



Expanding Space Exercise

📍 ACT

📖 Exercise

🕒 10-20 min

👤 Client or group

📊 No

A core process of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is experiential acceptance, which entails a willingness to stay present with difficult thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without trying to change, avoid, or suppress them [1]. Rather than viewing discomfort as a problem to solve, ACT teaches clients to open up to all their inner experiences and make space for them, while using ACT skills to continue choosing values-based action. Russ Harris [2] called these ‘toward moves’ because our behavior then aligns with the type of person we want to be. Learning experiential acceptance skills supports ‘toward moves’ and enhances psychological flexibility while reducing suffering [3].

The metaphor of expansion refers to creating space around pain instead of contracting or resisting it helps to illustrate this process [1]. Learning to accept difficult feelings as internal sensations that can be “held” in a wider field of awareness encourages clients to observe without identifying or fusing with their experience [1,2,3]. This is consistent with research that has found that mindfulness and acceptance-based strategies reduce experiential avoidance and improve functioning across various client groups, including those with anxiety disorders [4], substance abuse problems [5, 6], parenting [7] caregiver stress [8], and trauma [3].

The somatic experience of *contraction* is often associated with fear, shame, or pain, whereas *expansion* fosters a sense of openness, resourcefulness, and agency [1, 3]. ACT emphasizes the importance of helping clients stay in contact with painful experiences without defense so they can maintain a commitment to values-aligned action [2]. By encouraging clients to “make space” for discomfort rather than eliminating it, the Expanding Space Exercise becomes a practical, embodied metaphor that undermines default avoidance strategies and cultivates the ACT core process of acceptance.

This practice can be especially powerful for those prone to avoidance or control-based coping strategies, or for clients with trauma histories who struggle with emotional regulation or feel overwhelmed by uncomfortable emotions [3, 4, 5, 6]. The exercise helps cultivate a non-reactive, spacious awareness that draws on the three core ACT processes of the observer self, mindfulness, and acceptance. Practicing the technique during challenging times will enhance clients’ tolerance of uncomfortable internal experiences and build the resilience needed to pursue values-based living in the face of life challenges.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients practice acceptance by cultivating a sense of spaciousness around difficult internal experiences. By imagining and embodying the expansion of space around thoughts, feelings, or sensations, clients learn to notice, observe and hold discomfort with openness and reduce experiential avoidance.



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 7*).
- To make the most of this exercise, guide clients into a relaxed, grounded state before beginning. You can use the brief *mindful check-in* tool to get present and grounded in the body first. Clients may struggle at first with letting go of the impulse to “get rid of” distressing thoughts or emotions, so normalize this reaction and gently redirect toward openness.
- This exercise is best introduced to manage life challenges that evoke moderate rather than overwhelming distress. Encourage clients to notice bodily sensations as part of the process, anchoring attention to their breath, posture, or physical sensations of feet on the ground, as needed. It can be practiced regularly when facing emotionally charged situations or stressful life challenges between sessions.
- For clients with trauma histories or heightened anxiety, offer reassurance that they can pause or return to the present moment at any time. Use language that emphasizes *safety*, *autonomy*, and *permission*. You may consider pairing this with debrief questions to help clients integrate the experience.



References

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4. 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>
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8. Han, A., Yuen, H. K., & Jenkins, J. (2021). Acceptance and commitment therapy for family caregivers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 26(1), 82-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105320941217>



Expanding Space Exercise

Introduction

When something feels painful or uncomfortable, like anxiety, shame, sadness, or anger, our natural reaction is to tighten up or push it away. But sometimes the most healing thing we can do is to simply make space for that experience and let it be.

(pause for 2 seconds)

This exercise will guide you through an imagery-based practice to help you “expand” around difficult feelings so they can no longer dominate your whole experience.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Step 1: Getting grounded

Find a comfortable seated position. Feel your feet on the floor and your hands resting in your lap.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Gently close your eyes or focus on a neutral place on the ground in front of you.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Take a few deep, steady breaths.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Let your attention settle into your body.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Step 2: Locate the discomfort

Bring to mind a recent emotion or thought that’s been difficult for you, something you’re struggling with, but that feels manageable at this moment.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Gently turn your attention to where you feel it in your body.

(pause for 2 seconds)



Is it tight in your chest?

(pause for 2 seconds)

A weight in your gut?

(pause for 2 seconds)

A buzzing in your head?

Step 3: Describe the sensation

Without judgment, describe the discomfort to yourself: its shape, texture, color, weight, movement.

(pause for 2 seconds)

For example, "It feels like a tight knot in my throat" or "It's a heavy, gray pressure in my chest."

(pause for 6 seconds)

Step 4: Imagine space around it

Now imagine the space around the discomfort slowly expanding.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Visualize your body making room, like your inner world is widening.

(pause for 2 seconds)

The knot is still there, but there's more space around it.

(pause for 2 seconds)

You are observing the feeling, you are not fused with it.

(pause for 2 seconds)

It exists within you, but it is not all of you.

(pause for 2 seconds)



Step 5: Breathe into the space

As you inhale, imagine the breath flowing into that open space.

(pause for 2 seconds)

As you exhale, allow the space to widen further.

(pause for 2 seconds)

You don't have to push the feeling away, just let it sit in this vast field of awareness.

(pause for 2 seconds)

You are observing it, accepting it, allowing it, not resisting it.

Step 6: Say "yes" to this moment

Gently say to yourself, *"There is space for this, too."*

(pause for 2 seconds)

You might add: *"I don't have to like it, but I'm willing to feel it."*

(pause for 2 seconds)

Allow whatever emotions are present to be held in your awareness with kindness and curiosity.

(pause for 10 seconds)

Step 7: Reflect

Now, slowly bring your attention back to your breath, noticing your chest and belly rising and falling.... in and out.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Now, gently open your eyes and notice the room around you.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Reflect briefly: How did it feel to allow space instead of resisting?

(pause for 2 seconds)



What shifted, if anything?

(pause for 2 seconds)

Could you practice expanding space in other difficult moments?

(pause for 2 seconds- end)