




Choice Points – Avoidance versus Acceptance

ACT

 Exercise

 45-60 min

 Client or group

 No

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a short-term intervention that promotes psychological flexibility by staying in contact with the present moment and pursuing values-aligned action, even in the presence of unwanted thoughts, emotions, or sensations [1]. A cornerstone of ACT is the ability to notice and respond to “choice points,” which are moments in time when key choices are made about whether to move toward values-based action (acceptance) or away from discomfort (avoidance) [2].

Avoidance is a common, natural response to psychological discomfort. However, persistent experiential avoidance (i.e., attempts to control or escape from internal experiences such as thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations) is linked to a range of negative outcomes, including increased psychological distress, reduced wellbeing, and diminished quality of life [3, 4]. In contrast, a willingness to make space for all experience, termed acceptance, involves opening up to discomfort while taking committed action aligned with personal values, even in the presence of internal challenges [5].

The Choice Point Model, developed by Russ Harris, simplifies ACT’s core processes into a user-friendly visual framework [2, 6, 7]. It helps individuals recognize these pivotal moments of decision making, called choice points, and determine whether their behavior is “towards” or “away” from their values. The model supports the development of psychological flexibility and values-based living. Research studies have demonstrated its efficacy in diverse settings and clinical populations, for example, with clients with substance use disorders [8] and in educational contexts [3].

This tool leverages the Choice Point Model to help clients become aware of habitual avoidance patterns and consciously choose more adaptive, values-based responses. By identifying their own choice points and practicing acceptance-based action, clients can cultivate greater flexibility, resilience and emotional regulation over time. Choosing to align behaviour with values fosters personal growth and psychological wellbeing [2, 6, 7, 8].



Author

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



Goal

This exercise helps clients identify psychological “choice points” in their daily lives and consciously choose between avoidance and acceptance-based responses. By increasing awareness of choice points and the potential consequences of each path, clients learn to make values-congruent choices, even in the presence of discomfort. This cultivates psychological flexibility, greater emotional resilience, and more meaningful, values-based living.



Advice

- This exercise can be conducted as a dialogue in a one-to-one session with a client, or in a workshop using one worksheet per person, with a group sharing at the reflection stage (see *step 7*). A client template and list of common values is provided for printing out. You can use this in the session and as a homework exercise.
- To ensure effective implementation of this tool, practitioners should begin by familiarizing clients with the concept of psychological flexibility and the choice point model using the visual aid. It is helpful to use concrete, real-life examples, especially those tied to values and emotional triggers, to show how avoidance behaviors often feel good in the short term but move clients away from meaningful outcomes. Conversely, acceptance-based choices often involve short-term discomfort but lead to long-term growth and alignment with one's values.
- Clients may initially struggle to recognize their choice points in real time. Encourage reflection through journaling or daily tracking of moments where a difficult thought, feeling, or urge arose, and what behavior followed. Emphasize that there is no judgment because this exercise is about increasing awareness, not perfection.
- It's important to create a safe space for clients to explore difficult internal experiences without shame. If clients are prone to self-criticism, normalize avoidance as a common human strategy and reframe the practice as an opportunity for compassionate growth, not self-correction. You can use the visual aid to introduce the concept of “towards moves” and “away moves” to make it easier to understand.
- Finally, this tool can be used flexibly across sessions. Repeated practice enhances its impact, and over time, clients often become more adept at making deliberate, values-based decisions. Integrating this tool into other ACT tools like values clarification or defusion exercises can deepen its effectiveness and embed psychological flexibility more robustly into the client's behavioral repertoire.



References

1. Cherry, K. M., Vander Hoeven, E., Patterson, T. S., & Lumley, M. N. (2021). Defining and measuring “psychological flexibility”: A narrative scoping review of diverse flexibility and rigidity constructs and perspectives. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 84, 101973. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.101973>
2. Harris, R. (2017). Choice Point 2.0: A brief overview. *Act Mindfully*. https://www.actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Choice_Point_2.0_A_Brief_Overview_-_Russ_Harris_April_2017.pdf
3. Alam, A., & Mohanty, A. (2023). “Happiness engineering”: Acceptance and commitment therapy for university students’ classroom engagement, mental health, and psychological flexibility. In *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Sustainable Development* (pp. 45-49). CRC Press.
4. Tarbox, J., Szabo, T. G., & Aclan, M. (2022). Acceptance and commitment training within the scope of practice of applied behavior analysis. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 15(1), 11-32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-020-00466-3>
5. Anstiss, T. (2020). Acceptance and commitment coaching. In *The coaches’ handbook* (pp. 301-313). Routledge.
6. Harris, R. (2014). The choice point worksheet with STOP. https://www.actmindfully.com.au/upimages/Choice_Point.pdf
7. Harris, R. (2022). *The happiness trap 2nd edition: Stop struggling, start living*. Robinson.
8. 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>
9. Bailey, Ciarrochi & Harris, (2014). *The weight escape: How to stop dieting and start living*. Shambhala.



Choice Points – Avoidance versus Acceptance

Introduction

It's important to begin by familiarising your client(s) with the concept of a choice point.

The following script can be read aloud to your client(s):

"Throughout your day, you'll face moments where you feel challenged, stressed, or uncomfortable. These are called 'choice points' because at these moments, you can choose one of two paths: trying to avoid or escape discomfort, or action aligned with your values, even if it's uncomfortable. This exercise will help you recognize these moments and choose a direction that leads to a more authentic, fulfilling life."

Step 1: Identifying choice points

The first step involves helping clients to identify choice points. You can use the following script:

"We'll start the exercise by learning to spot your choice points, the moments when you're tempted to do something to avoid discomfort, but when you could choose a different response.

Think about a recent situation where you felt angry, anxious, overwhelmed, or tempted to give up. What happened?

What were you feeling, thinking, or wanting to avoid?

Write down an example of a recent situation where you faced a choice point." *

***Tip:** Refer to the client template provided in Appendix A.

Step 2: Clarify your values

This step is a quick way to help your client(s) decide what kind of person they want to be, and the values they want to stand for. You can use the following script to help jot down some of the things that matter to them. This will help clarify their values.*

"To make a different kind of choice, you need to know what matters to you. Think about the kind of person you want to be, even when things are tough.

Choose 2–3 values that matter to you and guide how you want to live. Let's take a look at some examples.*

Feel free to pick your own values that may not be listed here.

***Tip:** you can print out the worksheet in Appendix B that provides some examples of values.

Step 3: Identifying “away moves”

The next step involves identifying experiential avoidance strategies that commonly arise when clients face discomfort or stress. These are termed “away moves”, as they involve choosing behaviour that takes the client away from their values and the kind of person they want to be. You can use the following script to introduce this to your client(s).

“Next, think about how you usually respond when you’re trying to avoid stress or discomfort. These are called *away moves*. These actions pull you away from the kind of person you want to be. Examples of away moves could include:

- Procrastinating or putting things off
- Snapping at someone
- Withdrawing or isolating yourself
- Criticizing yourself
- Numbing (e.g., with food, social media, alcohol)

These are common human responses that aim to quickly eliminate a source of stress or trigger. They’re nothing to be ashamed of, all of us have them.

What are your most common away moves? Use the template to list 2 or 3 that often show up in your life.”

Step 4: Identifying “toward moves”

The next step involves identifying alternative strategies that clients could use when facing discomfort or stress. These are termed “toward moves”, as they involve choosing behaviour that takes them toward the kind of person they want to be, in alignment with their values. You can use the following script to introduce *toward moves* to your client(s).

“Keeping in mind the values you clarified above. Now think about other ways you could respond to stressors and challenges, by acting in line with your values, even when it feels hard. These are called *toward moves*. They help you become the kind of person you want to be.

Examples of toward moves:

- Speaking honestly and kindly
- Asking for help
- Taking a break instead of quitting a task
- Setting a boundary - like saying ‘no’ to something or limiting your time with somebody you find difficult
- Healthy self-care to relieve stress like taking a warm bath, going for a walk, playing with a pet or your children

Use the template to list 2–3 toward moves you could choose next time you face a choice point.”



Step 5: Practice with the choice point diagram

This step involves using the choice point visual aid to reflect more on how to make decisions when faced with life's difficulties (see *Appendix C*). You can use the following script with your client.

"Now, looking at the choice point diagram, map a recent situation and consider:

- What triggered the choice point?
- What thoughts/feelings showed up?
- What were your possible away and toward moves?
- What did you choose—and how did it feel?

You can use the diagram once or twice a week to support self reflection and build awareness."

Step 6: Make a commitment

This final step entails asking your client to make a simple commitment to replacing a common away move with an alternative toward move. You can use the following script.

"Finally, identify one action you'll take this week that moves you toward your values even when discomfort shows up. For example, instead of numbing out on social media (away move), you could do some stretching, listen to calming or uplifting music, or take a walk.

Always remind yourself: "Discomfort is a normal response to stress and difficulty. I can feel it and still choose what matters."

What will your next toward move be? Use the template to make a simple commitment like this:

My next toward move will be: _____"

Step 7: Reflection

To close the exercise it's useful to ask your client(s) to reflect and share. Here is a script you can use to support their reflection.

"To close this exercise, reflect on the following questions:

- How useful was this choice point exercise?
- What could I do differently now that I've clarified my values?
- Are there healthy ways I can manage challenges and stress (toward moves) that could help me become the person I want to be?
- How often can I refer to the choice point chart each week to support my personal growth?

Always remember that avoidance will happen as it's a natural response to stressful situations. Don't criticize yourself for your away moves, just notice them, and reflect on alternatives."



Appendix A: Client Template

Step 1: Identifying choice points

Think about a recent situation where you felt angry, anxious, overwhelmed, or tempted to give up. What happened?

What were you feeling, thinking, or wanting to avoid?

Write down an example of a recent situation where you faced a choice point.



Step 2: Clarify your values

To make a different kind of choice, you need to know what matters to you. Think about the kind of person you want to be, even when things are tough.

Choose 2–3 values that matter to you and guide how you want to live. You can use the list provided or pick your own values.

Step 3: Identifying “away moves”

Next, think about how you usually respond when you’re trying to avoid stress or discomfort. These are called away moves. These actions pull you away from the kind of person you want to be. Examples of away moves could include:

- Procrastinating or putting things off
- Snapping at someone
- Withdrawing or isolating yourself
- Criticizing yourself
- Numbing (e.g., with food, social media, alcohol)

These are common human responses that aim to quickly eliminate a source of stress or trigger. They’re nothing to be ashamed of, all of us have them.

What are your most common away moves? List 2 or 3 that often show up in your life.

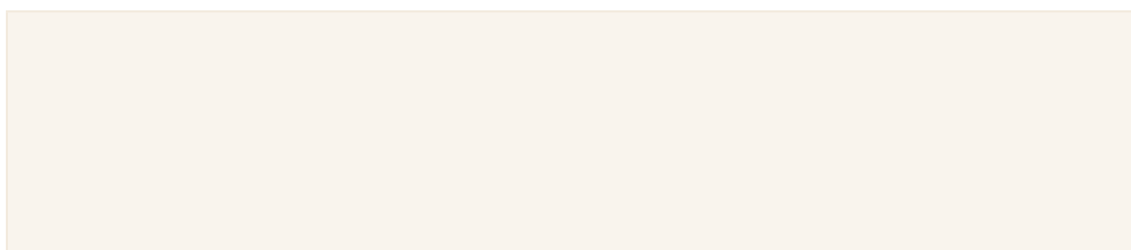
Step 4: Identifying “toward moves”

Keeping in mind the values you clarified above. Now think about other ways you could respond to stressors and challenges, by acting in line with your values, even when it feels hard. These are called toward moves. They help you become the kind of person you want to be.

Examples of toward moves:

- Speaking honestly and kindly
- Asking for help
- Taking a break instead of quitting a task
- Setting a boundary - like saying ‘no’ to something or limiting your time with somebody you find difficult
- Healthy self-care to relieve stress like taking a warm bath, going for a walk, playing with a pet or your children

List 2–3 toward moves you could choose next time you face a choice point.

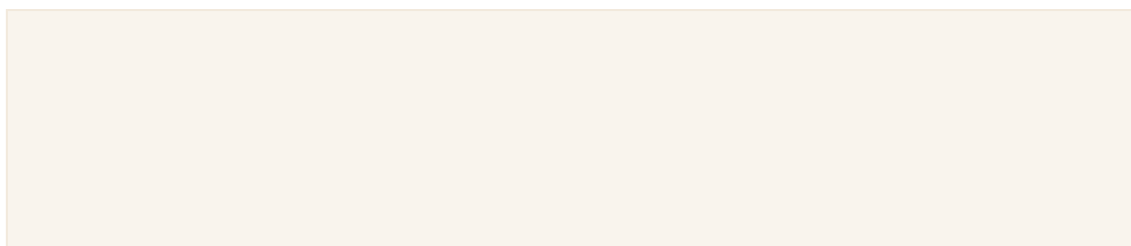


Step 5: Practice with the choice point diagram

Now, looking at the choice point diagram, map a recent situation and consider:

- What triggered the choice point?
- What thoughts/feelings showed up?
- What were your possible away and toward moves?
- What did you choose—and how did it feel?

You can use the diagram once or twice a week to support self-reflection and build awareness.





Step 6: Make a commitment

Finally, identify one action you'll take this week that moves you toward your values even when discomfort shows up. For example, instead of numbing out on social media (away move), you could do some stretching, listen to calming or uplifting music, or take a walk.

Always remind yourself: "Discomfort is a normal response to stress and difficulty. I can feel it and still choose what matters."

What will your next toward move be? Make a simple commitment like this:

My next toward move will be: _____

Step 7: Reflection

To close this exercise, reflect on the following questions

- How useful was this choice point exercise?
- What could I do differently now I've clarified my values?
- Are there healthy ways I can manage challenges and stress (toward moves) that could help me become the person I want to be?
- How often can I refer to the choice point chart each week to support my personal growth?

Always remember that avoidance will happen as it's a natural response to stressful situations. Don't criticize yourself for your away moves, just notice them, and reflect on alternatives.



Appendix B: Values Worksheet

In ACT, values describe the things that matter to you and that you want to stand for. Choosing actions aligned to your values can feel difficult, but helps you to become the person you want to be. Here are some examples.

Relationships & Connection

- **Love:** Being a loving partner, parent, or friend.
- **Compassion:** Treating others (and myself) with kindness.
- **Honesty:** Speaking truthfully, even when it's hard.
- **Loyalty:** Standing by those I care about.
- **Forgiveness:** Letting go of resentment.

Personal Growth & Learning

- **Curiosity:** Exploring new ideas and experiences.
- **Growth:** Becoming a better version of myself.
- **Wisdom:** Learning from life's experiences.
- **Openness:** Being willing to consider new perspectives.
- **Resilience:** Adapting to and accepting the hard times as they help me grow.

Courage & Integrity

- **Courage:** Doing what matters, even when I'm scared.
- **Authenticity:** Being true to who I really am.
- **Responsibility:** Owning my choices and actions.
- **Perseverance:** Staying with what's important, even when it's tough.
- **Fairness:** Standing up for justice or what's right.

Health & Self-Care

- **Vitality:** Feeling alive and energized.
- **Self-care:** Taking care of my mind and body.
- **Balance:** Making space for rest, fun, and effort.
- **Sobriety:** Living free from addiction.
- **Safety:** Protecting myself and others.

Work & Achievement

- **Commitment:** Sticking with something important.
- **Contribution:** Making a positive difference.
- **Creativity:** Expressing myself in unique ways.
- **Excellence:** Striving to do things well.

Appendix C: Choice Point Flow Chart

