Exploring Clean and Dirty Discomfort

ACT

Exercise

5-15 min/day

Client

No

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) emphasizes a flexible, values-based approach to psychological wellbeing based on psychological flexibility. This is defined as the ability to stay present with whatever is happening, even if it's painful, and still do what matters [1]. One of ACT's core distinctions is between *clean* discomfort, which is the natural, inevitable pain that arises from life circumstances, and *dirty* discomfort that results from efforts to avoid, suppress, or control emotional pain [2].

Avoidance strategies, such as distraction, suppression, or self-criticism, increase suffering and entrench distress over time. As Harris explains, the avoidance of discomfort creates more of it [2]. Conversely, a willingness to make space for clean discomfort using ACT skills such as mindfulness, acceptance, defusion, and values-based action reduces additional suffering and promotes psychological resilience [1].

Research supports this distinction. For example, one study found that ACT group interventions that used a clean and dirty discomfort diary effectively reduced distress in college students by targeting experiential avoidance [3]. Similarly, another study emphasized how distinguishing between clean and dirty discomfort supports people confronting existential concerns with openness and purpose, supporting them to lead a more fulfilling life [4]. Recent clinical trials also indicate that distinguishing between clean and dirty discomfort in service of behavior change improves coping and self-efficacy, as well as reducing insomnia, anxiety, and distress [5, 6, 7].

Exploring clean and dirty discomfort is designed to help clients distinguish between these options that arise at choice points [2]. By recognizing their default avoidance patterns, clients become more aware of how certain behaviours fuel their suffering. This awareness is the first step toward building psychological flexibility and taking action in line with their values, which underpins behavioral change [1].

Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients identify and differentiate between clean and dirty discomfort. By tracking triggering experiences and noting avoidance behaviors, clients will increase awareness of their emotional patterns and begin practicing mindful, values-based responses to internal challenges.

Advice

- The following tool can be explored with a client in a session, or group of clients in a workshop setting as required. The Appendix contains a diary worksheet that can be printed out for the client's use- or copied as a template into a journal.
- Encourage clients to use this exercise throughout the day when they face uncomfortable situations that stress or trigger them. A 2- to 5-minute diary entry can support a pause, and build awareness of choice points.
- This exercise can be used to support responding rather than reacting during choice points. After noting down avoidance behavior, clients might ask, "What's one small thing I can do next time this happens that moves me toward my values?"
- Normalize avoidance by reassuring clients that it's the brain's default mode designed to try and eliminate pain and suffering as quickly as possible. Learning to distinguish between clean and dirty discomfort entails noticing when avoidance arises and becoming more aware of how different choices can reduce suffering in the longer term.

References

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Exploring Clean and Dirty Discomfort

Introduction

ACT differentiates between the ordinary discomfort that arises in the course of living and encountering stress and problems, and the discomfort that develops following the use of avoidance and control strategies to try and cope with them. Your first, natural response to stress is called 'clean discomfort' and the second coping strategy based on avoidance is termed 'dirty discomfort' in ACT.

This exercise helps you reflect on experiences of emotional discomfort during your day-to-day life. It will teach you to spot when you're using avoidance strategies that increase suffering in the long term called 'dirty discomfort', and gently guide you toward more helpful responses to your original 'clean discomfort' when encountering stressors.

Step 1: Track situations

Each time you face a situation that makes you feel stressed or triggered, use the diary worksheet template provided (Appendix) to record it. The idea is to build up a diary and track patterns to become more aware of your stressors. When you reflect on a stressful situation that happened, be specific:

- What happened?
- Where were you?
- Who were you with?

Step 2: Identify clean discomfort

Note your *initial* internal reactions to this situation including your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations.

According to the ACT approach, our painful thoughts and feelings in the face of triggers and stressors are natural and healthy. They are trying to protect us by activating the fight, flight, freeze stress response. These are your clean discomforts: the natural responses to life challenges and triggers.

For example, you are told your workplace is reorganizing and there will be job losses. Initially, you might feel anxious, have a churning stomach, and then perhaps get angry.

Step 3: Rate your initial distress

Using a scale of 0 (none) to 10 (extreme), rate how distressed you felt at the beginning of your stressful experience.

This provides a baseline indicating your original response to the situation.

Step 4: Observe dirty discomfort

Next, describe what you *did* with your discomfort. Did you try to push it away? Distract yourself? Criticize yourself? These responses are your reactions that aim to avoid or control unpleasant and difficult experiences.

Some common examples might include binge watching TV, stress eating, scrolling social media, substance use (alcohol or drugs).

These are termed sources of dirty discomfort that prolong your initial painful inner experiences into more suffering. They are very human responses to stress that can become habits over time and are nothing to be ashamed of.

Step 5: Rate post-reaction distress

After using avoidance strategies, how distressed did you feel?

Again, rate this from 0 (none) to 10 (extreme). Compare it to your initial rating in *Step 2*.

Step 6: Reflect on patterns

As a final step at the end of the week, review your diary entries.

- What do you notice?
- Are there common avoidance patterns? What helped? What made things worse?
- Are there choice points when you face stressors where you could try accepting your pain in the moment and using defusion techniques or mindfulness instead?

You can jot these down in a journal and discuss them in your next session.

Over time, using the clean and dirty discomfort diary will help you to identify habits and patterns of avoidance. You will become more aware of the consequences of trying to control your natural stress response rather than make space for and accept it. And you will become more aware of the times when you have a choice - to accept the natural, clean discomfort rather than avoid it and feel worse in the long term.

Appendix: Clean and Dirty Discomfort Diary Template

Clean Versus Dirty Discomfort Diary				
Situation	Clean Discomfort (My initial reaction)	Initial distress level	Dirty Discomfort (What I did with my initial reactions)	Secondary distress level