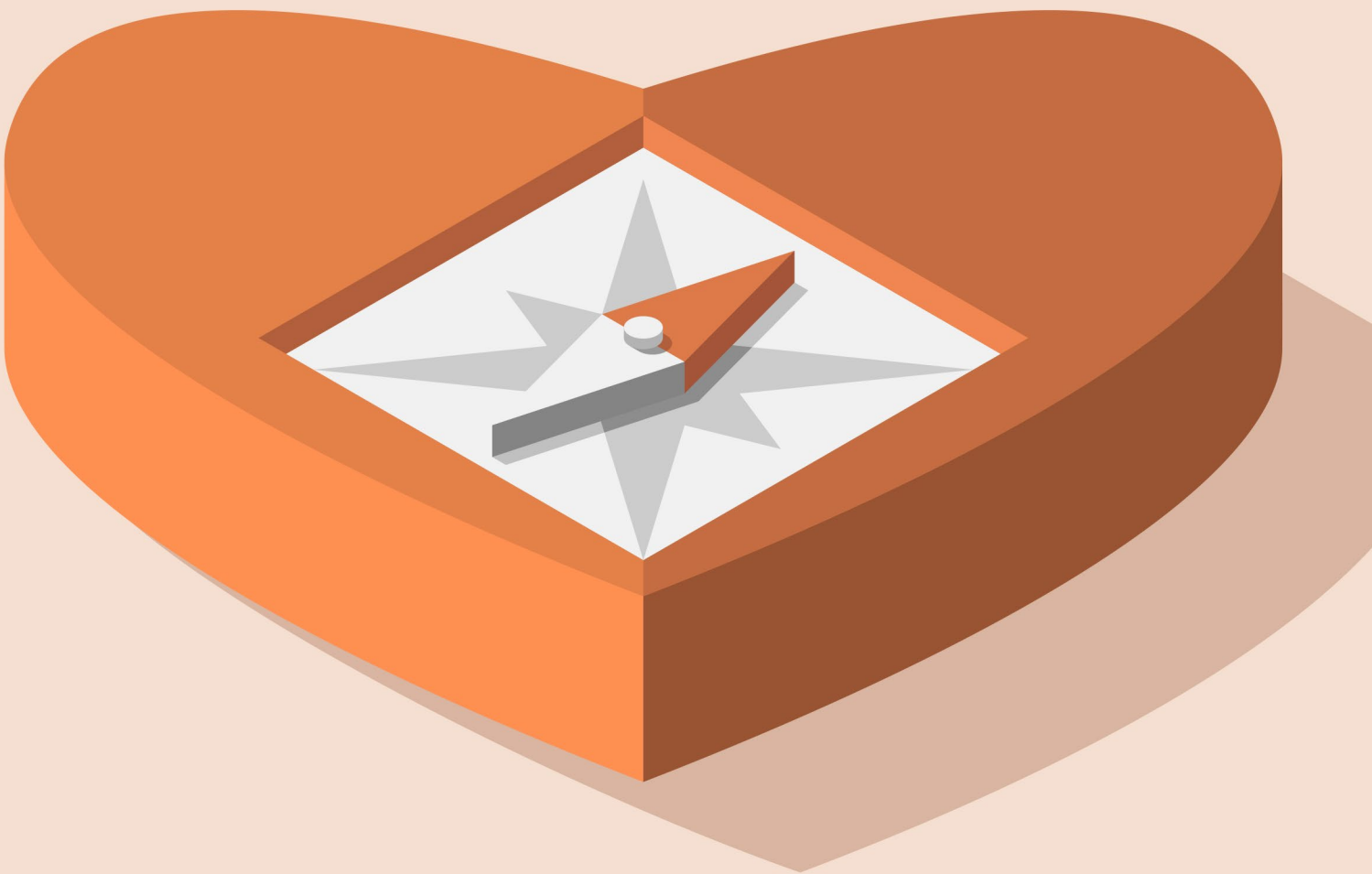




17 Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) Exercises



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■ INTRODUCTION

Mental health is often equated with an absence of distress, but is the belief that we can eliminate pain, anxiety, or discomfort part of the problem? Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers a radically different perspective: pain and discomfort are an inevitable part of being human, but chronic suffering doesn't have to be. Rooted in over 40 years of empirical research pioneered by psychologist Professor Steven C. Hayes, ACT invites us to accept all of our experience with openness rather than avoidance [1].

At the heart of ACT is the development of psychological flexibility that supports resilience and behavioral change. It entails the ability to stay present, accept difficult thoughts and feelings, and take action guided by personal values, especially when times are tough [1, 2]. In times of uncertainty, stress, loss, or change, psychological flexibility allows us to bend without breaking. This isn't just a therapeutic skill; it's the foundation of resilience, meaning, and long-term wellbeing.

This tool pack is designed to help practitioners and clients alike develop that flexibility. It reframes human struggles not as a sign of failure, but as a doorway to deeper purpose. Whether you're navigating personal challenges or supporting others, these tools will equip you to keep doing what matters, especially when life is hard.

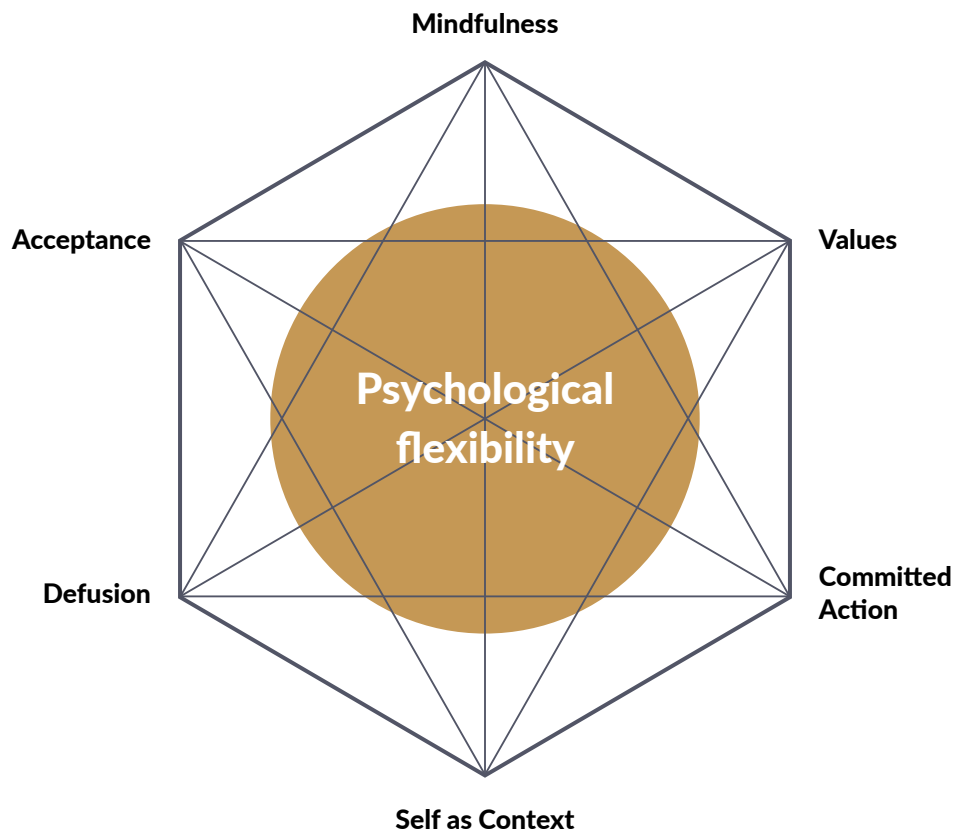
▶ THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS & CORE CONSTRUCTS

This ACT Tool pack is grounded in over four decades of clinical research and practice pioneered by the seminal work of Professor Steven C. Hayes [1, 3, 4]. At its core, the ACT model is based on the hexaflex, six core processes that cultivate psychological flexibility, the ability to take action that aligns with personal values, even in the presence of pain and discomfort [1, 3, 4].

Key constructs include:

1. Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility is defined as the capacity to stay present, open, and values-driven in the face of difficulty. It's the central outcome of ACT and a predictor of resilience and wellbeing [1, 2, 5]. An example of psychological flexibility could be choosing to give a public talk despite feeling anxious, because it supports a valued goal.



2. Self-As-Context

The self-as-context refers to the capacity to observe thoughts, feelings, and experiences without being defined by them. Sometimes, it's called "the observer self." It creates a stable sense of identity that notices internal experiences without being overwhelmed by them [1, 2, 5]. An example of the self-in-context in action would be gaining perspective by observing yourself as the space where things happen, as a context for experience, rather than identifying with difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

3. Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be defined as the practice of paying attention, on purpose, to the present moment with openness and curiosity. Mindfulness skills reduce reactivity, enhance awareness, and anchor clients in the here and now [1, 2, 5]. An example of mindfulness could be noticing the sensation of a racing heart during conflict and grounding through the breath, rather than reacting impulsively.

4. Acceptance

In ACT, acceptance involves making space for uncomfortable internal experiences without trying to fix or avoid them. While avoidance amplifies suffering, acceptance welcomes all internal experiences and makes space for pain and discomfort to move and change [1, 2]. An example of acceptance could be noticing grief as a wave of emotions and sensations and allowing it, rather than numbing or avoiding it with substances or distractions.

5. Cognitive Defusion

Cognitive defusion is a core process that involves learning to step back from thoughts and observe them rather than identify with them or be dominated by them. Defusing from unhelpful thoughts reduces their power, as well as undermining limiting beliefs and storylines [1, 2]. An example of defusion would be saying “I’m having the thought that I’m not good enough” or naming an internal narrative as “the I’m not good enough story” instead of buying into the thought “I’m not good enough”.

6. Values Clarification

Values clarification involves identifying what matters most deeply to us. This process is crucial because values provide direction and motivation for taking committed action [1, 2, 3]. An example of values clarification could be deciding to reach out to a distant family member despite fear of rejection, because connection is a core value.

7. Committed Action

Committed action refers to taking purposeful steps in alignment with one’s values, even when discomfort or obstacles arise. This turns the insights gained through the other core processes into real-world change. Committed action is how values are expressed through behavior over time, building a life of meaning and integrity [1, 2, 3]. An example could be continuing a creative project despite self-doubt, because self-expression and contribution are personally meaningful values.

► WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) matters because it addresses a core human truth: **life includes pain, but suffering is optional**. Backed by over four decades of research, ACT has been shown to improve mental health outcomes across anxiety [6], depression [7], trauma [8], substance abuse [9], and stress-related disorders [10]. Its central benefit is psychological flexibility, which predicts reduced psychological distress and greater resilience, emotional intelligence, and life satisfaction [1, 2, 5].

In both personal and professional contexts, ACT cultivates self-awareness, purpose, and meaningful action. It helps individuals stay grounded and values-driven amid overwhelm, making it especially relevant in today's world of burnout, post-pandemic uncertainty, and social disconnection [4, 11]. Professionals across healthcare, education, leadership, and caregiving roles benefit from ACT's tools to manage stress and avoid compassion fatigue [10, 12, 13, 14].

Beyond symptom relief, ACT supports holistic wellbeing, integrating mind, body, and values in a way that fosters long-term vitality [1, 4]. By helping people relate more skillfully to their inner world and external challenges, ACT promotes deep personal growth and stronger interpersonal connections [1, 4, 11]. In a time when quick fixes and avoidance are common, ACT offers something profoundly different: a sustainable path toward wholeness, presence, and living a life that truly matters.

■ THE PRODUCT

This ACT Tool pack is designed for a wide range of users, including therapists, coaches, educators, health and wellbeing professionals, and those seeking personal growth. Grounded in evidence-based principles, the tools are accessible, adaptable, and practical across various settings.

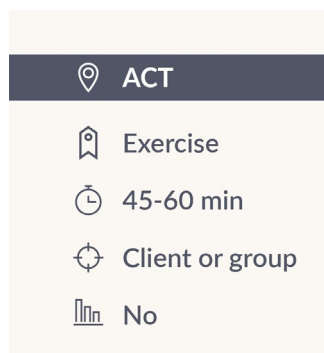
In clinical practice, they support clients in building psychological flexibility and navigating anxiety, depression, trauma, and life transitions [1, 2]. In coaching and educational settings, the tools promote resilience, self-awareness, and values-based action, enhancing both personal and professional development [12]. Within organizational contexts, they can foster emotional agility, improve team communication, and buffer against burnout [13].

Whether used in one-on-one sessions, workshops, or for self-guided reflection, the tool pack equips people with skills to stay centered, committed, and connected even in the face of challenges. It's a versatile resource for anyone supporting human growth in a complex world.

► UNDERSTANDING THE ICONS

This product contains 17 different exercises. Each exercise is structured similarly with a background section, goal description, exercise advice, and suggested readings.

On the first page of every exercise, a legend is shown, consisting of several icons:



- The first icon displays the main category the exercise belongs to.
- The second icon shows the type of exercise. The following options are available:
 - Exercise (an exercise that describes an activity that is done once, during a session)
 - Assessment (an exercise that aims to assess a trait or characteristic of a person)
 - Overview (an exercise that provides an overview or list of something, research findings, facts, etc.)
 - Advice (an exercise directed at the helping professional providing advice on how to carry out a particular activity)
 - Meditation (an exercise that describes a form of meditation)
 - Intervention (an exercise that describes an activity that needs to be done more than once during a specific period)
- The third icon provides an estimation of the duration of the exercise. In other words, how long does it take to complete the exercise? This is always an estimation of the total time it takes. Note that for some exercise types, like overview, advice, protocol, and intervention, it is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the duration. In these cases, n/a (not available) is written.
- The fourth icon describes the intended audience for this exercise; available options include client, coach, or group.

- The last icon indicates whether this specific intervention has been tested at least once in a scientific study and has been published in a peer-reviewed journal (yes or no). Note that if there is a solid theoretical and scientifically tested basis underlying the tool, but the tool itself in its current form has not been directly addressed in research, the icon will still indicate “no.”

► PROFESSIONAL USE & ETHICAL BOUNDARIES

Please note that the exercises in this product are not a substitute for a coaching certification program, which we recommend you take before you call yourself an official coach and before you see clients or patients.

Note that you are advised to use these exercises within the boundaries of your professional expertise. For instance, if you are a certified clinician, you are advised to use the exercises within your field of expertise (e.g., clinical psychology). Likewise, a trainer may use the exercises in a workshop but is not advised to use the exercises for clinical populations.

PositivePsychology.com B.V. is not responsible for unauthorized usage of these exercises.

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