russ:* Such as?

*Jeff:* Travel around the world.

*Russ:* What would you do on your travels?

*Jeff:* I'd laze around on beaches...explore exotic countries...visit the wonders of the world.

*Russ:* Okay. What do you value about lazing around on beaches?

*Jeff:* It's relaxing. It's a great way to chill out.

*Russ:* And what do you value about visiting exotic countries?

*Jeff:* Meeting new people, tasting new cuisines, discovering exotic arts and crafts.

*Russ:* Okay. Now, I want to be clear on this. I'm not for a moment suggesting that you give up on your goal.

If you want to be rich, by all means, go for it. But I'd hate to see you spend the next ten years feeling miserable because you think you have to be rich before you can find fulfilment. See, you identified "relaxing" and "chilling out" as activities you value. Well, there's a zillion different ways you can relax and chill out right now, and you don't have to be rich. You could have a hot bath, listen to some music, do yoga...

*Jeff:* Yeah, but I really do like lazing on beaches.

*Russ:* Absolutely. And so it makes sense to save up your money and plan a beach holiday. But you don't have to *wait until you're rich* to have the satisfaction of relaxing—that's something you can do every day. And it's the same for those other values. For example, if you value tasting exotic cuisine, how could you do that right now?

*Jeff:* I guess I could try some ethnic restaurants.

*Russ:* Yeah, or some ethnic cookbooks.

*Jeff:* Yes, but that's not the same as eating the local food in a foreign country.

*Russ:* I'm not suggesting that it is. I'm just pointing out that if you truly value eating exotic food, you don't have to wait until you're rich enough to travel the world. And the same goes for discovering little-known arts and crafts. If you wanted to do that right now, what could you do?

*Jeff:* Go to art galleries?

*Russ:* Exactly. Or visit museums or local arts-and-crafts fairs. Or you could read about it, or research it on the Internet.

*Jeff:* Yeah, but that's not the same as—

*Russ:* I know. And again, if you want to travel overseas, then it makes sense to save money and plan for it. All I'm saying is, if you value relaxing, eating different foods, and learning about unusual arts and crafts, you can do all these things right now. You don't have to go through life desperately wanting. Now, let's come back to your goal of being rich. Why else is that important?

*Jeff:* Because people look up to you when you're rich.

*Russ:* Well, I don't know if that's always the case, but let's assume you're right. What's so important about having people look up to you?

*Jeff:* They treat you better. They respect you.

*Russ:* So let's suppose that people treated you well and respected you and looked up to you. What would that enable you to do?

*Jeff:* I guess I'd be more at ease. I wouldn't have to try and impress anyone. I could just be myself.

*Russ:* So what you really value is being yourself? Being genuine?

*Jeff:* Yeah. I just want to be me.

*Russ:* Okay. So can you be genuine right now? Do you have to wait until you're rich?

*Jeff:* It's easier if you're rich.

*Russ:* Maybe so. But are you going to wait until you're rich before you give yourself the satisfaction of being genuine?

*Jeff:* What if I'm genuine and people don't like me?

*Russ:* Do you want to spend your life building friendships with people who only like you because you're rich?

*Jeff:* No.

*Russ:* What sort of friendships do you want to build?

*Jeff:* Ones where I can be myself; where I can be accepted for who I am.

*Russ:* Okay. So if you value being genuine, why not start right now in the relationships you already have? Ask yourself, "What's one small thing I could say or do that would be truer to the real me?"

\* \* \*

As you can see, Jeff was quite convinced that he needed to be rich before he could find satisfaction in life. But over time, as Jeff chose increasingly to live by his values, he found a deep sense of fulfilment—even as he pursued his financial and business goals.

## INTRODUCING ACT TO CLIENTS

Here's how I usually introduce ACT to clients. (Although it doesn't always come out in one long spiel like this; it may come out in several pieces over the course of a session).

We'll be working together using a type of therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. I know it's an odd name, but don't let that put you off. Down the line, it will make sense to you. It's a powerful new type of psychotherapy based on cutting edge research into how the human mind works - and it's been clinically proven to be successful in a wide range of psychological problems.

This is a very active therapy. It's not one of those therapies where we just *talk* about your problems. It's a therapy in which you actively learn new skills to change your life for the better.

We have two basic aims in this therapy.

One aim is to help you create a rich, full and meaningful life. To do that, we'll need to spend some time talking about what you really want out of life; what's important and meaningful to you, deep in your heart. And then, using that information as a guide, we'll look at how you can set goals and change your behaviour to take your life in the direction you want to go.

Our second aim is to teach you a set of skills that will allow you to handle painful thoughts and feelings far more effectively, in such a way that they have much less impact and influence over your life.

So a key part of this therapy will involve you learning those skills in the session, and then taking them home and practicing them in between sessions. The more you practice, the more benefits you'll get – and vice-versa.

What this means is, that in some sessions we will actually need to bring up some of those painful thoughts and feelings during the session, so you can practice using your new skills to handle them better. Because of this, at times this therapy may seem like a roller-coaster ride - but at those times, I will be sitting there, right beside you. (*This is a saying that I first heard from Robyn Walser*)

It's always hard to know how many sessions that will take, so how about you commit to six sessions, and then on session six, we'll take stock, see how you're going, and see if you need any more. If you find that you don't need that many sessions, that's fine too. Also, we have to be realistic; no therapy works for everyone, so if this approach doesn't seem right for you, or you're not happy with the way it's progressing, I can easily refer you to colleagues who have different approaches.

## Informed Consent Issues

The next 2 pages are what Professor Kelly Wilson, a leading ACT authority, has to say about informed consent for ACT:

"In my own training and the way I train folks, therapy should always start with informed consent. Below is a thumbnail of my approach:

### 1) Address alternative therapies

I think it is beholden on us to mention alternative treatment approaches that have demonstrated efficacy (including pharmacotherapy) and also to mention that alternative treatments where the direct evidence base is not substantial, but appears to be sensible given the more general evidence available in the literature. If there is a gold standard, like Barlow's PCT for panic--I tell them about it.

I do not get into any kind of big theoretical discussion about, my reservations about the overselling of pharmacotherapy or my own understanding of the likely mechanisms of action in cognitive therapy. I don't do those therapies and if people want them, I can point them to folks who are well versed in them. I also do discuss allegiance effects, though I take them quite seriously. I think that whenever possible, one ought to get therapy from someone who is fully invested in that sort of work. So, if someone wanted CT for depression, I would be the wrong guy.

I know smart capable people who do that sort of treatment and am happy to refer folks to them. Likewise, if someone presents with panic, I am not going to do a straight up PCT treatment with them, even though it is the gold standard. I will tell them about PCT (including that is the gold standard) and say that I would do work that has many similarities and is based on many of the same principles, but if they want that specific treatment, I refer to another provider in our clinic. (See below the section on describing the treatment I do as to some ways it might differ from a straight up PCT protocol.

### 2) Address risks and benefits

My addressing of risks and benefits does not look much different than risks and benefits for any treatment--i.e. not everyone benefits from any treatment, even the most successful varieties. I do not bury a client in a lit review or a checklist of diagnoses for which there is ACT evidence. I do not really buy the diagnostics much anyway. I typically tell people that the treatment we do is directly connected to a tradition that has been useful for a lot of difficulties and that the evidence for this particular looks very promising in the breadth of difficulties for which it seems useful. I also tell clients that treatment is difficult work. I tell people that they may experience significant distress during treatment. I promise to talk about how the person is doing along the way and if it looks like this treatment is not beneficial, I promise to work with them to find the best alternative treatment referral (since my group only focuses on ACT and behaviorally-oriented work).

### 3) Propose specific time frame

I generally tell clients that it can be a problem estimating whether treatment is useful on a moment by moment basis. Sometimes I use metaphors to illustrate this point. For example, if you plant a garden, going outside every fifteen minutes to see how it is coming along doesn't work very well. Or, going to the gym to get in shape--sometimes you feel worse physically before you start to see the benefits. Also, like physical training sometimes you see periods of progress punctuated by periods that are somewhat flat. I like to start with a time frame where we will stop and look back and ask ourselves "are we headed in the right direction." Partly the time frame depends on the client and the difficulty, but I like a window of 4-6 weeks. This does not mean I expect life to be peaches and cream in 4-6 weeks, just that I think in that time period we should have some sense that we are headed in a direction that seems to have some vitality.

#### 4) Orient person to therapist, client roles

I tell clients that we will be working from a perspective that sees the people we call clients and the people we call therapists as being in the same boat. The rock climber metaphor from the book is a reasonable approximation of the relationship. I honestly can't recall exactly what is in the book, but like two rock climbers on opposite rock faces, there are things I might be able to see from where I stand that would be hard for them to see--not because I am all wise or something, just because I am standing in a different place. Likewise, there are things they can see and feel that I cannot--like the feel, temperature and texture of the rock. I tell clients that if I am to be most useful to them, it will help if I can see the world through their eyes, feel it with their hands. I can't, but I tell them that I will ask them to do their best to give me a sense of what it is like to live in their skin. And then I follow through. My aim is that a client leaves the room with no doubt that their experience was the most important thing in that room during that session. The combination of my somewhat different perspective and their own felt sense of their situation seems to me like the best shot at finding a way forward that works. I tell them this.

We used to say I will be very active at the beginning and that will lessen later. I tend to say something more like sometimes I will be more active and sometimes you will be.

#### 5) Give general descriptions of operating principles

Since generally, behavioral methods are justifiable given the evidence base (exposure-based work, behavioral activation) I tell people that ACT is based on many of the same principles as the best supported treatments available, and will use many of the same methods, but that it tends to look at difficulties in the broader context of whole lives and an individual's valued directions. Therefore the treatment will end up looking at valued domains of living and the ways that these difficulties fit into that whole life. I generally tell them that the work is acceptance focused and whole life focused, rather than being focused on very specific problems. Problems are not ignored, at all; however, they are looked at in this broader way. I tell them that it will be very, very hard work and that we will not do a bit of work except in the service of the direction they would like to take their lives."

## Flow of Sessions

This is just to give you an idea of how a series of sessions might flow. Please note: I am only sharing *my experience of what works for me in my practice*. There can, obviously be huge variations on this. Your experience may be very different to mine, and you should adapt this therapy to suit you and your clientele.

Most published ACT protocols vary from 4 to 14 sessions. Some of these are heavily geared towards values and action. Others are much more heavily geared towards prolonged mindfulness practice. I suggest you read through several protocols and get a sense of how they vary. You can do this through reading the various ACT books, and/or downloading some of the many protocols available on the main ACT website:

[www.contextualpsychology.org/act](http://www.contextualpsychology.org/act)

In the article I wrote for Psychotherapy Australia, which was part of your pre-workshop reading, I outlined a 10 session treatment that I did for one client with social anxiety disorder. This is fairly typical for me. Most of my clients I see for 5-10 sessions. However, I have always been predisposed to brief therapy, and many ACT therapists move more slowly than I do – especially if they have a psychodynamic background. The order of interventions is also very variable, and depends largely on what the client is presenting with. At times I start with confronting the agenda, other times with values, and other times I may start in session 1 with defusion, acceptance, or simply ‘being present’. So, for example, for clients with PTSD, I like to start with values – but sometimes these clients won’t ‘go there’ psychologically, because it’s too painful and they don’t have the skills to handle the pain. In such cases, I will then start with defusion. On the other hand, Robyn Walser’s PTSD programs in the USA tend to start with self-as-context. So you can see, this is really a very flexible model and you can actually start from any point on the hexiflex, or you can start with confronting the agenda.

In most of the ACT books and protocols the order of interventions is like this:

- 1) Confronting the agenda
- 2) Control is the problem
- 3) Willingness is the alternative (defusion, acceptance, the present moment)
- 4) Self-as-context
- 5) Values and Committed action

In the high-functioning ‘worried well’ client, I may get through all of this in as little as 2 or 3 sessions. On the other hand, with severe PTSD, it may take me 15 to 30 sessions, or even more; and with such clients, I may spend the first 2 sessions simply taking a history and building a rapport. And I do have a small number of long term clients that I’ve been seeing regularly for several years! Below I’ve given a fairly typical 8 session outline (typical for me, that is).

### Session 1:

If the history is very long and complex with multiple problems, then the whole first session may just consist of taking a history, followed by introducing ACT, and consenting (as on the previous pages) - ie it is effectively an intake session. The history includes the problem(s), the life context, and a brief assessment of goals/values (what would you start/ stop/ do more of /less of if this was no longer a problem?) plus a review of strategies tried, how they worked both short term and long term, and the costs (ie confronting the agenda).

If the history is *not* long or complex (eg simple phobia) and if I think there’s enough time, then in this first session I’ll move on to control is the problem, and then give a brief defusion or mindfulness technique to take home and practice – eg ‘I’m having the

thought that', or 'ten mindful breaths'.

If there's not enough time for that, I'll simply assign clients to monitor their control strategies, and their (lack of) effectiveness, and their associated costs.

(Often, I also give a values worksheet, saying 'We'll come back to this a couple of sessions from now, but I'd like you to start thinking about it, and/or talking about it with significant others.' Also, I often give clients a copy of my Mindfulness Skills CD, on the first session, and I ask them to listen to whatever track I think is most appropriate.)

#### Session 2:

If necessary, more confronting the agenda (what have you tried? /how has it worked?/ what did it cost"?). In my practice, I find that many clients very quickly get that the emotional control agenda is ineffective, without the need for extensive 'creative hopelessness' interventions. I next move on to (or do a recap of) 'control is the problem' (eg the struggle switch/quicksand/clean vs. dirty discomfort etc). Then I move on to defusion and mindfulness. If a client is more in touch with their physical sensations, and finds it difficult to access their thoughts, I'll start with mindfulness exercises geared towards body sensations. Otherwise, my preference is to start with cognitive defusion.

#### Session 3 & 4:

Major focus on defusion/ acceptance/ present moment/ willingness. Bring values in, little by little.

NB 'confronting the agenda' may come into each and every session to some degree – (Struggling in quicksand again? How's that working for you? Is this another way to avoid/control? What are the costs of that?)

#### Session 5

Typically this is where I do self-as-context exercises (but sometimes I'll do them much earlier or later); then move on to values in more depth.

#### Session 6

Values to goals to actions. (Values may take a couple of sessions, depending on how remote client is from them, and what barriers come up. In more experientially avoidant clients, we may need to do a lot more work on defusion and acceptance before clients are willing to get in touch with their values.)

#### Session 7 & 8

Values, Goals, Actions. Identify barriers – F.E.A.R. Further develop mindfulness skills to remove barriers. Then assess need for further sessions. If I do the eye-to-eye exercise, it usually won't come in until after 7 or 8 sessions.



## 80 Year Old Birthday Celebration: An Exercise In Imagination

In this exercise, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and imagine you are 80 years old, and that there is a birthday celebration in your honour. (Imagine this any way you like. Some people imagine in vivid pictures, as on a TV screen. Others imagine more with words or sounds or abstract ideas. However you imagine it is right for you. Also, remember this is your *imagination* – so it doesn't have to obey the rules of logic. It's okay if your parents are there and they're 120 years old. It's okay if your friends are there and they look exactly the same as they do today. Also, stay alert for the million and one sneaky ways your mind can try to pull you out of this exercise. Any time your mind starts interfering, making provocative comments etc. simply say 'Thank you mind!' and come back to the exercise.)

So close your eyes now and imagine you are 80 years old, and that there is a birthday celebration in your honour – and everybody you care about is there to honour you – friends, family, work colleagues.

Now imagine one person who you really care about – friend, family member, colleague, you choose; anyone who is important to you – imagine that person gets up to make a short speech about you – about the person you are, the life you've lived, what you stood for in life, and what you meant to them. Imagine that they say *and mean* whatever it is you would most like to hear them say *and mean*.

Notice how you feel as they say these things.

Now imagine another person who you really care about – friend, family member, colleague, you choose; anyone who is important to you – imagine that person gets up to make a short speech about you – about the person you are, the life you've lived, what you stood for in life, and what you meant to them. Imagine that they say *and mean* whatever it is you would most like to hear them say *and mean*.

Notice how you feel as they say these things.

Finally imagine one last person who you really care about – friend, family member, colleague, you choose; anyone who is important to you – imagine that person gets up to make a short speech about you – about the person you are, the life you've lived, what you stood for in life, and what you meant to them. Imagine that they say *and mean* whatever it is you would most like to hear them say *and mean*.

Notice how you feel as they say these things.

Now take a moment to reflect on what you've heard, and to consider: what does this tell you about your values? About what really matters to you, deep in your heart?

### **A Short Exercise To Demonstrate How Easily We Judge Emotions As Bad**

Tell the client you are going to read them out a list of the 9 basic human emotions (listed below). Ask them to say out aloud, without thinking too hard about it, which ones are 'good', and which are 'bad':

- Love
- Joy
- Curiosity
- Fear
- Anger
- Shock
- Disgust
- Sadness
- Guilt

Then debrief. Most people judge 6 out of 9 as bad. Why? Because they feel unpleasant!

### **An exercise to demonstrate a) fusion vs defusion and b) how positive thoughts attract negative ones (and vice-versa)**

In this exercise, explain to the client: *I am going to say a few sentences. As I say them out aloud, I want you to close your eyes and do two things:*

- a) notice the words I say*
- b) notice your automatic reaction to those words – the thoughts and feelings that immediately pop into your head as I say them.*

Then read each sentence below out aloud slowly & calmly:

- I am a human being.
- I am a worthwhile human being.
- I am a worthwhile, lovable human being.
- I am a worthwhile, lovable, valuable human being.
- I am a worthwhile, lovable, valuable, wonderful human being.
- I am complete, whole, and perfect.
- I am a useless piece of human garbage.

Then debrief the client; what was their reaction to each statement? As the words grew ever more positive, what negative reactions showed up? When the final negative statement was read out, what positive thoughts showed up?

Then remind them that the instruction was to *notice* the words; not to analyse them, agree, disagree, change them, assess them as true or false etc.

Then repeat the exercise, but ask the client this time to simply *notice the words; the sound, volume, speed, pitch, timbr etc.*

After that, debrief; how was their reaction different when they just noticed the words?

N.B. The following pages are another extract from *The Happiness Trap*

### **Reason-giving**

To demonstrate conclusively that thoughts do not control your behaviour, do these two experiments:

- 1) Think to yourself, 'I can't scratch my head! I can't scratch my head!' And as you do, lift your arm and scratch your head.
- 2) Think to yourself, 'I have to stand up! I have to stand up!' And as you do that, stay seated.

\* \* \*

How'd it go? No doubt you found that you could take those actions even though your thoughts said you couldn't. Of course, thoughts can *influence* your behaviour - but they can't *control* it. And the greater the degree of fusion with a thought, the greater the influence it will have on your behaviour.

This means that reasons are not a problem unless we fuse with them: that is, take them as the literal truth, or treat them as commands we must obey. Therefore, it's important to realise that...

### **Reasons Are Not Facts**

Here's an example of a reason: 'I can't go for a run, because I'm too tired.' But does being tired make you physically unable to run? Of course not. You can feel tired and still go for a run. (In fact, ask any athlete—they'll tell you that sometimes they can feel tired or sluggish and end up having one of their best workouts.)

Here's an example of a fact: 'I can't go for a run, because a spinal injury has completely paralysed my legs.' Does spinal paralysis of the legs make it physically impossible to run? Yes. So the above statement is a fact.

Reasons are basically just excuses; things we say to justify what we do (or don't do).

- Can you feel as though you don't have enough time, and still exercise?
- Can you feel tired and still exercise?
- Can you feel as though you can't be bothered, and still exercise?
- Can you hate exercise and still exercise?
- Can you notice that it's cold outside, and still exercise?

Obviously, the answer to all these questions is yes, because the reasons given are all just *excuses* for not doing exercise. None of them are facts, that is, truths, which have objective reality.

As soon as you have to face any sort of challenge, your mind will come up with a whole list of reasons not to do it: 'I'm too tired.' 'It's too hard.' 'I'll only fail.' 'It's too expensive.' 'It'll take too long.' 'I'm too depressed.' 'I feel too anxious.' 'My parents wouldn't approve.' 'People would think I'm being selfish.' 'I don't deserve it.' 'There's a great program I want to watch on television.' Blah, blah, blah, on and on it goes, reason after reason after reason.

And that's okay, as long as we see these reasons for what they are: just excuses, *not* facts—which then begs the question:

## **How Do You Tell an Excuse from a Fact?**

Often we know full well when we're making excuses—we just need to be honest with ourselves. But if you've set a valued goal, and your mind gives you a reason not to attempt it, sometimes it's not so clear that this is just an excuse. So if you're genuinely unsure whether the thought is merely an excuse for inaction, or a statement of fact about something that truly is impossible, just ask yourself this question: 'If the person you care about more than anyone else in the world were kidnapped, and the kidnappers told you they will *never* release that person until you take a particular action toward your goals, would you then take action?' If the answer is yes, then you know that any reason (for not taking that action) is merely an excuse.

'Ah, yes,' you may be saying, 'but that's just a silly hypothetical question. In the real world, the person I love has not been kidnapped.'

Right you are. But what's at stake in the real world is something equally important: your life! Do you want to live a life in which you do the things that are really meaningful to you? Or do you want to live a life of drifting aimlessly, letting your demons run the ship?

'Okay,' I hear you say. 'I agree that I could attempt this goal, but it's not that important to me.'

The question here is, are you being honest with yourself? Or are you just buying into another thought? If the goal you're avoiding is *truly* unimportant to you, fine, don't attempt it. But make sure you check in with your values. And if this goal really *is* something you value, then you are faced with a choice: either act in accordance with what you value, or let yourself be pushed around by your own thoughts.

In particular, you need to watch out for this sneaky thought: 'If this were really so important to me, I'd be doing it already!' This thought is just another 'reason' in disguise. The reasoning goes something like this: 'I haven't taken action up to now, which means it can't really be that important, which means it's not a true value of mine, which means there's no point in putting any effort into it.'

This reasoning is based on the false assumption that humans will *naturally* act in line with their values. But if this were true, there'd be no need for a book such as this, or a therapy such as ACT. The fact is, many of us *don't* act on our values for long periods of time: months, years, or even decades. But those values are always there deep inside us, no matter how remote from them we are. A value is like your body: even if you've totally neglected it for years, it's still there, it's still an essential part of your life, and it's never too late to connect with it.

You may say, 'But it's not that easy. These reasons seem so convincing.'

That's right. They do seem convincing if you fuse with them. So you need to remember, they're just thoughts. You can then defuse them in a number of different ways:

You can simply notice them and label them. Each time a reason pops into your head, acknowledge it by silently saying, 'Reason-giving.'

You can say to yourself, 'Thanks mind!'

You can acknowledge, 'I'm having the thought 'I can't do this because...''

You can ask yourself the kidnap question: 'If the life of a loved one depended on it, could I attempt this goal, even with all these 'reasons' not to?'

You can name the stories underlying the reasons: 'Aha! The 'Too Tired' story, or the 'Not Enough Time' story.'

You can simply let these thoughts come and go, like passing cars, while you focus your attention on taking action.

## 4 Approaches To Any Problematic Situation

In any problematic situation, there are 4 possible approaches to consider. I find it very helpful to actually write these approaches down for clients (and myself, at times!) so they can see they have a choice about what to do:

- **Option One: leave the situation**
- **Option Two: stay, and change what can be changed**
- **Option Three: stay, and accept what can't be changed**
- **Option Four: stay, and rely on emotional control strategies**

Let's take a look at each in turn.

### **Option One: Leave the situation.**

To leave is not always an option – for example, if you happen to be in prison. However, if leaving a problematic situation is possible, then it's worth considering: would your overall quality of life be better if you left than if you stayed? Of course, you can never know this for certain, but you can make a reasonable prediction based on what has happened up to this point.

### **Option Two: Stay, and change what can be changed.**

If you choose to stay in a difficult situation, the first step is to change whatever possibly can be changed to improve it. And in any situation, what you have most control over is the action that you take. So focus your energy on taking action, guided by your values, to make things as good as they possibly can be. Depending on the context, this might involve anything from practicing assertiveness or communication skills, to spending more quality time with your partner, to filing a law suit or restraining order.

### **Option Three: stay, and accept what can't be changed**

If you've chosen to stay, and you've taken every action possible to improve the situation, and it's still difficult, then it's time to practise acceptance. Make room for those painful feelings. Defuse those judgmental, hostile, despairing or self-defeating thoughts. Catch yourself ruminating and worrying, and come back to the present moment. Choose to live by your values, and engage in the present moment, irrespective of the challenges you face. (In fact, option two and option three ideally will occur simultaneously. Think of Victor Frankl, living by his values in the midst of that unbearable suffering in the Nazi concentration camps.)

### **Option Four: Stay, and rely on emotional control strategies**

All too often, people stay in a problematic situation, but they don't do everything possible to improve it, and nor do they practice acceptance. Rather they worry, ruminate, and analyse, or get angry, anxious, or depressed. And then they turn to emotional control strategies to try and feel better. The variety of emotional control strategies that humans use in these situations is virtually endless: drugs, alcohol, TV, food, self-harm and suicidality. Invariably, emotional control strategies just create even more suffering in the long term.

## **Dilemmas**

It is particularly useful to run through these 4 options when clients are stuck in a “should I stay or should I go?” dilemma. (This most commonly seems to involve leaving a partner or a job). The aim in ACT – irrespective of whether you stay or leave - is to act on your values, engage fully in the moment, and practise acceptance. It’s also important to recognise that in such situations, there is no way not to choose. You either choose to sit on the fence, or you choose to climb down from the fence onto one side or the other. (Of course, eventually, if you stay up there long enough, the fence topples over, taking you with it!) This is a useful metaphor: sitting on a fence is okay for a short while, but before long, it becomes incredibly painful. So are you going to get off, or will you stay there in agony until the fence topples over?

### **When Clients Ask: ‘Who Am I, Then?’**

It’s not uncommon, once you’ve taken someone through a self-as-context experience, for them to ask, ‘Well who am I, then?’ It’s easy to get bogged down in deep, philosophical questions at this point, and for our purposes in ACT, we don’t wish to do that. So I usually reply along these lines: *‘Asking “Who am I?” is a big question. There are many different senses of self. In our society, we tend to focus on 2 main senses of self: the physical self - our body, brain & nervous system etc; and the thinking self, more commonly called “the mind” – our thoughts, memories, feelings etc. What we’re aiming to do here is to recognise a third sense of self: the observing self. The observing self can observe both our thinking self, and our physical self, but is distinct from them. You are comprised of all three of these selves – but whereas the thinking self and the physical self change continuously, the observing self does not change. And more importantly, it’s like a safe place inside you, from which you can safely observe what’s happening in the mind or the body, without being hurt.’*