



cultivating
psychological flexibility
for the flourishing of communities

a brief overview of the 6 core skills in
Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT)

What is ACT?

Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT, pronounced "act") is an evidence-based psychological framework that can be distilled into three simple points. First, pain is absolutely unavoidable in life no matter how hard we may try to shield ourselves from its mental, emotional, and physical sting. Second, it is possible to live a richly meaningful life even when pain is present—they need not be mutually exclusive. Third, there are some skills we can learn to more effectively respond to the pain and cultivate a more vitalized life no matter our circumstances. These ACT skills are freely available to all.

The cofounder of ACT, Steven Hayes, lays out six skills that promote the psychological flexibility required to effectively respond to pain and live meaningful lives. A simplified understanding of the two skill sets is to view them as mindfulness skills and action skills.

The mindfulness skills consist of Be Present, Acceptance, Defusion, and Self-as-Context. While each skill is unique and valuable in its own right, a reductionistic expression of the mindfulness skills is to learn how to fully enter the present moment as the only place and time where choice and action are possible.

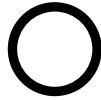
The action skills of Values and Committed Action are then the key to making the choices and taking the action that yields a richly meaningful life. Importantly, action alone is insufficient without being guided by a clear sense of what really matters in life. Therefore, knowing what matters (values) is a concrete step to facilitate the actions that truly count. Instead of living a life controlled by avoiding or struggling with pain, ACT skills provide the freedom to do what truly matters.

Why and how we use ACT at Brio

ACT is a particularly relevant framework for individuals and communities experiencing adversity. Life circumstances such as poverty, illness, oppression, injustice, and marginalization can create immense suffering— making it difficult to live lives that we value. However, our core belief at Brio is that flourishing and wellbeing are possible even in the most difficult circumstances, and indeed necessary in order for individuals and communities to rise up and effect change.

At its core, ACT helps us to change the way we relate to our pain by turning toward our experiences with openness, even kindness. As we do this, we expand the range of choices available to us at any given moment, making it more possible to live out our personal and communal values with concrete action.

With each partner community, we seek to identify what it looks like to live “the good life”— one that is imbued with a sense of meaning and purpose, even if external circumstances continue to be difficult. Then, the mindfulness skills in ACT allow us to help participants experience more openness and willingness in relationship with their experiences, creating more space for the fullness of life. Along the way, shared notions of meaning and purpose offer guidance toward choices that make life more fulfilling, frequently leading to positive change for the individual, family, and community.



The 6 Skills





Be Present

Being present means making full contact with the present moment, including all aspects of your body, thoughts, and emotions. Learning to Be Present is about training your attention in a new way. The goal of this attention training is to increase your awareness of your body, thoughts, and emotions in a manner that is both focused and flexible. Even learning the basic skills to Be Present will help you to feel the solid ground beneath you and gain some stability in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty.

Have you ever noticed that we humans tend to ruminate on things in the past and worry about things in the future? By learning to keep our attention focused in the present, worry, anxiety, negative thoughts, and dire predictions hold less power. We discover that there is more choice, more freedom, and more flexibility in the present moment than the past or future can ever offer us.



Acceptance

Acceptance means making space for the wholeness of our experience— even the unpleasant parts. Some of these difficult feelings might be anger, frustration, boredom, confusion, sadness, worry, loneliness, guilt, fear, or so many others. All of these are normal feelings to be having during stressful times. But the difficult fact of the matter is that we can't actually stop ourselves from feeling these emotions. They just happen no matter what tricks of avoidance or control that we try to use! The good news is that we can learn how to open up and make space for these unpleasant experiences in ways that give us more freedom.

Opening up means learning how to acknowledge our experience as a normal part of what it means to be human. It means being willing to allow even the most unpleasant parts to be present without having to spend all of our energy fighting against them or avoiding them. It means learning how to treat ourselves gently and kindly when we are in pain.

Despite sounding simple, this skill can be challenging to cultivate. Every human instinct teaches us to fight, flee, or freeze in the face of stress-inducing situations. Acceptance is not a passive receiving, but an active willingness to remain open to life. When we learn how to open up to our full experience, it frees us up to drop the struggle with ourselves and to start turning our energies to the things that matter most to us— the things that bring richness and meaning to life.



Defusion

When it comes to our thoughts and emotions, one thing is certain: we never stop having them! Sometimes the thoughts come slowly like a glacial drip, and sometimes they come with the fury of a sudden monsoon. Our thoughts can be about the simplest things (where are my glasses?), and they can be about the thoughts that we are having about the thoughts that we are having. Our ability to think at meta levels makes our minds among our most powerful assets, and allows us to solve incredibly complex problems. But at the same time, all our thinking can create other problems for us.

When we are experiencing anxiety, depression, or any of life's difficult emotions, our thoughts are often also a significant piece of the suffering. Whether it is constant anxious rumination, fixing negative labels on ourselves, or replaying the same painful memories, our thoughts have a central role. Oftentimes, they get so frequent and so strong that it is as if they sink their hooks into us and simply won't let go. We just get stuck.

One way we can practice disentangling ourselves from our thoughts is to bring the same observation and curiosity to our thoughts that we bring to other parts of our experience. When we are able to do this, it gives us a little space to step back rather than get hooked. This ability to create some distance from our thoughts and feelings is called "Defusion".



Self-as-Context

We all hold self-stories. These are the labels, descriptions, and even factual statements about ourselves that help us to make sense of who we are. They are the content of our lives. We have ways of describing our personality, our hopes, our names, our preferences, our height... you name it and we have words to describe it. All of these words and statements are the content of our identity: a kind of personal definition.

Sometimes, having a really clear sense of this can be invaluable. Other times, we may cling so tightly to one piece of identity content that it costs us something important. For example, we've all seen people who tell themselves that they are so "tough" that they don't need any help. Or we end up telling ourselves stories like, "I wish I could do that... but I'm just not that sort of person."

Our self-content is not necessarily wrong. In fact, all these ideas and labels could potentially be supported by a mountain of evidence. However, what if it were possible to hold all this self-content a bit more loosely— to be more flexible with how we let it define our lives and our choices? This is what Self-as-Context is all about. We can learn to distance our sense of self from the content or our self-stories, as if we are observing all those ideas swimming around inside of us. Making this move to viewing our "self" as a context rather than a pile of content can be one of the most liberating experiences. It frees us from the pressure of having to react or behave according to the stories we have told about ourselves, or that others have told about us. We can be free to make new choices.



Values

Defining our values provides us with a clear sense of meaning and purpose in every kind of situation. But first, we need to avoid the trap of thinking of “values” as “things I want to do” and “things I like to feel”. When most of us are asked to name what matters most to us, we usually fall into these two main traps.

The first trap focuses more on short-term goals. For example, we might say that we want to be in a romantic relationship or get a new job. These aren't values despite being things that are important to us. Instead, the values related to these goals would describe the type of person we want to be in a romantic relationship or the type of person we want to be in our work. Values are like directions on a compass, while short-term goals are destinations on a map.

The second trap is understanding our values as ways that we want to think or feel. These are emotional goals and are dependent upon trying to control what we have already learned is uncontrollable (thoughts and feelings). Instead, values are focused on what is within our control— how we respond to our thoughts and feelings. An emotional goal might be to feel more engaged at work. If we listen to that emotional desire, we might find that beneath it is the value of being a curious person who is committed to learning at work.

Values are more than goals and temporary feelings. They are the words that we use to describe the essence of our way of being in the world: our chosen qualities. They describe what is truly important to us about being a friend, a family member, a partner, a co-worker, or simply a human being. Articulating our values clearly, even if our goals take longer to reach or the feelings aren't always easy, allows us to stay committed to becoming the very best version of ourselves that we can be.



Committed Action

Taking action is what these well-being skills come down to. But as we all know, sustaining change is tough; many of us have tried and failed with our personal or professional goals. Despite the popular idea of using incentives and punishments, the most effective way to create long-term change is to root our efforts in our core values. Doing something that feels truly and deeply meaningful to us is inherently rewarding. This is why this skill is called “Committed Action”— making a commitment to living in alignment with our core values.

When we root our actions in our values, they provide guidance for our direction and ideas about what concrete steps we can take. At each stage, we can continually do the work of translating our values into action. Being a “kind” person might translate into committing to verbally affirming and appreciating others each day. Being a “just” person might mean choosing to join others in advocacy or organizing. As long as the specific actions we take are fulfilling our values, it becomes easier to sustain values-based action over the long term. It means that change efforts are not about meeting goals (helpful as they might be), but about growth— continued movement in a chosen direction.

Doing what matters to us is not easy. There will be barriers, setbacks, and moments when we don’t act in alignment with our values. This doesn’t mean the journey is over though; it just means that there is a new choice point in front of us. With the next step that we take, how can we continue to commit ourselves to what is truly important?

learn more:

ACT resources

Hayes, S. C. (2020). *A liberated mind: How to pivot toward what matters*. Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.

Harris, R. (2019). *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. 2nd Ed. New Harbinger Publications.

Dindo, L., Van Liew, J. R., & Arch, J. J. (2017). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: A Transdiagnostic Behavioral Intervention for Mental Health and Medical Conditions. *Neurotherapeutics : the journal of the American Society for Experimental NeuroTherapeutics*, 14(3), 546–553.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13311-017-0521-3>



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