

# Acceptance Commitment Training (ACT)

## 01 What Is ACT?

ACT is about building psychological flexibility. ACT is considered a “third wave” therapy/training program that moves beyond traditional cognitive approaches and adds other skills into the mix (mindfulness, visualisation, personal values etc.).

CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and ACT are both behaviour-based approaches, but they differ primarily in the view they take around thoughts. Whereas CBT works by helping you identify and change negative or destructive thoughts, ACT holds that pain and discomfort are facts of life, something we must get comfortable with if we wish to live a happy, fulfilled life. For this reason, ACT encourages you to accept all thoughts rather than trying to change them, both the good and the bad.

ACT dovetails and works well using GROW and Re-GROW, coaching models. Another important aspect of ACT is the commitment to take action and bring positive changes into your life. ACT therapy will help you get clear on what is important to you and then create a plan that aligns with your values – ultimately bringing more meaning and purpose into your life.

## 02 Evidence for ACT?

Studies have shown that psychological flexibility predicts a wide range of work-related outcomes – including work attitudes, well-being, job performance and absence rates. ACT interventions have been shown to both increase psychological flexibility and:

- Reduce work-related emotional distress.
- Increase productivity and innovation.
- Increase transformational leadership behaviours
- Increase well-being and mental health.
- Improve team leadership, leading to increased organisational commitment and profit.
- Reduce unplanned absences from work for employees with chronic health problems.
- Increase the application of new learning to the job.
- Increase job satisfaction.
- Increase motivation and performance.
- Increase resilience and decrease the incidence of burnout.

## 03 Psychological flexibility

Psychological flexibility means “contacting the present moment fully as a conscious human being, and based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behaviour in the service of chosen values”. In everyday language, this means holding our thoughts and emotions more lightly and acting on longer-term values and goals rather than short-term impulses, thoughts, and feelings.

Why? Because thoughts and emotions tend to be unreliable indicators of long-term value. We have little control over them; they sometimes ebb and flow dramatically.

## 04 Coaching and Mentoring approaches

1. As a coach and mentor, am I trying to change the content of the individuals' thoughts and inner experiences, or am I trying to change their relationship with those inner experiences?
2. Is what we are doing in the service of helping them to live their freely chosen values?

To use ACT effectively as a coach and mentor, we suggest a set of higher-level skills such as but not limited to:

- Compassion for others and Compassion for self
- Genuinely curious
- Listen for non-verbal clues.
- Consciously assess psychological flexibility – how open and aware are you?
- Re-framing skills
- Helping the participant to be willing to sit with discomfort.
- Help the participant to have a wider perspective and see alternate points of view.
- Challenge the mindset, fixed vs growth.

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## 05 Using the Matrix

Note the horizontal line across the middle, AWAY  $\leftrightarrow$  TOWARDS. Everything below the line lies within our inner world, thoughts, and feelings. Everything above the line is around our behaviours – what we do and how we show up.

- This horizontal line also depicts where and how we move. How do we move towards or away from our Goals and Values?
- The vertical lines depict how we move from our thoughts and inner world to our actions and behaviours.
- Note that our Goals and Values are on the right-hand side.

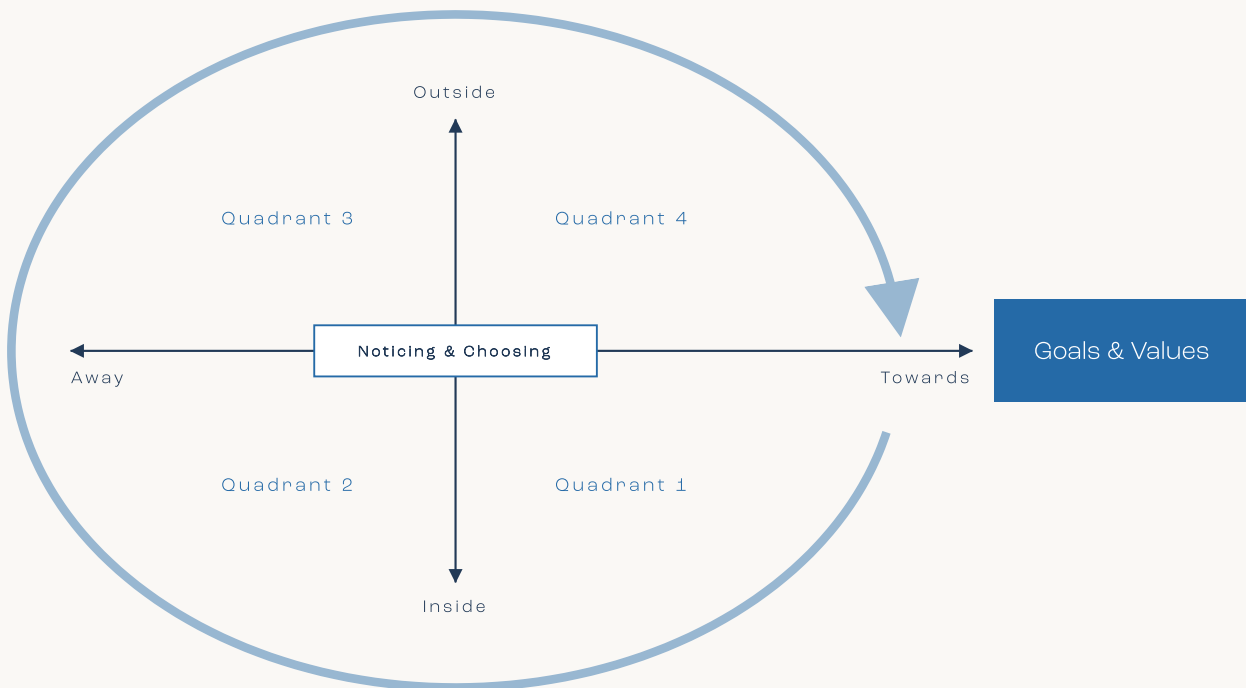
Start: 'Example' the ACT process    Goal: The individual wants to "get more clients."

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## 06 Quadrant 1

Matrix grid: Use a blank piece of paper to draw two lines as below (vertical and horizontal).

- Starting bottom right – using the above example of an individual goal, "get more clients". Write this into quadrant one along with a couple of the participant's values (for example- work-life balance, well-being, and health)
- Now move over to quadrant 2 (bottom left)



## 07 Quadrant 2 (notice and choose).

What is going on in the individual's head that is stopping them from achieving their goal; what is moving them away from their Goals and Values? How is fear showing up? What is getting in their way? Some of these examples could be as follows:

- I don't enjoy selling myself.
- Don't like the spotlight.
- Fear of failure or rejection
- What will people say if I fail?
- Imposter syndrome
- I haven't done this before.
- Not good enough
- It is not what I usually do.
- I may need the answers.
- Outside of my comfort zone

In this quadrant, we observe feelings; these are things that may distract us from our goal, feelings we can't control. The important thing to stress here is not to get entangled in your thoughts, this state is called 'Fusion', where thoughts dominate us, and these don't always represent the reality of the situation. These thoughts focus our attention on the contents of our mind, not on our five senses, what is happening in the real world. By submitting to this, we can get dragged into a negative spiral where our inner world takes over.

## 08 The hard part.

De-fusion is where we observe our thoughts for what they are, the products of a busy mind. The skill here is noticing, neglecting, and accepting, in many ways, 'calling them out'. The challenge here is to be sufficiently curious, adopt an open and challenging mindset, and be receptive to new information and ideas as they arrive, even when unpleasant.

We don't necessarily need to question or understand these ideas, they are what they are, and there may be many. The end of this process is asking yourself, are these thoughts helping me move towards, or away from, my Goals and Values?

ACT teaches you to become more inquisitive of your thoughts and techniques for diffusing them. Different techniques for this might include:

- Saying a complex thought aloud over and over until its meaning vanishes and only the sound remains.
- Learning to recognise a thought for what it is, for example, changing "No one likes me" to "I have the thought that...."
- Teaching you how to develop a relationship with the things you struggle with rather than fight against them – like anxiety, for example.

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## 09 Quadrant 3

What are some of the behaviours and actions the participant is doing that is moving them away from their Goals and Values? Examples of this might be the following:

- Busy being busy through not achieving goals
- Putting off
- Prioritising other work
- Not following through
- Avoiding
- Waiting for someone else
- Excuses

## 10 Quadrant 4

Finally, what could the coach or mentor do to help the individual towards their Goals and Values? What actions or areas can I help them with which could help them in their journey? Can we make ourselves accountable to help the individual achieve them? Can we list them, prioritise them and scale them? Following our example, the individual may write:

- Prepare my pitch – different versions.
- Prepare a list of potential clients, and talk the list through with someone else – does this make sense now?
- Share with colleagues – even share this exercise. Does this make sense now?
- Create a marketing deck.
- Create marketing flyers.
- Decide what approach is appropriate for each contact.
- Do I have any questions about the content of my product or service?
- Am I part of a team? If so, do I need help? Would I like help? Would this be more effective with a partner?
- Note our priority may not be the same as someone else's.
- Create time frames for follow-up.

When using scaling – get the individual to scale each of these action points on a scale of 1-10:

(10 = ready for action step, 1 = not ready, 5 = almost ready. Ask for constructive points- what would it take to move the score).

