

About ACT

What is Acceptance & Commitment Therapy?

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) gets its name from one of its core messages: to accept what is out of your personal control, while committing to action that will improve your quality of life.

The aim of ACT is to help people create a rich full and meaningful life, while effectively handling the pain and stress that life inevitably brings. ACT (which is pronounced as the word 'act', not as the initials) does this by:

- a) Teaching you psychological skills to deal with your painful thoughts and feelings effectively - in such a way that they have much less impact and influence over you. (These are known as mindfulness skills.)
- b) Helping you to clarify what is truly important and meaningful to you - i.e. your values – then use that knowledge to guide, inspire and motivate you to change your life for the better.

The ACT View of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a "hot topic" in psychology right now - increasingly recognized as a powerful therapeutic intervention for everything from work stress to depression - and also as an effective tool for increasing emotional intelligence. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is a powerful mindfulness-based therapy (and coaching model) which currently leads the field in terms of research, application and results.

Mindfulness is a mental state of awareness, focus and openness - which allows you to engage fully in what you are doing at any moment. In a state of mindfulness, difficult thoughts and feelings have much less impact and influence over you - so it is hugely useful for everything from full-blown psychiatric illness to enhancing athletic or business performance. In many models of coaching and therapy, mindfulness is taught primarily via meditation. However, in ACT, meditation is seen as only one way amongst hundreds of learning these skills - and this is a good thing, because most people do not like meditating! ACT gives you a vast range of tools to learn mindfulness skills - many of which require only a few minutes to master.

ACT breaks mindfulness skills down into 3 categories:

- 1) Defusion: distancing from, and letting go of, unhelpful thoughts, beliefs and memories
- 2) Acceptance: making room for painful feelings, urges and sensations, and allowing them to come and go without a struggle
- 3) Contact with the present moment: engaging fully with your here-and-now experience, with an attitude of openness and curiosity

These 3 skills require you to use an aspect of yourself for which no word exists in common everyday language. It is the part of you that is capable of awareness and attention. In ACT, we often call it the 'observing self. We can talk about 'self in many ways, but in common everyday language we talk mainly about the 'physical self - your body - and the 'thinking self' - your mind. The 'observing self is the part of you that is able to observe both your physical self and your thinking self. A better term is 'pure awareness' - because that's all it is: just awareness. It is the part of you that is aware of everything else: aware of every thought, every feeling, everything you see, hear, touch, taste, smell, and do.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a unique and creative approach to behavior change which alters the very ground rules of most Western psychotherapy. It is a mindfulness-based, values-oriented behavioral therapy, that has many parallels to Eastern philosophy, yet is firmly based on cutting-edge Western research into human behavioral psychology.

In a nutshell, ACT helps people to fundamentally change their relationship with painful thoughts and feelings, to develop a transcendent sense of self, to live in the present, and to take action, guided by their deepest values, to create a rich and meaningful life. ACT takes the view that most psychological suffering is caused by experiential avoidance, i.e. by attempting to avoid, escape, or get rid of unwanted private experiences (such as unpleasant thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges and memories). Our efforts at experiential avoidance might work in the short term, but in the long term they often fail, and in the process, they often create significant psychological suffering.

In ACT, we develop mindfulness skills (both traditional techniques, and many modern, innovative ones) which enable us to fundamentally change our relationship with painful thoughts and feelings. When we practice these skills in everyday life, painful feelings and unhelpful thoughts have much less impact and influence over us. Therefore, instead of wasting our time and energy in a fruitless battle with our inner experiences, we can invest our energy on taking action to change our life for the better - guided by our deepest values.

A steadily growing body of scientific data confirms that cultivating acceptance, mindfulness, and openness to experience is highly effective for the treatment of depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, chronic pain, PTSD, anorexia, and even schizophrenia. ACT is also a very effective model for life coaching and executive coaching.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY & THE SIX CORE PROCESSES OF ACT

There are six core processes in ACT:

1. **Connection** means being in the present moment: connecting fully with whatever is happening right here, right now. (Technically in ACT, this is called "contacting the present moment".)
2. **Defusion** means learning to step-back or detach from unhelpful thoughts and worries and memories: instead of getting caught up in your thoughts, or pushed around by them, or struggling to get rid of them, you learn how to let them come and go - as if they were just cars driving past outside your house. You learn how to step-back and watch your thinking,

so you can respond effectively - instead of getting tangled up or lost inside your thinking.

3. **Expansion** means opening up and making room for painful feelings and sensations. You learn how to drop the struggle with them, give them some breathing space, and let them be there without getting all caught up in them, or overwhelmed by them; the more you can open up, and give them room to move, the easier it is for your feelings to come and go without draining you or holding you back. (Technically in ACT this is called "acceptance".)
4. **The Observing Self** is the part of you that is responsible for awareness and attention. We don't have a word for it in common everyday language - we normally just talk about the 'mind'. But there are two parts to the mind: the thinking self - i.e. the part that is always thinking; the part that is responsible for all your thoughts, beliefs, memories, judgments, fantasies etc. And then there's the observing self - the part of your mind that is able to be aware of whatever you are thinking or feeling or doing at any moment. Without it, you couldn't develop those mindfulness skills. And the more you practice those mindfulness skills, the more you'll become aware of this part of your mind, and able to access it when you need it.
5. **Values** are what you want your life to be about, deep in your heart. What you want to stand for. What you want to do with your time on this planet. What ultimately matters to you in the big picture. What you would like to be remembered for by the people you love.
6. **Committed action** means taking action guided by your values - doing what matters - even if it's difficult or uncomfortable

When you put all these things together, you develop something called psychological flexibility. This is the ability to be in the present moment, with awareness and openness, and take action, guided by your values. In other words, it's the ability to be present, open up, and do what matters. The greater your ability to do that, the greater your quality of life, the greater your sense of vitality, wellbeing and fulfillment.

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