



## Allowing the Waves Exercise

📍 ACT

📖 Exercise

🕒 10-20 min

👤 Client or group

📊 No

ACT applies mindfulness skills to support clients acting in alignment with their values, even in the face of unhelpful thoughts and emotional discomfort. A core component of ACT is acceptance: a mindfulness-based practice that entails a willingness to make space for uncomfortable internal experiences (thoughts, feelings, urges) without unnecessary struggle, while engaging in values-based action [1].

Avoidance of uncomfortable emotions often leads to a narrowing of life experiences and increased psychological distress [1]. This is particularly relevant in clients facing chronic stress, anxiety, trauma, or caregiving burdens, where experiential avoidance may be common and costly [2, 3]. This “allowing the waves” exercise teaches clients how to approach their feelings with openness, like waves in the ocean that rise and fall naturally, rather than attempting to suppress or escape them.

This exercise draws from “urge surfing” and the metaphor of “surfing the waves,” a widely used ACT intervention often used to manage substance abuse problems [4, 5]. However, allowing the waves refers to more than compulsions or urges. This exercise is about learning to accommodate unpleasant emotions in general, like anxiety and anger, that threaten to derail clients from behaving in line with their values. In contrast, “allowing the waves” helps cultivate mindful acceptance of emotional experiences in the service of values-based living.

Berman and Kurlancheek (2021) have shown how the choice point model of ACT can support clients noticing their feelings, by choosing to open up rather than hook into avoidance, and thereby move toward valued actions [5]. Similarly, ACT-based acceptance practices demonstrably enhance emotional resilience in caregivers and parents by fostering self-compassion [6, 2].

Additionally, Russ Harris (2022) has emphasized that trauma-informed ACT work involves teaching clients to observe and name their emotional experiences without fusion, judgment, or the need to fix them [7]. This exercise supports that process. By learning to stay with emotional waves and ride them through, clients begin to unhook from emotional struggles and engage in the meaningful activities they care about [1, 2, 4, 5, 6].

Ultimately, the “allowing the waves” exercise builds the skill of staying present with difficult internal experiences while recommitting to personal values. This exercise draws on elements of the core ACT processes of acceptance, defusion, present-moment awareness, and committed action, and offers an empowering, experiential path out of avoidance and toward a life of meaning and vitality.



## Author

This tool was created by Jo Nash, Ph.D.



## Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients practice allowing difficult feelings to rise and fall like waves, rather than avoiding or resisting them. With ongoing practice, clients learn acceptance skills that increase their capacity for values-based action, even in the presence of discomfort.



## Advice

- This exercise can be introduced in a session and then offered as a homework exercise using the worksheet and MP3 attached, or in a workshop with a group sharing at the reflection stage (see *step 6*).
- Introduce the metaphor gently. Some clients may initially resist exposure to unpleasant emotions. Normalize this discomfort and emphasize that this is a practice that helps build a new skill, not a performance.
- Encourage clients to use their breath and physical sensations to stay grounded as they observe emotional waves.
- You can tie the exercise to a real-life situation that the client is avoiding due to emotional discomfort. Help them articulate what value would guide action in that moment.
- Remind clients that feelings, like waves, have a beginning, middle, and end. Their job is to observe the process, rather than control it. There is no rush or specified time span.
- Like any mindfulness skill, “allowing the waves” improves with practice. Recommend using this during emotional spikes or as a daily check-in.



## References

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3. Haller, H., Breilmann, P., Schröter, M., Dobos, G., & Cramer, H. (2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis of acceptance-and mindfulness-based interventions for DSM-5 anxiety disorders. *Scientific Reports*, 11(1), 20385. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-99882-w>
4. Moniz-Lewis, D. I., Carlon, H. A., Hebden, H., Tuchman, F. R., Votaw, V. R., Stein, E. R., & Witkiewitz, K. (2023). Third-wave treatments for impulsivity in addictive disorders: a narrative review of the active ingredients and overall efficacy. *Current Addiction Reports*, 10(2), 131-139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-023-00487-2>
5. Berman, B. M., & Kurlancheek, K. (2021). The choice point model of acceptance and commitment therapy with inpatient substance use and co-occurring populations: A pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 758356. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.758356>
6. Byrne, G., Ghráda, Á. N., O'Mahony, T., & Brennan, E. (2021). A systematic review of the use of acceptance and commitment therapy in supporting parents. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 94, 378-407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12282>
7. Harris, R. (2022). *Trauma-focused ACT: A practitioner's guide to working with mind, body, and emotion using acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.



## Allowing the Waves Exercise

### Introduction

Emotions can be intense, like waves that crash on the shore.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

Sometimes we try to run from them, block them, or fight them. But in doing so, we often get pulled under.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

In this exercise, you'll learn to notice emotional "waves" as they come and go, without trying to control them.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

With practice in real-life situations, you'll become more skilled at allowing uncomfortable feelings to rise and fall, while staying anchored to your values: the things that matter most to you.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

First, let's run through it here in the session before you try it out in triggering situations.

### Step 1: Initial practice set-up

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit or lie down.

*(pause 10 seconds)*

Close your eyes or soften your gaze.

*(pause 5 seconds)*

Bring your attention to your breath.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

Notice the rise and fall of your chest or belly as you breathe in and out. You don't need to change your breath, just observe it.

*(pause 15 seconds)*



### Step 2: Tune inward

Bring to mind a recent situation where you felt a difficult emotion (e.g., anxiety, sadness, anger).

*(pause 5 seconds)*

Gently name the feeling: "I notice anxiety," or "here is sadness."

*(pause 5 seconds)*

You are not the feeling, you are the one noticing the feeling.

*(pause 5 seconds)*

### Step 3: Observe the wave

Imagine this emotion as a wave in the ocean.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

What does it feel like in your body?

*(pause 2 seconds)*

Is it hot, heavy, tight, buzzy, or sharp?

*(pause 5 seconds)*

Where is it located, chest, stomach, throat?

*(pause 5 seconds)*

Just notice.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

Let the wave be there... without trying to fix it.

*(pause 10 seconds)*

Anchoring in the breath can help to self-soothe when exposed to uncomfortable emotions.

*(pause 2 seconds)*



Try the physiological sigh: two inhalations through the nose and one long exhale through the mouth 2-3 times.

*(pause 15 seconds)*

This breathing technique activates the rest and relaxation response.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

#### **Step 4: Ride it out**

Stay with the sensation.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

Imagine yourself floating on the wave, allowing it to rise, peak, and eventually fall.

*(pause 5 seconds)*

Remind yourself: "This is a wave. It will pass."

*(pause 5 seconds)*

You may find that it changes, lessens, or intensifies. Your job is not to control it, only to stay with it.

*(pause 10 seconds)*

Anchor yourself in the breath as needed.

*(pause 15 seconds)*

#### **Step 5: Return to values**

Ask yourself: "What action can I take right now that moves me toward something I care about, even with this feeling here?"

*(pause 5 seconds)*

It might be setting a boundary with a loved one or work colleague in a triggering situation (for example, saying "Thanks for telling me how you feel, I'll get back to you on that later" or taking a self-compassion break by making a warm drink, having a snack, or taking a walk.

*(pause 2 seconds)*

Both of these examples serve the values of love, connection, and kindness.

*(pause 5 seconds)*



### Step 6: Reflect

After the wave has passed (or even if it hasn't), take a moment to reflect:

- What did I notice during the wave?

*(pause 5 seconds)*

- What helped me stay with it?

*(pause 5 seconds)*

- What value did I move toward?

*(pause 5 seconds)*