



Using Life Deviation Scores to Take Action

📍 ACT

📖 Exercise

🕒 25-40 min

👤 Client

📊 No

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an evidence-based approach to alleviating psychological suffering that addresses a misalignment between how we live and what we truly value [1]. Rather than eliminating distress, ACT focuses on developing psychological flexibility, which is defined as the ability to engage in values-based action while being willing to be present with our thoughts and emotions, however uncomfortable they may be [2].

The concept of life deviation draws from values-based ACT work and highlights discrepancies between how valued a life domain is and how fulfilled we feel in that area. When our behavior veers too far from our values, whether due to avoidance, rigid thinking, or life circumstances, this misalignment generates what Wilson & Murrell (2004) describe as a values-based signal of distress [3].

Life deviation scores indicate the gap between how a client actually lives and how they'd like to live based on their values. The higher the life deviation score, the more attention needed to that valued life domain [1, 3]. In ACT, remedying life deviation scores in a specific life domain requires committed action in line with values-based goal setting [1].

Recent ACT research underscores the value of this type of assessment. Berman and Kurlancheek (2021) found that clarifying values and translating them into goals helped inpatient clients with co-occurring disorders regain a sense of purpose [4]. Similarly, Han et al. (2021) showed that values-based action planning and goal setting improved well-being among family caregivers [5]. Zakiei et al. (2021) also demonstrated ACT's ability to enhance emotional regulation and sleep patterns by helping clients act in line with personal values [6].

This exercise operationalizes those findings: once clients identify their top three life domains with the highest deviation scores, they are invited to clarify the underlying value and transform it into a long-term goal and three short-term, actionable steps. This process is supported by evidence showing that connecting daily behaviors to personal values increases engagement, motivation, and long-term success [7].

Rather than reacting to discomfort or setting goals driven by external expectations, this tool encourages clients to pivot toward a life of authenticity that honors what matters most [2].



Author

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



Goal

This exercise is a follow-up to the “Ranking Your Values and Life Deviation Scores” exercise. The goal of this exercise is to help clients transform value misalignments (life deviation scores) into meaningful long-term and short-term goals. By doing so, clients can engage in committed action and pivot toward a more value-congruent life based on real behavioral change.



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 worksheet that can be printed out for the client's use or copied as a template into a journal.
- To maximize the effectiveness of this tool:
 - Normalize emotional discomfort. Clients may feel guilt, regret, or sadness when they realize how far they've drifted from their values. Use the mindfulness check-in tool to help them stay grounded.
 - Use specific language and encourage goals that are behavior-based and measurable (e.g., “spend one evening a week with my partner” vs. “be a better spouse”).
 - Start small and remind clients that the aim isn't perfection but momentum. Even modest short-term goals can reignite a sense of meaning.
 - Connect to the choice point tool. Support clients in recognizing each goal-related action as a toward move: a choice to pivot in the direction of values, rather than away from discomfort.
 - Review and revise goals regularly. ACT teaches us to stay flexible. If a short-term goal doesn't work, modify it, don't abandon it.
- Encourage clients to treat this worksheet as a living document and a compass guiding them back to their values, even in the face of uncertainty or emotional pain.



References

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Introduction

This exercise is a follow-up to the “Ranking Your Values and Life Deviation Scores” assessment. You need your life deviation score worksheet to hand to turn insight into action. You’ve already identified the areas of life where your values are least fulfilled. In this exercise, you will use those insights to set values-based goals that move you toward a more fulfilling life. Use the worksheet supplied in *Appendix A* to complete the following steps.

Step 1: Identify your top three life domains

Look at your life deviation scores worksheet from the previous exercise. Choose the three life domains with the highest deviation scores. These are the areas of your life that are most in need of attention.

Step 2: Name the core value for each domain

Using the worksheet attached in *Appendix A* for each domain, name the specific value that matters to you.

Example: If the domain is *Health*, your value might be *Vitality*. You can use the values prompt sheet from the previous assessment for ideas.

Step 3: Write a long-term goal

For each value, define a long-term goal that expresses what it would look like to live in alignment with that value.

For example, in the life domain *health*, if your value is *vitality* your long term goal might be: “Maintain a balanced, energizing lifestyle that supports my physical and mental health.”

Step 4: Set three short-term goals

Next, break each long-term goal into three practical, actionable steps you can begin working on this week or month.

You can use the SMART goal format (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) as explained in the worksheet *Appendix B* to help set realistic short-term goals.



Example (Value: Connection, Domain: Romantic Relationships)

- Long-term goal: Spend more meaningful time with my partner to strengthen our connection.
 - Short-term goal 1: Plan a weekly date night on Friday evenings.
 - Short-term goal 2: Send a kind or appreciative message daily.
 - Short-term goal 3: Schedule one uninterrupted 30-minute conversation this week.

Step 5: Track and reflect

Revisit this worksheet weekly. Check in with yourself:

- Have I taken a step toward my goal this week?
- What obstacles came up?
- What helped me stay on track?

Use this awareness to adjust your next steps and stay committed to your values.



Appendix A: Life Deviations Scores and Setting Goals

This worksheet follows on from the *Ranking Your Values and Finding Your Life Deviation Score* worksheet. The areas of your life that are most in need of attention will have higher life deviation (LD) scores.

Use this worksheet to focus on your top three highest-scoring valued life domains. For each, choose a core value. For example, in the area of romantic relationships and partnerships, you may value *sharing*. However, you may find that you and your partner have not been sharing much time lately, perhaps due to work or other family commitments.

In this case, the value would be 'sharing' and to move in that valued direction, you can set long- and short-term goals that can be described as actions. The same follows with the two domains with the highest LD scores. Answer these questions to define your goals:

Highest-scoring value 1:

This value will be manifested in the following long-term goal:

Which, in turn, will be manifested in these three short-term goals:

1.	
2.	
3.	



Highest-scoring value 2:

This value will be manifested in the following long-term goal:

Which, in turn, will be manifested in these three short-term goals:

1.	
2.	
3.	

Highest-scoring value 3:

This value will be manifested in the following long-term goal:



Which, in turn, will be manifested in these three short-term goals:

1.	
2.	
3.	



Appendix B: The SMART Goal Format (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)

1: Be specific

What exactly do you want to achieve?

"I want to..."

Consider what success will look like.

2: Make it measurable

How will you know when the goal is achieved?

"I will measure success by..."

What will indicate progress?

3: Check for achievability

Is this goal realistic and within your control?

"This goal is achievable because..."

Consider whether you have the skills, time, and resources to do this.

4: Ensure it is relevant

Why is this goal important to you?

"This matters to me because..."

Consider how it connects to your values and current priorities.

5: Make it time-bound

By when will you achieve this goal?

"I will reach this goal by..."

Identify a deadline here.

6: Final SMART Goal Statement: Combine the pieces above into a clear SMART goal.

"I will [specific action] by [deadline], measured by [indicator], because [relevant reason], and I know it is achievable because [evidence of achievability]."