




## The Obstacle Roadmap

 ACT

 Exercise

 20-30 min

 Client or group

 No

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) teaches that meaningful living does not come from the absence of pain but from taking committed action in its presence. ACT emphasizes values-based action, or doing what truly matters, even when thoughts, emotions, and sensations try to pull us off track [1]. Yet even when values are clear, people often encounter internal obstacles like fear, doubt, shame, and discomfort, which lead to avoidance or self-sabotage [1, 2].

ACT distinguishes between the content of obstacles (what thoughts or feelings show up) and the context (how we relate to them). Psychological flexibility means we can hold discomfort lightly while moving in the direction of our values [1, 2]. This requires mindfulness, willingness, and planning. Tools like cognitive defusion, acceptance, and perspective-taking allow clients to notice these obstacles without becoming entangled in them [2].

Research supports the effectiveness of ACT interventions in fostering behavior change in a range of client groups including those experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, addiction, and caregiving stress [3, 4, 5]. The Obstacle Roadmap provides a structured way to move from values clarification into concrete planning. Rather than treating obstacles as roadblocks, it reframes them as terrain to navigate that is manageable and to be expected [6].

By mapping anticipated challenges and pairing them with acceptance and commitment-based action, clients gain self-awareness and build psychological flexibility. This prepares them to persist in the face of difficulty, increasing the likelihood of sustained, values-congruent action and long-term behavioral change [6].



### Author

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



### Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients anticipate and mindfully respond to internal and external obstacles that may arise when pursuing values-based goals, thus increasing their capacity for committed yet flexible action. The foundation of this exercise is an acceptance of obstacles as inevitable life challenges rather than identifying with them as personal failures, then planning accordingly.



## Advice

- This tool is best used after values clarification, once a client has identified a meaningful direction or goal. You could offer this after completing the life deviation assessment with goal setting or the clean and dirty discomfort diary. Introduce the concept of obstacles not as failures, but as expected parts of the journey. Emphasize that ACT's approach is not to remove all discomfort, but to change our relationship to it.
- Some clients may initially view obstacles as evidence they're "not ready" or "not good enough." Normalize this response and use defusion techniques like 'Thanking the Mind' to help them step back from these thoughts. Exercises like 'Willing Hands', 'Expanding Space', or ACT metaphors like 'Watching the Clouds' can also support the client's acceptance of anticipated discomfort.
- Reassure clients that flexibility is more important than perfection. The roadmap is not a rigid plan, but a compass to help them stay aligned with their values when the road gets bumpy. If they do go off track, which they will, then they can get back on track more easily with this personalized plan in place.



## References

1. Hayes, S. C. (2019). *A liberated mind: How to pivot toward what matters*. Avery.
2. 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.
3. Berman, B. M., & Kurlancheek, K. (2021). The choice point model of acceptance and commitment therapy with inpatient substance use and co-occurring populations. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 758356. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.758356>
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>
5. 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>
6. Harris, R. (2021). *The reality slap* (2nd ed.). Hachette UK.



# The Obstacle Roadmap

## Introduction

Begin by normalizing the experience of obstacles of different kinds. You can use this script to describe the purpose of the exercise to your client(s).

“Doing what matters most isn’t ever easy. Even when we’re clear about what we want, we can run into powerful internal obstacles like self-doubt, fear, anxiety, painful memories, or external challenges like time constraints, conflict, or unexpected setbacks.

This tool is here to help you stay connected to what really matters, even when the road gets rough. Think of it as a personal roadmap: a guide to help you keep moving toward a rich, meaningful life in line with your values.”

### Step 1: Identify your values-based goal

Next, use the results of your client's previous values clarification exercises, like the life deviation assessment, with goal setting to take the first step toward planning responses to obstacles when they arise. You can use the following script. There is a worksheet attached in Appendix for printing out that you can give the client to fill in if you are running a workshop or want to use it for homework.

“Let’s start by identifying something that matters deeply to you, an action, goal, or direction that’s rooted in your core values.

Ask yourself:

- What do I want to move toward?
- What really matters to me about this?
- How would taking this step reflect the kind of person I want to be?

State your goal here:

*Example: “I want to reconnect with my sister because I value family and healing.”*

### Step 2: Visualize the ideal outcome

This step requires the client to imagine the best possible outcome if they manage to stay in line with their values.

“Now imagine things go as well as they reasonably could. You stay on track with your values. What might that look and feel like?

### Ask yourself:

- What would be different in my life if I followed through?
- How would I feel about myself?
- What would I be proud of?

Describe your ideal outcome:

*Example: "We'd talk more openly, and I'd feel at peace knowing I made the effort."*

## Step 3: Anticipate internal and external obstacles

This step asks your client to imagine obstacles that could arise.

"Before taking action, it's helpful to name the obstacles that might show up. This includes internal experiences like difficult thoughts or emotions, and external challenges like scheduling or distance.

Categories to consider include

Obstacle Type	Examples
Thoughts	"She'll reject me." "I always screw this up."
Feelings	Anxiety, anger, shame, guilt
Sensations	Tight chest, racing heart, fatigue
Situational	Time constraints, lack of support, long-standing conflict

What obstacles do you expect to face?"

## Step 4: Create ACT-based responses

This step entails getting your client to use ACT exercises to overcome obstacles.

"For each obstacle, think about how you'll respond using other ACT tools and skills. The goal isn't to get rid of obstacles, it's to change your relationship with them, so they don't stop you from acting on your values."



ACT tools to choose from:

- Cognitive defusion:
  - “I’m having the thought that...”
  - “Thanks, mind.”
- Acceptance & willingness:
  - “This is uncomfortable, but I can make space for it.”
  - Try a physical gesture like *Willing Hands* or deep breathing.
- Values refocus:
  - “This matters because...”
  - “This clean discomfort is part of the path toward something meaningful.”

**Example:**

Obstacle: “I’ll get overwhelmed with emotion.”

Response: “I’ll notice the emotion like a wave, let it rise and fall, and breathe through it.”

Repeat for as many obstacles as needed.

### Step 5: Choose a small, values-based action

Ask your client to take a tiny step toward what matters most.

“Now pick one small, specific step you’re willing to take even if fear or discomfort comes along for the ride.

Ask yourself:

- What’s one thing I can do this week to move in this direction?
- What’s doable, even if things don’t feel perfect?
- What would keep me aligned with who I want to be?

Your small next step will be what?”

*Example: “Send her a short message to say I’m thinking of her.”*



### Step 6: Reflect and revise

This invites your client to follow up and reflect on results.

“After you take the step, check in with yourself. Use this reflection to learn, adapt, and plan your next move.

Ask yourself:

- What happened when I took the step?
- What worked or surprised me?
- Did any new obstacles show up?
- What do I want to do differently next time?

Here's an example reflection:

*Example: “I felt nervous before sending the message, but relieved afterward. She didn’t respond yet, but I feel good that I reached out. I didn’t expect to feel so sad afterward, so next time I’ll plan some support or grounding time.”*

### Tip: Ongoing Practice

Remind your client to:

“Keep your roadmap flexible because life changes, and so will your thoughts and feelings. The key is to keep showing up for what matters, even when it’s uncomfortable.”



## **Appendix:** Obstacle Road Map Worksheet: A Tool for Doing What Matters Most

This tool is here to help you stay connected to what really matters, even when the road gets rough. Think of it as a personal roadmap: a guide to help you keep moving toward a rich, meaningful life based on your values.

### **Step 1: Identify your values-based goal**

Start by identifying something that matters deeply to you like an action, goal, or direction that's rooted in your core values.

#### **Ask yourself:**

- What do I want to move toward?
- What really matters to me about this?
- How would taking this step reflect the kind of person I want to be?

#### **Write your goal here:**

### **Step 2: Visualize the ideal outcome**

Now imagine things going as well as they reasonably could. You stay on track with your values. What might that look and feel like?

#### **Ask yourself:**

- What would be different in my life if I followed through?
- How would I feel about myself?
- What would I be proud of?



**Describe your ideal outcome:**

### Step 3: Anticipate internal and external obstacles

Before taking action, it's helpful to name the obstacles that might show up. This includes both internal experiences, like difficult thoughts or emotions, and external challenges, like scheduling or distance.

**List the obstacles you expect to face:**

### Step 4: Create ACT-based responses

For each obstacle, plan how you'll respond using tools from ACT. The goal isn't to get rid of obstacles — it's to change your relationship with them, so they don't stop you from acting on your values.

**ACT Tools to choose from:**

- Cognitive defusion:
  - I'm having the thought that...
  - Thanks, mind.





- Acceptance & willingness:
  - This is uncomfortable, but I can make space for it.
  - Try a physical gesture like Willing Hands or deep breathing.
- Values refocus:
  - This matters because...
  - This discomfort is part of the path toward something meaningful.

**Repeat for as many obstacles as needed.**

#### **Step 5: Choose a small, values-based action**

Now pick one small, specific step you're willing to take — even if fear or discomfort comes along for the ride.

**Ask yourself:**

- What's one thing I can do this week to move in this direction?
- What's doable, even if things don't feel perfect?
- What would keep me aligned with who I want to be?

**Your small next step:**



### Step 6: Reflect and revise

After you take the step, check in with yourself. Use this reflection to learn, adapt, and plan your next move.

#### Ask yourself:

- What happened when I took the step?
- What worked or surprised me?
- Did any new obstacles show up?
- What do I want to do differently next time?

#### Reflection: