




The Compass vs. The GPS Exercise

 ACT

 Exercise

 20-30 min

 Client or group

 No

One of the most essential distinctions in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) lies in understanding the difference between values and goals. Values are enduring principles that guide how individuals want to behave and what they want to stand for across time, akin to a compass offering direction without a fixed endpoint [1, 2]. In contrast, goals are specific, measurable outcomes or destinations. While goals are important for progress, rigid attachment to them can be psychologically detrimental when setbacks occur [3, 4]. In ACT, values are like a compass: they provide direction, not a destination. Goals are more like a GPS: they offer turn-by-turn directions to a predefined endpoint.

Research indicates that rigid goal pursuit, especially in high-control individuals or perfectionists, can lead to burnout, avoidance, and disengagement when obstacles are encountered [3, 4]. The risk of pursuing GPS-like goals is that detours, obstacles, or setbacks may be experienced as personal failure or invalidation. This often results in frustration, avoidance, or quitting altogether. People may abandon meaningful pursuits because things didn't go according to plan, even when their values remain unchanged.

In contrast, ACT promotes psychological flexibility, which entails the ability to remain present, open, and committed to values-based action even when life goes off track. This flexibility is strongly correlated with improved wellbeing, resilience, and persistence in meaningful behavior despite adversity [5, 6]. Research has shown that ACT interventions enhance wellbeing and adaptive functioning by shifting focus from outcome achievement to values-based living [5, 6, 7, 8].

The metaphor of a compass versus a GPS encapsulates this distinction. This Compass vs. GPS Exercise invites clients to reframe setbacks not as failures, but as natural detours that can be navigated on a meaningful journey. A GPS may seem helpful for reaching exact destinations, but when the road is blocked, it can feel like a failure to reach a desired destination. A compass, however, allows for adaptable movement in a chosen direction, even through uncharted territory. This ACT tool helps clients internalize this metaphor and apply it to reframe setbacks, disengage from rigid expectations, and recommit to values-led action.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients shift from rigid, outcome-based thinking to flexible, values-based action by exploring the metaphor of the compass vs. the GPS. Internalizing this metaphor as a guide to action when faced with life challenges promotes persistence, resilience, and psychological flexibility when things go off track.



Advice

- This tool works well in one-to-one coaching, group workshops, and clinical contexts.
- Introduce this exercise when clients feel stuck, demoralized, or overly focused on specific goals. It pairs well with values clarification work or following a perceived failure. Normalize frustration because everyone wants things to go “according to plan,” but emphasize that meaning comes from how we navigate setbacks and learn from them, not where we end up.
- If needed, use additional ACT tools like “I’m Having the Thought That” or “Thanking the Mind” for fused thoughts (e.g., “I failed, so I’m a failure”) and “The Obstacle Roadmap” to revisit flexible action in the face of difficulty.



References

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The Compass vs. The GPS Exercise

Introduction

The script that follows explains the exercise to clients. You can run through this in a session and then provide the client with the worksheet to practice at home.

“Sometimes in life, things don’t go according to plan. You may face setbacks or detours that make you feel like you’ve failed. For ACT practitioners, success isn’t about getting to a specific destination by a certain time, but rather continuing in the direction that matters most to you. This exercise will help you shift from a rigid, GPS-like mindset to a more flexible, compass-guided way of living.”

Step 1: Understanding the metaphor

Next, further explain the metaphor using the following:

“In ACT, a GPS mindset is purely goal-oriented and based on the belief ‘I must get there exactly as planned, or I’ve failed.’

Whereas the compass mindset entails maintaining an alignment with your values by choosing to stay on track with committed action when setbacks occur. It can be summarized as “Even if I encounter obstacles, I can keep moving toward what matters.”

Discuss how each mindset feels and what consequences each might have by using these prompts:

- “How would it feel to adopt a GPS mindset to life? What might the consequences be?”
- How would that contrast with a compass-guided way of living, do you think?”

Step 2: Identifying a recent setback

This step asks your client to experiment with the GPS versus compass mindsets using a real-life example.

“Think of a recent situation where you felt like you failed or got off track.

- What was the goal you were pursuing?
- What went wrong?
- How did you feel?”



Example: Your client got shortlisted for a dream job, went to two rounds of interviews, and didn't get hired. Resulting feelings might include hopelessness, sadness, anger, and shame or guilt about not being good enough. If this is part of a pattern of rejection it could even trigger feelings of anxiety or depression.

Step 3: Clarifying the underlying value

Next, clarify the underlying value that was driving that goal with your client using the following prompts:

- "What value was this goal supposed to serve?
- What does this say about what matters to you?
- Can you try reframing the goal into a value? You can try by saying 'This mattered to me because I care about'..."

Tip: Taking the same example as we used in *step 2*, your client may value personal development and learning, so they were looking forward to new challenges. So the value could be personal growth because they care about professional development; an important component of personal growth.

Therefore, a client might say, 'This mattered to me because I care about personal growth, development, and learning'.

Step 4: Reframing the setback

Next, explore reframing the setback as a detour using the compass metaphor and the following prompts:

"Now you're clear about why that goal mattered, can we try reframing the setback? How might this have been a detour, not a dead end?"

Is there anything you can do that still upholds your value, even if the original goal isn't possible?"

Tip: Using the above example, your client could reframe the setback of not being hired as a learning opportunity. When candidates have been shortlisted and interviewed for a role, most hiring panels are willing to offer feedback on request. This feedback can provide valuable information that the client can learn from to prepare for another opportunity. They could also consider job-crafting their current role to focus on elements that support professional development and learning. If unemployed, they could look for voluntary roles or retraining opportunities to develop their competencies and skill set.



Step 5: Defining a new, flexible step

This next step builds on reframing the setback as a detour and choosing one small step to get back on track. You can use the following prompts:

“Now you’ve reframed the setback as a detour, can you choose one small action that aligns with your values and will help you get you back on track?”

Tip: Using the above example, a small action could be: ‘I will email the hiring manager and ask for feedback to reconnect with the high value I place on professional development, even though I wasn’t hired this time.’

Step 6: Reflecting on the compass

Finally, encourage your client to reflect on the exercise using the following prompt:

“Let’s close by reflecting on this exercise. How did you feel when you reframed the setback and acted from your compass?”

Discuss how values can guide a client even when their goals change or fail.

Step 7: Offering the worksheet as homework practice

Finally, if your client found this helpful, you can offer them the worksheet in *Appendix* as homework practice using the following prompt:

“Retraining our minds to adopt a compass-based view of life rather than a GPS mindset takes practice. Next time you encounter a setback that threatens to derail you, you can use this worksheet to get back on track.”



Appendix: Compass vs. GPS Worksheet

Living a values-driven life means staying true to what matters most, even when plans go off track. This worksheet helps you reflect on a recent setback and reconnect with your values so you can keep moving forward with purpose.

Step 1: Understanding the metaphor

Read and reflect:

- **GPS mindset:** “I must reach this specific goal exactly as planned, or I’ve failed.”
- **Compass mindset:** “Even if things don’t go according to plan, I can still move in the direction that matters.”

Which mindset do you tend to fall into when things go wrong?

	GPS mindset
	Compass mindset

Explain your choice:

Step 2: Identify a recent setback

Think about a time you felt off-track, frustrated, or like you failed.

What happened?



What goal were you trying to achieve?

How did you feel about the outcome?

Step 3: Clarify the underlying value

Behind every meaningful goal is a deeper value.

What mattered to you about this goal?

Now, complete this sentence: "This mattered to me because I care about..."



Step 4: Reframe the detour

Now, let's shift the story.

How might this setback be a detour, not a dead end?

What options do you still have to move toward your values?

Step 5: Define a new, flexible step

Choose one small action you can take that reflects your value regardless of the original outcome.

What will you do?

When will you do it?



Step 6: Reflection

How do you feel when you act from your values (your “compass”) rather than fixating on specific outcomes?

Complete this sentence: “When I act from my compass, I feel...”

Final Thought:

Setbacks don’t have to stop your journey. Your values are always there pointing you in the right direction.