




The Two Perspectives Exercise – Meeting the Observer Self

ACT

 Exercise

 45-60 min

 Client or group

 No

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) defines the “self-as-context” (or observer self) as the stable perspective from which a person observes their internal experiences, such as thoughts, emotions, and memories, without being defined or consumed by them [1]. Unlike the conceptualized self (e.g., “I am anxious,” “I’m a failure”), the observing self is the nonjudgmental witness to all experience, providing a sense of continuity, especially during distress [2].

Hayes et al. [3] emphasize that developing self-as-context increases psychological flexibility as the core process underpinning ACT’s effectiveness. Clients who experience this perspective often describe increased self-compassion and reduced fusion with painful thoughts. Group-based ACT studies, such as Lewin et al. [4], suggest exercises invoking multiple perspectives (e.g., journaling dialogues or chair work) can successfully build self-as-context, reducing experiential avoidance and increasing resilience.

Clinical applications, including ACT for caregivers of individuals with dementia [5], illustrate that exposure to observer self experiences enhances emotional regulation and allows individuals to engage in values-based actions despite suffering. The mindful action plan [6] also shows the importance of integrating this self-perspective to foster compassionate, values-aligned productivity.

This exercise is designed to guide clients through a structured experiential process that contrasts their content-based self (e.g., “I am my thoughts and emotions”) with their context-based self (the perspective from which they notice these experiences). Through dialogue, chair work, and mindful observation, clients gain experiential insight into their inherent capacity to observe without judgment, thus loosening cognitive fusion and fostering greater psychological flexibility [1, 2].



Author

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



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients experientially contact their observer self (self-as-context) by engaging in a structured “two perspectives” dialogue using an empty chair technique. By doing so, clients can reduce cognitive fusion, increase psychological flexibility, and relate to their thoughts and emotions with greater perspective, compassion, and openness.



Advice

- This exercise can be conducted as a dialogue in a one-to-one session with a client, or in a workshop format in pairs, with a group sharing at the reflection stage (see *step 7*). An MP3 is included that you can share as a homework exercise.
- This exercise should be introduced gently, especially for clients new to ACT or those struggling with intense self-criticism. Clients may find the experience emotionally rich or surprising, so therapists should provide a compassionate and grounded container for exploration. It's often helpful to invite clients to notice, not analyze their experiences during the exercise, reinforcing that there's no “right” way to do it.
- Practitioners may consider guiding the exercise through voice (e.g., in-session or via audio recording) to facilitate experiential depth. Encourage clients to take their time, pause between sections, and journal afterward. If resistance or confusion arises, normalize it as part of the process. Follow-up discussions are important to help integrate insights and reinforce the distinction between observing and conceptualized self-experiences.



References

1. Hayes, S. C. (2019). *A liberated mind: How to pivot toward what matters*. Avery.
2. Harris, R. (2022). *The happiness trap 2nd edition: Stop struggling, start living*. Robinson.
3. Hayes, L. L., Ciarrochi, J. V., & Bailey, A. (2022). *What makes you stronger: how to thrive in the face of change and uncertainty using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.
4. Lewin, R. K., Acuff, S. F., Berlin, K. S., Berman, J. S., & Murrell, A. R. (2023). Group-based acceptance and commitment therapy to enhance graduate student psychological flexibility. *Journal of American College Health*, 71(1), 162-171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1881522>
5. Han, A., Yuen, H. K., Jenkins, J., & Yun Lee, H. (2022). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) guided online for distressed caregivers of persons living with dementia. *Clinical Gerontologist*, 45(4), 927-938. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07317115.2021.1908475>
6. Moran, D. J., & Ming, S. (2022). The mindful action plan: Using the MAP to apply acceptance and commitment therapy to productivity and self-compassion for behavior analysts. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 15(1), 330-338. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-020-00441-y>



The Two Perspectives Exercise – Meeting the Observer Self

Introduction

Sometimes, we get so caught up in our thoughts and feelings that we forget we are *not* those thoughts and feelings, we are the space where they happen.

(pause for 2 seconds)

This exercise will help you experience yourself from two perspectives: the “content self” (meaning the content of your usual inner experience such as thoughts, emotions, and thoughts about various aspects of your experience and your emotions) and the “observer self” (the calm, non-judging awareness that notices all of those experiences).

(pause for 2 seconds)

All you need to do this is curiosity and an open mind.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Step 1: Preparation

Find a quiet space where you can sit without interruption.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Have two chairs facing each other (or you can imagine doing this if space is limited).

(pause for 2 seconds)

Label one chair “Content Self” and the other “Observer Self.”

(pause for 2 seconds)

Step 2: Speak from the content self

Sit in the “Content Self” chair and speak aloud as if you were describing yourself and your current situation from your usual perspective. Reflect on the content of your experience by asking yourself:

- Is there a problem, challenge, or difficulty that concerns me right now?

(pause for 6 seconds)



- How does it affect my life at home, at work, and in my relationships?

(pause for 6 seconds)

- How am I feeling about that situation and life in general right now?

(pause for 6 seconds)

- If I could change it, what would I like to happen?

(pause for 6 seconds)

Allow your thoughts, feelings, and inner narrative or story to flow honestly and fully.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Step 3: Transition to the observer self

Now move to the “Observer Self” chair.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Take a deep breath. Notice what you feel in your body.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Looking at the content self chair say to yourself: *“I am noticing that there is a person over there having these thoughts and feelings about this challenging situation.”*

(pause for 6 seconds)

Describe what you observed the “Content Self” say, but without judgment or interpretation.

(pause for 2 seconds)

You can use phrases like:

- “I notice that this person feels overwhelmed.”

(pause for 2 seconds)

- “I see that they believe they are not enough.”

(pause for 2 seconds)

- “I notice tension in their shoulders when they speak.”

(pause for 2 seconds)

- “I see they hope the situation will change.”

(pause for 2 seconds)



Step 4: Continue the dialogue

Now, switch between chairs 2–3 again, letting each “self” respond.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Allow the Content Self to express what it wants, for example:

“I wish I was calmer, I wish I could solve this problem.”

(pause for 6 seconds)

And allow the Observer Self to simply notice the Content Self, reflect, and remain open, for example:

“I notice that person wants to feel better, and wants to solve their problem.”

(pause for 6 seconds)

“I notice that after returning from the observer chair, they are less tense.”

(pause for 6 seconds)

- You may wish to close your eyes while in the Observer chair to deepen awareness.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Then do this one more time. Sit in the Content Self chair again.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Allow the Content Self to express what it thinks, feels, and wants.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Sit in the Observer Self chair and see what you notice about the Content Self.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Step 5: Integration and reflection

After swapping chairs 3 times, sit in a neutral position and reflect:

- What was it like to speak from each perspective?

(pause for 6 seconds)



- Did anything shift in how I see myself?

(pause for 6 seconds)

- What did I learn about the part of me that notices?

(pause for 6 seconds)

Step 6: Closing affirmation

- End the exercise by stating aloud:

"I am not my thoughts. I am the one who observes. I can hold space for all that I experience."

(pause for 6 seconds)

You might want to journal to capture insights and strengthen the observer self experience.

Step 7: Reflection in session

Take time to reflect on your experience with the exercise and your connection to the observer self, either with your practitioner or by discussing it with a friend. Journaling is a good support for practice.