




## The Willingness Scale

 ACT

 Exercise

 10-20 min

 Client or group

 No

A foundational principle in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is the idea that psychological suffering often stems not from pain itself, but from our unwillingness to experience it [1]. ACT aims to increase psychological flexibility by fostering willingness, an open, accepting stance toward difficult internal experiences that arises when pursuing values-based goals. Willingness is not about liking discomfort; rather, it's about allowing pain to be present when it serves something we deeply care about [2].

Empirical studies support the efficacy of ACT in enhancing willingness and reducing experiential avoidance, which is a core feature of anxiety, depression, and addictive behaviors [3, 4, 5]. In particular, clients who learn to tolerate unwanted thoughts, feelings, and sensations while committing to valued actions report increased wellbeing and life satisfaction [6, 7].

The Willingness Scale is a tool to help clients examine their willingness to experience internal discomfort in specific situations where avoidance has become a barrier to growth. It invites reflection on the cost of avoidance, the meaning of values-based action, and the potential benefit of choosing willingness over control. This promotes greater insight, enhances motivation, and cultivates readiness for committed action [1, 2, 8].

You can use this tool after using the life deviation score tools, and/or in conjunction with values clarification and goal-setting tools. By rating their willingness to experience discomfort in their most valued life domains, clients begin to shift their stance from “I must feel better before I act” to “I am willing to act in the presence of discomfort if it serves what matters most to me.” [9].

This tool also integrates well with experiential practices like *Willing Hands* and *Expanding Space*, offering a cognitive bridge between embodied acceptance and real-world behavioral change.



### Author

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



## Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients assess their current willingness to experience discomfort in pursuit of valued action and to identify areas where increased willingness can support greater psychological flexibility and meaningful behavioral change.



## Advice

- This exercise should first be modelled and explored in a session, and then offered as a homework practice using the worksheet attached in *Appendix*. It can also be offered in a workshop with a group sharing at the reflection stage (see *step 7*).
- Before using this tool, it can be helpful to briefly introduce the ACT distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable; suffering often arises from the struggle to avoid pain. Invite clients to explore this gently, using language like “What if pain wasn’t the enemy?” or “What would it be like to make space for discomfort in the service of your values?”
- This exercise works well after values clarification or as a follow-up to experiential practices like *Willing Hands* or *Expanding Space*. Practitioners can guide clients through the scale, helping them reflect on specific values-driven goals and the internal barriers that arise. Use this opportunity to normalize discomfort and highlight the paradox of control: how efforts to avoid discomfort often increase it.
- Ensure clients know the scale is not about judgment. It’s a tool for enhancing self-awareness and growth. Low willingness scores are not “failures,” but opportunities for exploration. Repeating the tool periodically can help track shifts in willingness over time, especially with an ACT learning journal.



## 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. 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>
4. Berman, B. M., & Kurlancheek, K. (2021). The choice point model of acceptance and commitment therapy with inpatient substance use and co-occurring populations: A pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 758356. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.758356>
5. Moniz-Lewis, D. I., Carlon, H. A., Hebden, H., Tuchman, F. R., Votaw, V. R., Stein, E. R., & Witkiewitz, K. (2023). Third-wave treatments for impulsivity in addictive disorders: A narrative review. *Current Addiction Reports*, 10(2), 131-139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-023-00487-2>
6. 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>
7. Byrne, G., Ghráda, Á. N., O'Mahony, T., & Brennan, E. (2021). A systematic review of the use of acceptance and commitment therapy in supporting parents. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 94, 378-407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12282>
8. 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.
9. Caletti, E., Massimo, C., Magliocca, S., Moltrasio, C., Brambilla, P., & Delvecchio, G. (2022). The role of the acceptance and commitment therapy in the treatment of social anxiety: An updated scoping review. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 310, 174-182.



# The Willingness Scale

## Introduction

When something that matters deeply to us is challenged, like a relationship, our work, our creativity, or our sense of purpose, uncomfortable feelings often arise, like fear, self-doubt, anxiety, and shame. Unhelpful thoughts may also show up like 'I'm not good enough' or 'I might as well give up', or 'I'm such a loser'. Given how unpleasant these inner experiences are, we tend to try to avoid them. We might find ourselves reaching for comfort food, binge watching TV, scrolling social media, or reaching for a glass of wine or beer to numb out. However, these times are choice points. When facing challenges to what matters to us, we can avoid them or be willing to experience discomfort in the service of values-based action. This might entail having a difficult conversation, asking for help or support, or admitting mistakes and making amends. Over time, avoidance can cost us dearly, while values-based action takes us toward the kind of person we want to be.

This tool helps you gently explore:

- What meaningful actions you've been avoiding,
- What internal discomforts show up for you,
- And how you might begin choosing willingness over avoidance, one step at a time.

### Step 1: Choose a meaningful action

You can use this tool as a next step from values clarification. Think of something that's important to you that challenges you, that you often avoid because it brings discomfort. This action should connect to your values, not just goals or "shoulds." Ask yourself, "If I weren't uncomfortable, what would I be doing more of in my life?"

Examples:

- Telling someone how you really feel
- Applying for a job you want
- Saying "no" to something that drains you
- Expressing your needs or setting a boundary

Write your chosen action below:

I want to... \_\_\_\_\_

(because it connects to my value of \_\_\_\_\_.)



### Step 2: Identify internal barriers

What shows up inside you when you think about taking this action? These are your internal barriers, the thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, or memories that make it hard to move forward.

Some examples include:

- Thoughts: "I'll mess it up," "They'll think I'm weak," "This will end badly"
- Feelings: anxiety, guilt, irritation, overwhelm
- Sensations: tight chest, sweaty palms, racing heart
- Memories: past failures, rejections, criticism

Complete the sentence:

When I think about doing this, what shows up for me is...

### Step 3: Rate your willingness

On a scale of 0 to 10, how willing are you to allow those internal experiences (thoughts, emotions, sensations) if it means you can take this meaningful action?

There's no right or wrong score. This is just a snapshot to help you understand where you are right now.

- 0 = I'm not willing at all to experience these things
- 10 = I'm completely willing to experience whatever shows up

My willingness score is: \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

### Step 4: Explore the cost of avoidance

Now reflect: What has it cost you to avoid this discomfort? Avoidance often feels like relief in the short term, but over time, it can keep us stuck. So, what has not acting in line with your values taken away from you?



Think about:

- Missed opportunities
- Strained or broken relationships
- Impacts on your sense of integrity or self-confidence
- Regrets or repeated patterns

Now, finish the following sentence.

The cost of avoidance has been...

#### Step 5: Imagine choosing willingness

Take a moment to imagine: What might your life look like if you chose willingness instead of avoidance, even just a little?

What if you said to yourself, “I don’t have to feel great. I just have to show up for what matters.”

Reflect on what could become possible for you if you were willing to experience discomfort in service of what truly matters to you. Now finish the following sentence:

If I chose willingness, I might...

#### Step 6: Choose a small step

Now, choose one tiny, manageable step you could take toward this action, even if your willingness score is low.



Some examples include:

- Write a draft message (but don't send it yet)
- Practice saying one line out loud
- Set a date to revisit the action
- Tell someone you trust about your intention

Tiny steps matter. You don't have to do the whole thing at once.

Now finish the following sentence:

One small step I can take is...

#### Step 7: Reflect and track

After you take action (even a small one), reflect on what you learned:

- Did you feel more or less capable afterward?
- Did your willingness shift at all?
- What would you try next time?

Now finish the following sentence:

What I noticed or learned is...

My willingness now feels like: \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

Remember that you can repeat this exercise for other situations. The goal isn't to get rid of discomfort, it's to learn how to carry it as you move toward what matters most.



## Appendix: The Willingness Scale Worksheet

This tool helps you gently explore:

- What meaningful actions you've been avoiding,
- What internal discomforts show up for you,
- And how you might begin choosing willingness over avoidance, one step at a time.

### Step 1: Choose a meaningful action

Think of something that's important to you that challenges you, that you often avoid because it brings discomfort. This action should connect to your values, not just goals or "shoulds." Ask yourself, "If I weren't uncomfortable, what would I be doing more of in my life?"

*Examples: Telling someone how you really feel, applying for a job you want, saying "no" to something that drains you, or expressing your needs or setting a boundary*

Write your chosen action below:

I want to... \_\_\_\_\_

(because it connects to my value of \_\_\_\_\_.)

### Step 2: Identify internal barriers

What shows up inside you when you think about taking this action? These are your internal barriers, the thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, or memories that make it hard to move forward.

Some examples include:

- Thoughts: "I'll mess it up," "They'll think I'm weak," "This will end badly"
- Feelings: anxiety, guilt, irritation, overwhelm
- Sensations: tight chest, sweaty palms, racing heart
- Memories: past failures, rejections, criticism





Complete the sentence:

When I think about doing this, what shows up for me is...

### Step 3: Rate your willingness

On a scale of 0 to 10, how willing are you to allow those internal experiences (thoughts, emotions, sensations) if it means you can take this meaningful action?

There's no right or wrong score. This is just a snapshot to help you understand where you are right now.

- 0 = I'm not willing at all to experience these things
- 10 = I'm completely willing to experience whatever shows up

My willingness score is: \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

### Step 4: Explore the cost of avoidance

Now reflect: What has it cost you to avoid this discomfort? Avoidance often feels like relief in the short term, but over time, it can keep us stuck. So, what has not acting in line with your values taken away from you?

*Think about: missed opportunities, strained or broken relationships, impacts on your sense of integrity or self-confidence, regrets or repeated patterns*

Now, finish the following sentence:

The cost of avoidance has been...



### Step 5: Imagine choosing willingness

Take a moment to imagine: What might your life look like if you chose willingness instead of avoidance, even just a little?

What if you said to yourself, "I don't have to feel great. I just have to show up for what matters."

Reflect on what could become possible for you if you were willing to experience discomfort in service of what truly matters to you. Now finish the following sentence:

If I chose willingness, I might...

### Step 6: Choose a small step

Now, choose one tiny, manageable step you could take toward this action even if your willingness score is low.

*Some examples include: write a draft message (but don't send it yet), practice saying one line out loud, set a date to revisit the action, tell someone you trust about your intention*

Tiny steps matter. You don't have to do the whole thing at once.

Now finish the following sentence:

One small step I can take is...



### Step 7: Reflect and track

After you take action (even a small one), reflect on what you learned:

- Did you feel more or less capable afterward?
- Did your willingness shift at all?
- What would you try next time?

Now finish the following sentence:

What I noticed or learned is...

My willingness now feels like: \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

Remember that you can repeat this exercise for other situations. The goal isn't to get rid of discomfort, it's to learn how to carry it as you move toward what matters most.