

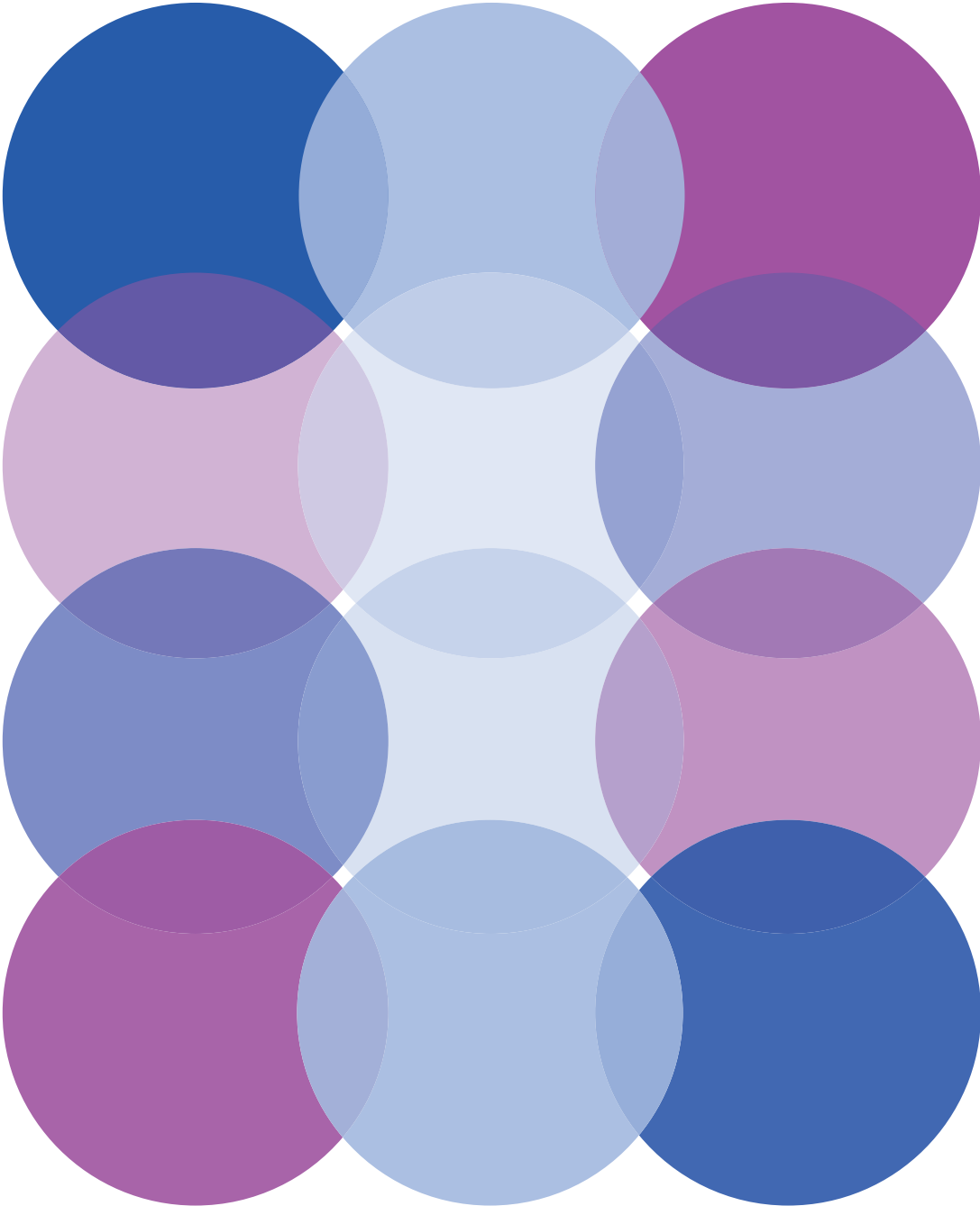
Reclaim Your Life

ACCEPTANCE & COMMITMENT THERAPY in 7 WEEKS

Strategies to
Manage Depression,
Anxiety, PTSD,
OCD, and More

CARISSA GUSTAFSON, PsyD

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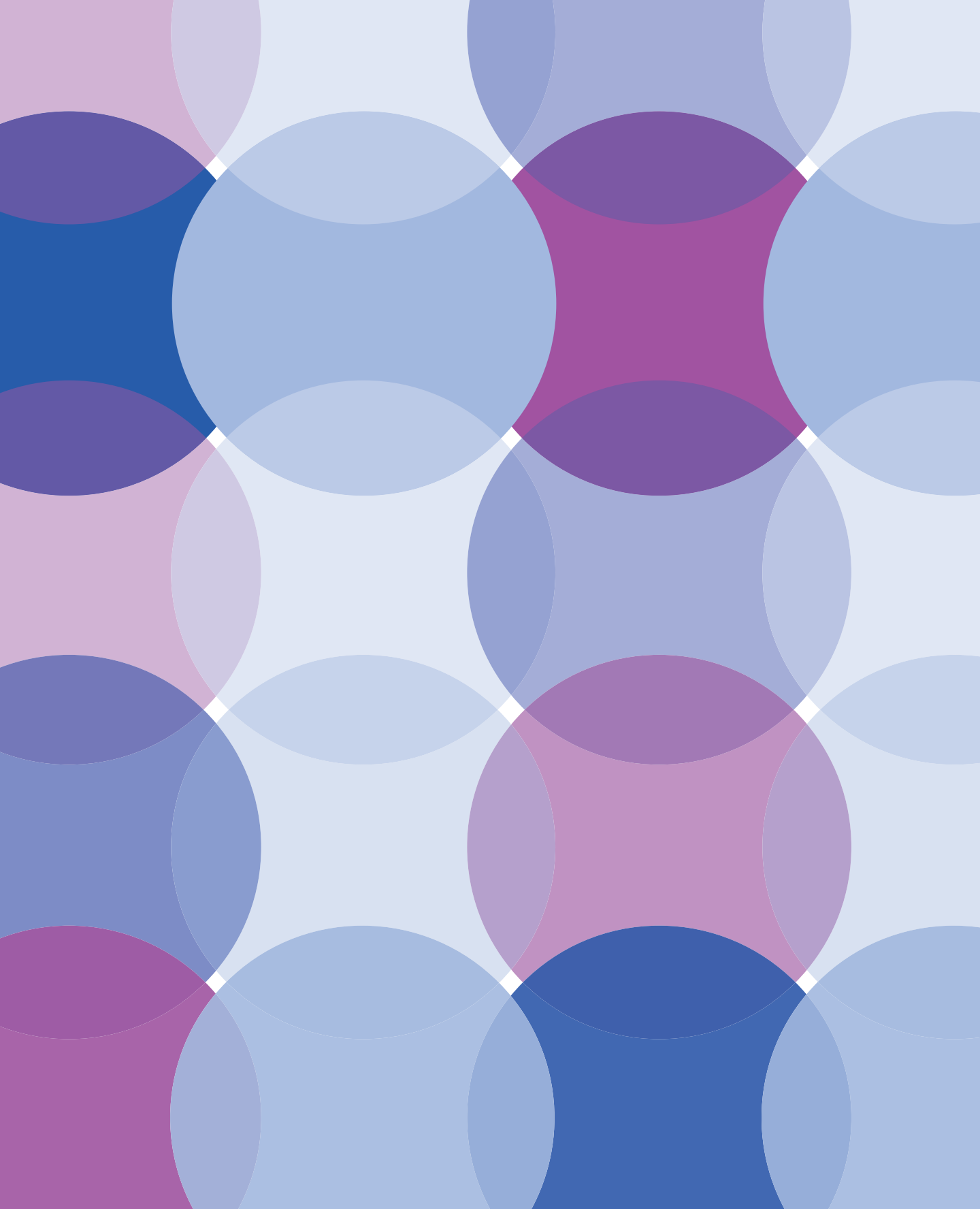
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To everyone who thinks they don't have anything to say.
May you learn to use your voice.



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INTRODUCTION + HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I am a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in third wave cognitive behavioral therapies like acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). I received training in ACT as a part of my doctoral education as well as formal training by one of the main founders of ACT, Steven C. Hayes, as well as others, such as Robyn Walser.

My passion for ACT comes from the unique way it addresses human pain and suffering. In the ACT model, pain is seen as a part of the human experience, whereas suffering is not, or as Buddha put it, “pain is inevitable; suffering is not.” In ACT there is an acceptance of pain as a part of the human experience while simultaneously focusing on living a meaningful life consistent with your values. For many people, the notion that pain is a part of life, while a bit of a letdown, can be liberating. There isn’t anything wrong with you; you are just human! Welcome to the human experience. It’s hard. Although we are not going to get rid of unhappiness or other kinds of difficult emotional experiences, by embracing the human experience, with its “10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows,” as the Buddha described it, we can find liberation from suffering and work toward a life filled with meaning and purpose.

ACT has been extensively researched and offers support for a wide range of issues, including depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and even psychosis. Mindfulness, which is a major component of ACT, has an even broader range of benefits, including reduced stress and decreased rumination—circular, unproductive thoughts that are often associated with depression

and anxiety. Mindfulness also helps people think about things in ways that are more flexible and reduces emotional reactivity. Who doesn't need that?

The great thing about ACT, which makes it effective for a number of mental health issues, is that rather than focusing on symptoms and symptom reduction, it focuses on changing how you cope with your experience. When people experience some kinds of discomfort—distressing thoughts or feelings, for example—they typically try to avoid them. While it makes sense to avoid discomfort, it often backfires. For example, alcohol is a common way of dealing with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. If you are feeling bored, dissatisfied, or irritated, have a drink, right? What's the problem? Well, if it becomes habitual, you may very well end up abusing alcohol, which only creates more problems. You might alienate friends or family or even develop health complications and never learn a healthier way of relating to your thoughts and feelings. Substance abuse is far from the only example. With OCD, individuals engage in compulsive behaviors like handwashing, for instance, to reduce the distress they are experiencing related to fear of germs and contamination, but can end up losing hours each day that could be spent pursuing more meaningful things. With post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), individuals often avoid thoughts, images, and memories associated with trauma, and yet that behavior often leads to increased distress in the form of intrusive nightmares and flashbacks, and potentially a very narrowed, restricted life. With social anxiety disorder, people avoid the discomfort associated with social situations only to

find themselves longing for connection. Are you starting to see a pattern? Avoiding uncomfortable thoughts and emotions, while understandable, doesn't work very well.

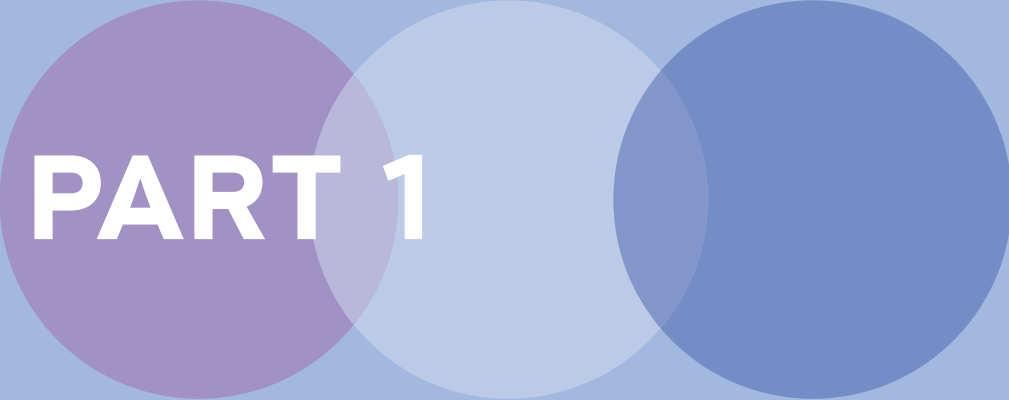
In ACT, the focus is less about changing your thoughts and feelings and more about learning how to relate to your thoughts and feelings so they are no longer getting in the way of pursuing the things that are important to you. For example, an individual with OCD may continue to experience obsessive thoughts, but, using mindfulness skills, can notice the thoughts without being distressed by them.

Whatever you are struggling with, whether it is stress, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, OCD, social anxiety disorder, PTSD, or just learning to relate to your emotions in a healthier way, ACT is for you.

Part 1 of this book is your Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Starter Guide. Here, I will explain the ACT model, introduce you to each of the six core processes, and help you understand how ACT applies to you. Part 1 lays the groundwork for part 2 of the book, the 7-week program. Each of the first six weeks covers one of the six core processes of ACT. Throughout these six weeks, you will come to understand that your thoughts are not reality, how to get unstuck, how to use mindfulness to be present in the moment, how to observe your own experience, how to figure out your values, and how to take ACTION. The seventh and final week focuses on bringing it all together so you can continue to practice going forward. Each of the six weeks that covers a core process is



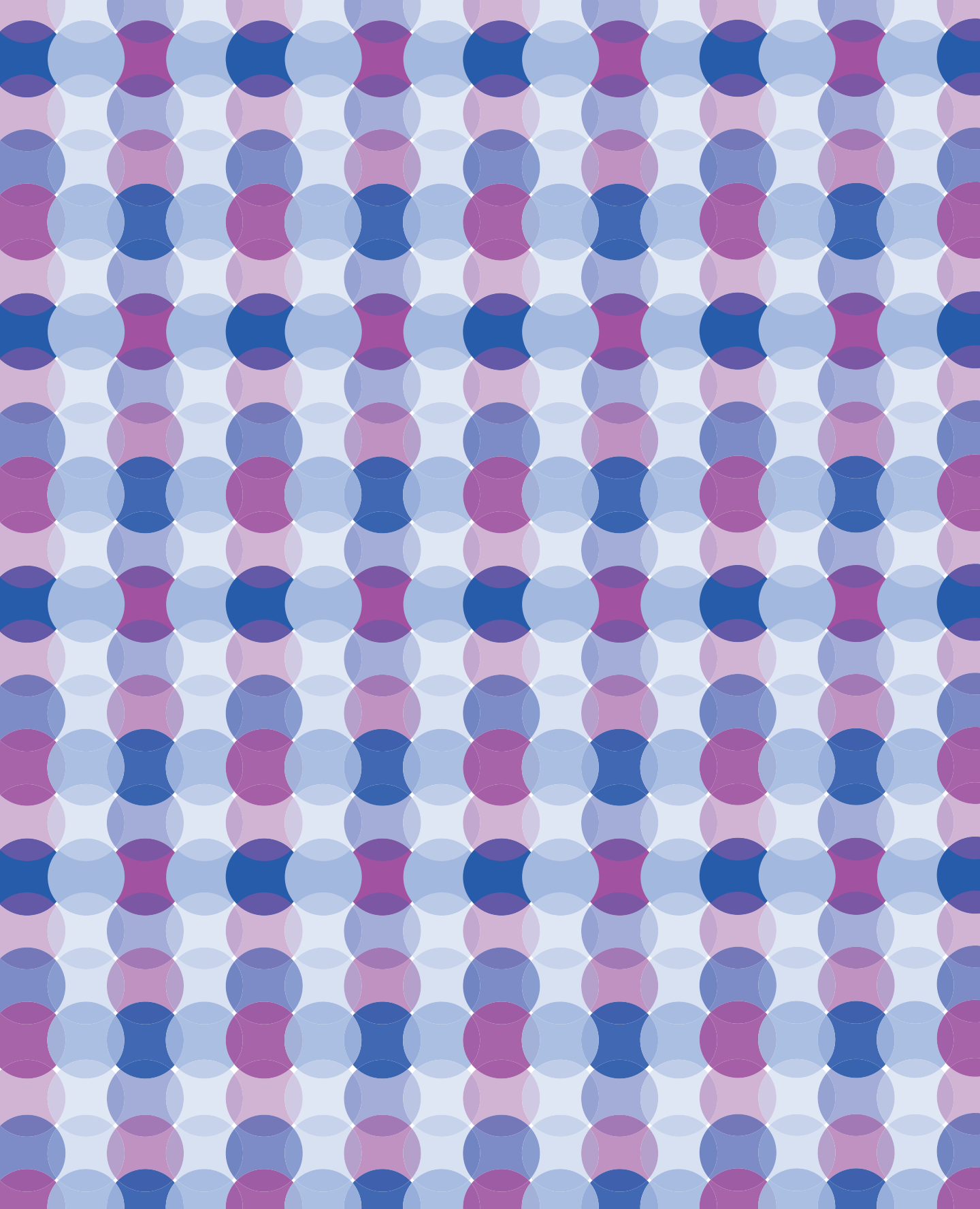
packed with strategies for you to practice and includes questions for reflection. Try to take time to read through each chapter and practice the different strategies each week. I know it is tempting, but please don't skip ahead. Give yourself time to absorb what you are learning and be patient with yourself as you make changes throughout the 7-week program. The strategies you will learn in this book will help you learn how to relate to your experience in a new way and move toward a fulfilling life. Let's get started.



PART 1

YOUR ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY STARTER GUIDE

Part 1 of this book will help familiarize you with acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT, as it will be referred to throughout the book, and which is pronounced “act” rather than the separate letters “A-C-T”. This signifies the importance of ACTION. Most important, in part 1, you will learn about how ACT can be helpful for you and your particular situation.



CHAPTER 1

All About ACT

In this chapter, you'll find an overview of ACT. This includes its origins, underlying theory, supporting evidence, and six core processes, which will provide a framework for the following weeks. You'll also learn what makes ACT unique among therapeutic approaches.

THE ORIGINS OF ACT

Where did ACT come from? ACT was developed by Steven C. Hayes, Kelly Wilson, and Kirk Strosahl in the mid- to late-1980s. This makes it a relatively new therapy.

ACT is a part of the cognitive behavioral tradition. What does that mean? Well, it began with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which was first developed in the 1960s by Aaron T. Beck. CBT focuses on helping people recognize and challenge their unhelpful thought patterns in order to change their emotions and help them engage in more healthy behaviors.

The idea is that your thinking affects your mood, which affects your behavior, which affects your mood, and so on. For example, if you have the thought “I am boring and no one would want to be my friend or be interested in me” you would probably feel down and be very unlikely to socialize, which would only make you feel more down. But if you challenge your thinking and tell yourself something more realistic, like “While not everyone is going to like me, there are people who seem to enjoy my company. Maybe I’m not so boring,” your mood will improve and you will be more likely to socialize, which will make you feel better.

That sounds great, right? But it isn’t always easy to just change your thoughts. In fact, sometimes the inability to change your thoughts can make you feel like there is something wrong with you and make you feel even worse about yourself or more hopeless about your situation. However, there is another solution: acceptance.

ACT AT A GLANCE

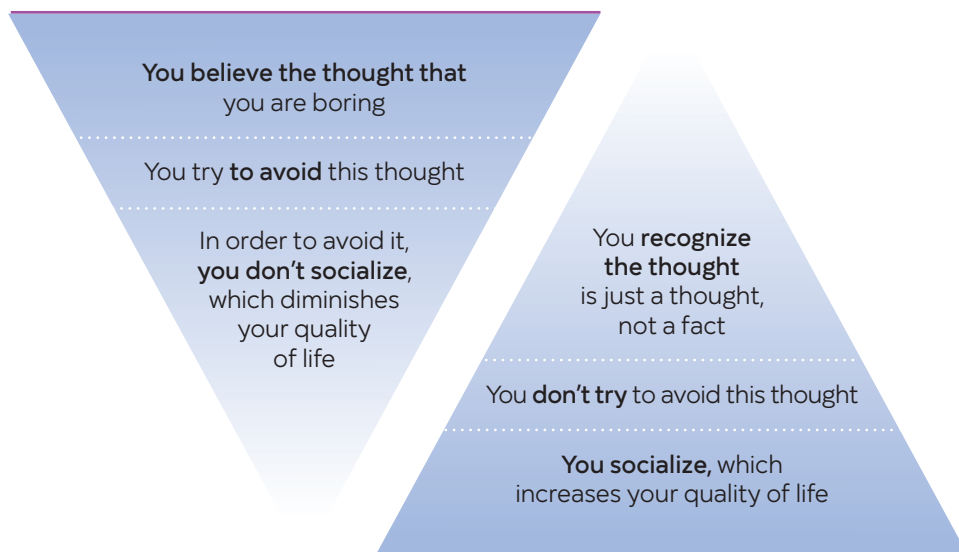
ACT is less focused on changing your thoughts and more focused on using acceptance and mindfulness strategies to increase flexibility in your thinking. Using ACT, you would recognize that thoughts are just stories or narratives you have developed and not the absolute truth. Let’s examine a thought and see how ACT would approach it differently:

“I am boring and no one would want to be my friend or be interested in me.”

ACT would ask you to notice this thought as a mental event rather than try to change your thinking. You don't have to buy into it or believe it. It isn't a fact. It is just a thought and it is okay to have thoughts like this sometimes—everyone does. You are human and there is nothing wrong with you for having this thought.

ACT uses commitment and behavioral change strategies to help people take ACTION toward the things that are meaningful and important to them. In this example, the person would commit to socializing with others because it is meaningful and important to them.

This illustration shows what happens when people believe their thoughts rather than recognize that they are just thoughts. When people believe the stories their mind tells them, they develop very rigid, fixed, or inflexible thinking, and their behavior can become similarly constricted. As a result, they stop moving toward the things they want for themselves and that might help bring them more fulfillment. If you rigidly believed the thought “I am boring and no one would want to be my friend or be interested in me,” you would probably spend a lot of time alone, which only keeps you stuck. But you don't have to believe your thoughts. And you don't need to let your thoughts dictate or control your ACTIONS. You can choose to recognize it as a mental event and choose to still be socially engaged, leading to a fuller, more meaningful life, as illustrated here.



A well-known metaphor often used in ACT called “Passengers on the Bus” can also help illustrate the ACT model. You are a bus, moving through life, and you pick up various passengers. Not all of these passengers are especially pleasant. You may pick up passengers such as shame or inadequacy. You may pick up the “You’re not good enough” passenger or the “hopelessness” passenger who screams from the back of the bus, “What’s the point of even trying?” You may have an “anxiety” passenger who tells you it’s safer not to drive at all. The point is that they’re passengers. They are not driving the bus. *You* are driving the bus and you get to decide where you’re going. The passengers you have picked up do not have to control or dictate your life. Although you may not be able to change your thoughts or get rid of your passengers, why not learn how to take them for a ride?

LANGUAGE AND SUFFERING

What does language have to do with suffering? Let me explain. Unlike animals, humans have a storytelling mind. This allows us to do many wonderful things, like make plans and solve problems. However, it also has the potential to increase suffering. How? Well, having a storytelling mind can get us into trouble because we often end up creating untrue stories or narratives, such as the thought, “I am boring.” If we believe our storytelling mind, we might end up trying to avoid the painful thoughts and feelings it invokes, thus restricting and diminishing the quality of our life, as illustrated in the example above.

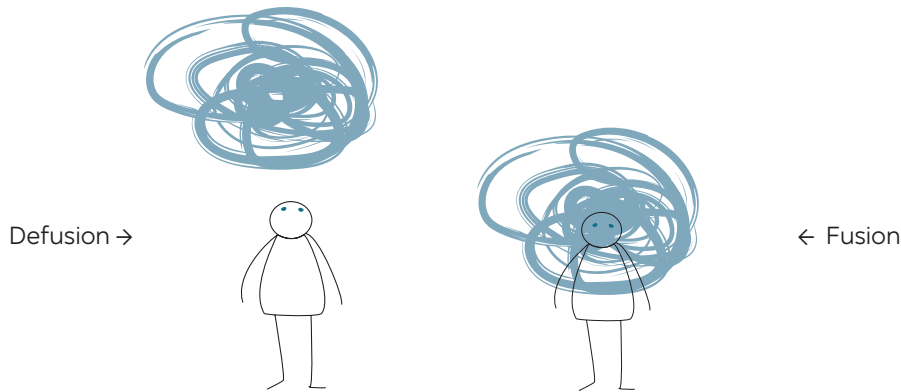
ACT IS AN EVIDENCE-BASED THERAPY

What is an evidence-based therapy? It means that ACT has been subjected to scientific studies and its effectiveness is supported by scientific evidence. ACT has been proven effective for a number of conditions, including depression, anxiety, OCD, and psychosis. You can learn more about the research and empirical support for ACT at the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS) website or at the American Psychological Association (APA) Division 12: Society of Clinical Psychology website, both of which can be found on the Resources section (page 165) at the back of the book.

THE SIX CORE PROCESSES

There are six core processes that guide ACT, which provide the structure for the 7-week program in this book. Each of the first six weeks focuses on one core process and the seventh week ties them all together. Before we get started, let's review the core processes.

The six core processes of ACT are 1) defusion, 2) acceptance, 3) present moment, 4) observer self, 5) values, and 6) committed ACTION. I know some of these terms are probably new and may sound funny. Don't worry, I will walk you through each one. I'll also explain psychological flexibility, which is considered the goal of ACT.



1 Defusion

Defusion is the ability to take a step back and observe your thinking rather than get lost or tangled up in it. Above is an illustration of me being “fused” with my thoughts versus me being “defused” from my thoughts. The goal is to become defused from our thoughts to help create more flexibility in our thinking. This allows us to see our thoughts as thoughts and allow them to guide us, if they are helpful, rather than to dominate us and dictate our ACTIONS.

2 Acceptance

Acceptance is about allowing your experience to happen rather than avoiding or resisting it, even if it is difficult. That means that when unpleasant thoughts, memories, images, emotions, urges, impulses, and physical sensations show up, you welcome them in. This reminds me of one of my absolute favorite poems, “The Guest House,” by Rumi. In the poem, different experiences show up at your door. It might be an experience of joy, or it could also be an experience of great sorrow. But whatever it is, it is temporary. The challenge is to invite each in as a part of your experience, and not turn them away. Can you welcome the visitors that show up at your door? I know it can be hard. I know there is a tendency to want to shut the door. So why invite them in? Why not avoid or resist? In short, because pain is a part of the human experience. You might as well embrace it.

3 Present Moment

This process is about making contact with the present moment. You might be thinking, how do I make contact with the present moment? Am I not already making contact with the present moment? Well, how present are you right now, really? As you are reading these words are you actually making contact with the present moment or are you somewhere off in your own mind? Maybe you have traveled into the past and are recalling a memory. Or maybe you have traveled somewhere into the future and are planning or imagining. Maybe you are having a conversation in your mind with someone who isn’t even here right now. None of these examples represent making contact with the present moment. Making contact with the present moment is being present with whatever is actually a part of your present-moment experience, whether it is your external environment (i.e., your surroundings) or your internal environment (i.e., your thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations). This book will teach you how to make more contact with your present-moment experience rather than resisting it, avoiding it, or simply getting lost in your own mind, all of which create suffering.

4 Observer Self

Observer self gets a little bit abstract and can be difficult to wrap your head around. Basically, it is the part of you that observes the mind, as opposed to the

part of you that gets lost in the mind, or the “thinking self.” Can you connect with your observer self? What are you thinking? Can you notice that you are having thoughts rather than just thinking them? This is the observer self.

5 Values

Values are what you care about; they are the things that are important to you. They bring a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. Everyone’s values are different. Values are also different from goals—goals can be accomplished, whereas values are ongoing and provide direction for how you want to live your life. For example, a goal may be to lose weight or exercise three to five times a week, whereas a value is physical and mental health. Values typically fall into certain areas or domains of one’s life; such as family, intimate relationships, parenting, friendships, education, employment, recreation, health, spirituality, and community.

6 Committed ACTION

Committed ACTION means making a commitment to move in the direction of your values despite whatever discomfort might arise as a result of doing so. People often know both what they value and what ACTIONS are needed, but fear or discomfort gets in the way. For example, you might know that you value intimate relationships, but difficult thoughts, insecurities, and feelings of inadequacy interfere and, as a result, you don’t date. Committed ACTION can be both external in terms of behaviors and internal in terms of the way in which you relate to yourself and your inner experience. For example, if one of my values is mental health, I may need to commit to getting out of my mind, which tells me a story like “this person wronged me,” and learn how to be present with my pain, grief, and loss. ACT requires making a commitment to move toward discomfort in the service of living out your values with the goal of creating a less restricted and more full, expansive, and meaningful life.

BECOMING FLEXIBLE

We made it all the way to the goal of ACT, psychological flexibility. What is psychological flexibility? It is the ability to think about things in a way that

is less rigid and with less attachment. This is important because it helps us act in a way that is flexible and ACTing flexibly allows us to move toward the things that bring us meaning.

YOU ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS

I know this may be a novel idea, but you are *not* your thoughts. Right now, you might be pretty attached to or “fused” with your thinking. Maybe you think that you *are* your thoughts and have no idea what I am talking about. That’s okay. We will work on that.

First of all, your thoughts are only one aspect of your awareness and they certainly do not define you. Your awareness also includes your emotions and physical sensations. Can you think of anything that is in your present awareness that could not be categorized as a thought, an emotion, or a physical sensation?

Note that emotions and physical sensations often overlap because they share the space of the body. In fact, one way of thinking about emotions is that they are experienced largely through physical sensations in the body. The next time you experience an emotion, notice how it feels in the body. Notice what tells you that you are sad, lonely, disappointed, disgusted, excited, or afraid. How are you experiencing emotions in the body? Is there a heaviness in the chest, a lump in your throat? This is a great way to make contact with the present moment.

Not only are you not your thoughts, but your thoughts are not even necessarily reflective of reality. Humans are equipped with an amazing mind that has the capacity to create stories and narratives, but this can become problematic, particularly if we buy into or believe our thoughts. For example, I might have a thought while in a yoga class that I am the best yogi in the room, and at other times think that I am lazy, out of shape, and taking more breaks than anyone else. In fact, these thoughts might occur in the same class, just a few minutes apart. They are both just stories. What are some of the stories your mind tells you? How much do you believe them?

You might also bring awareness to the thoughts you dismiss versus those you buy into or believe. I would venture to guess that there is a bit of bias in your thinking. You see, in addition to having this amazing mind that helps us plan and problem solve, it also has a tendency to create potentially problematic narratives. We humans also have something known as a negativity bias. Why do we have a negativity bias? It evolved in much the same way the storytelling mind did—it helps us to survive. It is helpful for us to mistake a stick in the grass for a snake, even when it is not, but generally speaking, assuming the worst-case scenario does not make us the happiest people. So, what can we do about the negativity bias? We can use the same strategies we have been talking about—the six core processes of ACT.

Hopefully, we have established that you don't need to believe every little thought that shows up in your mind. What a nightmare that would be! And if that nightmare is your reality right now, don't worry. It doesn't have to be that way. There is another way and I will show you how, starting in week 1. Remember defusion? This skill, which is essentially the ability to disentangle yourself from your thoughts and observe rather than react to them, is an important starting point and will be the focus of the first week, which we will build upon and fine-tune throughout the 7-week program.

YOUR EMOTIONS ARE NOT THE PROBLEM

You are supposed to have feelings. Your emotions also evolved to help you survive. Sadness indicates a kind of loss and helps people slow down in order to heal. Fear indicates some type of danger and helps people fight, flee, or freeze. Anger indicates that some type of boundary has been crossed (for example, someone is taking advantage of you) and helps you protect or advocate for yourself. Guilt, as unpleasant as it is, indicates that we have done something inconsistent with our values and can help us make repairs by apologizing. And let's not forget about the positive emotions, either. Hopefully it's pretty obvious, but feelings like happiness, love, and joy help us move toward and maintain things that are good for us, like connections with other human beings. Again, it comes down to survival.

EMOTION	WHAT IT INDICATES	WHAT IS NEEDED
Sadness	Loss	Slow down and heal
Fear	Danger	Fight, Flight, Freeze
Anger	Boundary violation	Protect or advocate for yourself
Guilt	You've acted inconsistently with your values	Make repairs, apologize
Happiness, Love, Joy	Our need for connection	Making and maintaining bonds

For whatever reason, people tend to downplay the importance of their emotions when emotions are, in fact, an incredibly complex and important system in terms of our survival. It's natural to want to avoid painful experiences, but when we are talking about inner experiences, such as thoughts and feelings, it is important that we allow, accept, and embrace them. Not only because ignoring them results in us ignoring important information regarding our needs, but also because resisting these experiences prolongs and intensifies them.

TOWARD A MEANINGFUL LIFE

If you are not your thoughts and your feelings are not the problem, where does that leave you? When you recognize that your thoughts are not facts, just mental events, and your feelings are not problematic, but rather important information, this frees you up to experience them. You don't need to be afraid of difficult thoughts or emotions—they're just elements of your awareness and a normal part of being human. Not only do you not need to fear them, but paying attention to your feelings is important because they are trying to tell you something. Allowing yourself to experience these difficult things will reduce your need to avoid and resist them, and guess what? This is what will allow you the flexibility needed to move toward living your values.

WHY ACT?

Now that you know the basics, let's look at some of the important reasons to practice ACT.

ACT IS EMPIRICAL

ACT has been scientifically studied and researched. It has been proven effective for a wide range of issues, including stress, depression, anxiety, OCD, social anxiety disorder, and substance abuse, among others.

ACT IS BRIEF

When people think of therapy, they often imagine a process that stretches out years and years, but it doesn't need to be like that. Through ACT, people have received brief interventions, meaning treatments for a number of weeks—not years—before it is effective.

ACT MEETS YOU WHERE YOU ARE

ACT is flexible, meaning that it meets you at your level. The same ACT strategies that address depression can also help manage other issues, like psychosis.

ACT DOESN'T TRY TO CHANGE YOU

Unlike other behavioral therapies, ACT doesn't try to change you. That doesn't mean that ACT doesn't involve change—it does, largely in the form of taking ACTion—but it doesn't change your thoughts or feelings. ACT is about changing the way you *relate* to your thoughts and feelings. It is about learning how to accept your thoughts and feelings and commit to taking value-driven ACTion. Remember the “passengers on the bus” metaphor? We don't kick the passengers off the bus, we take them for a ride—hopefully a pretty wild one!

ACT INCORPORATES MINDFULNESS

ACT is also unique in that it incorporates mindfulness. What is mindfulness? My favorite definition of mindfulness is the one used by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who brought mindfulness techniques into the health care system through the program Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). He defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” There are many benefits to mindfulness,

including reduced or more adaptive responses to stress, reduced rumination, decreased depression and anxiety, increased positive emotions, improved focus and memory, less emotional reactivity, improved emotional regulation, and more cognitive flexibility. Do some of these benefits sound familiar? Remember, the goal of ACT is psychological flexibility. Mindfulness is a major part of ACT. It informs many of the core processes of ACT, including defusion, acceptance, present moment, and observer self, which you will be learning more about throughout the 7-week program.

ACT FOCUSES ON VALUES AND COMMITMENTS

ACT is all about living your life in a way that is consistent with your values and committing to the things that matter to you most. It is about living a more meaningful life by doing things such as going to the party despite being socially anxious. In this way, ACT is not just insight-oriented—it is ACTion-oriented.

ACT CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

ACT can happen anywhere, anytime. You don't need anything special to practice ACT—just your brain. You can do it on your commute, waiting in line, etc. For example, I'll give you a preview of and introduce you to a quick and easy defusion technique, in which you thank your mind. When you notice your mind telling you things about yourself (that you are lazy or stupid, for example), you don't have to buy into it, you can simply notice it, say "Thank you, mind," and move on.

ACT CAN HELP ALMOST ANYONE WITH ANYTHING

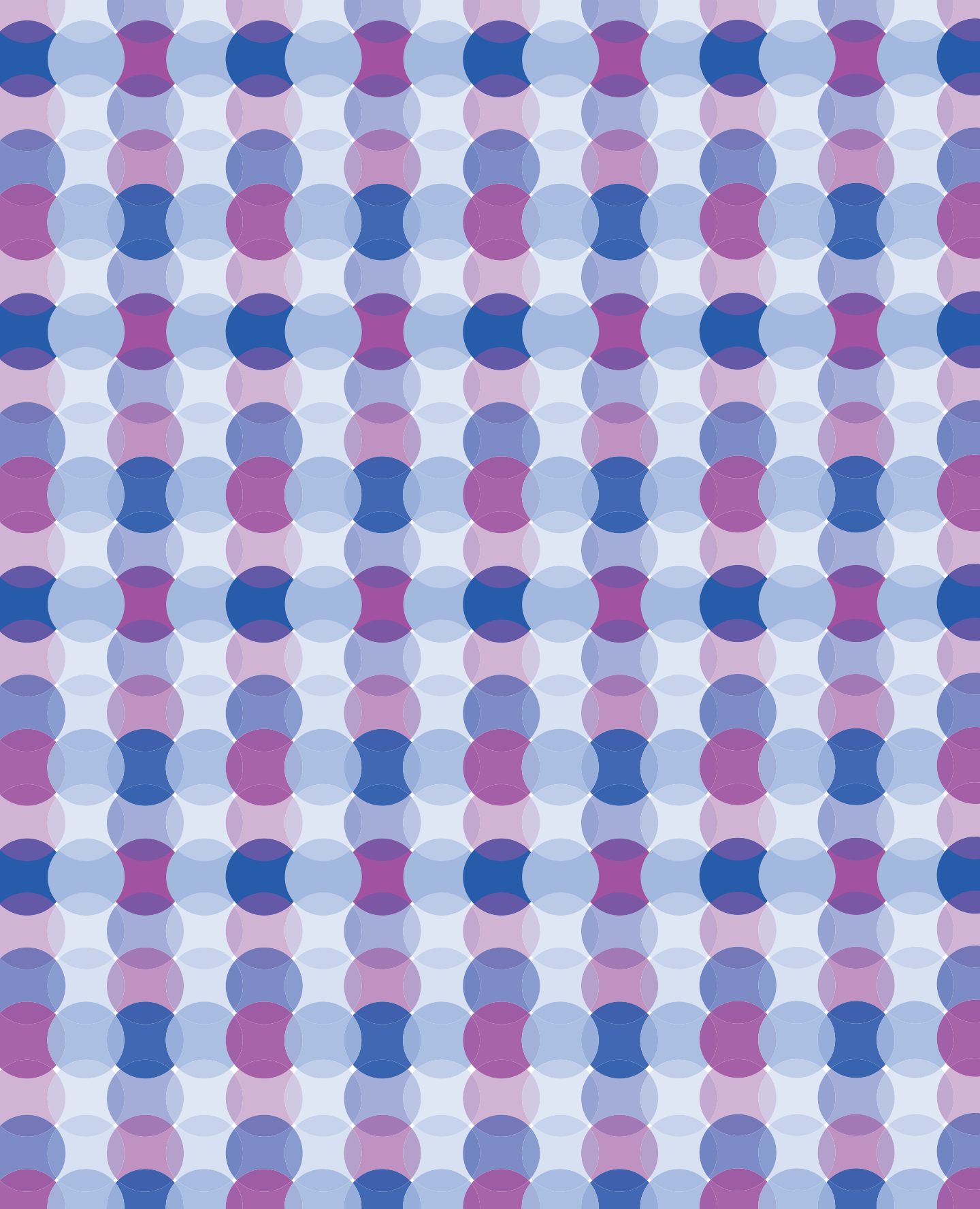
ACT is incredibly versatile. It can help almost anyone with almost anything. Who wouldn't benefit from being able to be more present, more accepting, less entangled in their thinking, better able to tolerate painful parts of their experience, think about things in a more flexible way, live in a way that reflects their values, and move toward building a meaningful life?

HOW WELL DOES ACT WORK?

The simple answer is ACT works really well. Stay with me for a second: In a 2015 meta-analysis of 39 randomized, controlled trials on the efficacy of ACT, ACT outperformed control conditions at post-treatment and follow-up assessments. It was superior to waitlist, those receiving a psychological placebo, and treatment as usual. If some of this language is confusing, it basically means a bunch of studies were studied all together and they concluded that ACT works better than the alternatives that people typically receive.

WHY ACT WORKS

Why does ACT work so well? Well, it works because it doesn't try to change you like other behavioral therapies. It accepts and embraces who you are—your humanity, “flaws,” and “imperfections.” It helps you learn how to live with these things rather than try to change or get rid of them. Why not change who you are? Why not get rid of your “flaws” and “imperfections?” I know it sounds nice, but the reality is that humans are flawed. No one is perfect, myself included. We all have limitations. Acceptance is key. Acceptance liberates us from the suffering that rejecting ourselves creates. One of my favorite quotes is by Carl Rogers: “The curious paradox is that I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.” You may be thinking, *Wait, I thought you just said we can't change?* While we may not ever rid ourselves of our limitations entirely, of course we can change. But first, we must accept and embrace who we are, especially those parts of ourselves that are painful and those difficult thoughts and feelings that we want to rid ourselves of. Acceptance is hardly easy or automatic, and it is absolutely not a passive process. In fact, the origins of the word *acceptance* come from the Latin word *acceptus*, meaning the “action of taking or receiving what is offered.” Acceptance is hard work. Commitment is difficult, too. It actually requires you to show up for yourself, again and again, living out your values. The strategies in this book will help you work toward this goal, but remember to be patient and kind to yourself as you put in the hard work.



CHAPTER 2

ACT and You

In this chapter, you will find out how ACT applies to specific problems that you may be struggling with. But first, let's get an idea of how you currently relate to your thoughts and feelings. Are you “fused” or “defused” from your thoughts? Are you rejecting and resistant or open and accepting of your emotions? In other words, are your distressing thoughts and painful feelings controlling you or are you observing and allowing them to be as they are with nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness? If you are entangled with your thoughts and resisting your emotions, how is it impacting you? Is it getting in the way of you living out your values through committed ACTION?

QUIZ: ARE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS CONTROLLING YOU?

QUESTIONS	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
1. I want to stop or control my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I believe that I am my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I find some of my thoughts intolerable or unacceptable.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I try to distract myself from my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My thoughts get in the way of me living my life.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I want to stop or control my emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I see my emotions as a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I think some of my emotions are bad or that I should not be feeling the way I do.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I resist experiencing or avoid my emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My emotions get in the way of me living my life.	1	2	3	4	5
Score:	+	+	+	+	=

So, what was your score? The highest possible score is a 50. The closer you are to a 50, the more fused you are with your thoughts and the less accepting you are toward your emotions.

Take some time to reflect on how your entanglement with your thinking and resistance toward your emotions may be interfering with your ability to live a meaningful life.

If you are especially fused with your thinking and avoidant of your emotions, and it is interfering with your life, don't worry. That is what we will be working on throughout the seven weeks ahead. I know it can be especially difficult to imagine how you are supposed to be present with intolerable thoughts or painful and overwhelming emotions. I don't just expect you to be able to do these things; I will give you *tools*. That is what the next seven weeks are all about.

SO, HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF?

One of the amazing things about ACT is how versatile it is. It can help with a wide variety of issues, including stress, worry and anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic attacks and panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, low self-esteem, perfectionism, anger, and addiction.

STRESS

Stress is something we all experience as a part of life. Like painful emotions, stress is unavoidable. Also, like painful emotions, stress evolved to help us survive. Our stress response was intended to help us respond to immediate threats. Nowadays, many of the threats we face are not immediate, but long and drawn out, which results in chronic stress that is taxing to both our body and mind if we do not know how to manage it. So how can we manage stress? Mindfulness in particular is helpful. In ACT, mindfulness applies to several of the six core processes, specifically defusion, acceptance, present moment, and observer self. Another one of my favorite quotes is by Jon Kabat-Zinn: “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf.” We cannot stop stress from appearing in our lives but, using mindfulness, we can learn how to respond to it rather than react to it. If stress is particularly problematic in your life, you might see if there are opportunities to find a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in your area.

WORRY AND ANXIETY

Like stress, we all have worry and anxiety in our lives. And, like stress, worry and anxiety can be helpful when they help us plan and prepare for things. But worry and anxiety can become excessive and unproductive. They can reach the point at which they are no longer helpful—actually working against us, and keeping us from moving toward our values. The six core processes in ACT will help you differentiate between helpful and unhelpful worry. You’ll manage unhelpful worry using the same mindfulness skills that help you respond rather than react to stress. You will learn how to defuse from your anxious thoughts and not let them get in the way of building a meaningful life.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a potentially extremely distressing psychological disorder that typically includes obsessions (such as the classic example of obsessive thoughts about germs) and is accompanied by some type of compulsive behavior (such as excessive handwashing). The compulsive behavior is an attempt to stop the obsessive thoughts, but it doesn't work, at least not for long, and people find themselves stuck in a cycle of engaging in compulsive behaviors, sometimes for hours of their day, to the detriment of their work, relationships, responsibilities, etc. So how does ACT help obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors? By helping people learn how to live with or mindfully disengage from their obsessive thoughts, which allows them to refrain from engaging in compulsive behaviors, and frees them up to live a more value-driven life.

PANIC ATTACKS AND PANIC DISORDER

Sometimes people misunderstand or misuse the term *panic attacks*. Panic attacks are when people experience a sudden, unexpected rush of fear and discomfort. They might experience a rapid or pounding heartbeat, sweating, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath, a choking sensation, chest pain, nausea, dizziness, numbness, tingling, or hot flashes or chills, or feel like they are going crazy or going to die. Panic attacks typically peak within about 10 minutes and resolve shortly thereafter. Oftentimes, when people first experience a panic attack they think they may be having a heart attack because of how strong the physical sensations are. This is because people who experience panic attacks are typically less aware of their thoughts and feelings and more aware of their physical sensations.

Panic disorder is when someone experiences repeated panic attacks and is so worried or anxious about when they might experience another panic attack that they start to restrict their lives in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to avoid these uncomfortable feelings. They let the fear of experiencing these intense physical sensations stop them from living a value-driven life. ACT can help by expanding people's awareness to include their thoughts and feelings. They can also learn how to tolerate or even accept the intense and uncomfortable physical sensations that arise so that they are free to live a value-driven life.

PHOBIAS

Phobias are excessive fears. They can be related to any number of things but are typically related to things like animals (e.g., spiders, insects, dogs), the environment (e.g., heights, storms, water), blood/infection/injury (e.g., needles, invasive medical procedures), situations (e.g., airplanes, elevators, enclosed spaces), or other miscellaneous things (e.g., choking, vomiting, loud sounds, costumed characters). When people have phobias and are in some way exposed to the feared object—a spider, for example—they have a heightened reaction to it and may experience a sudden rush of intense emotion. Because of these intense emotions, the feared object is avoided, sometimes at all costs. If someone has a fear of flying, for example, they may not attend a friend's wedding or travel to places they would otherwise like to visit. Do you see how avoidance starts to restrict someone's life? So, how can ACT help? It helps by allowing people to learn how to be present with these intense feelings, move toward their values, and engage in committed ACTION, such as boarding a plane and attending the wedding, traveling to Machu Picchu, and doing whatever else they want to do or going wherever they might want to go.

SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER

Social anxiety disorder is a phobia related to social situations. For example, someone with social anxiety disorder might become highly uncomfortable meeting new people or making small talk, or have a fear of public speaking. In these situations, they experience an intense fear of embarrassment or

rejection. Social anxiety disorder is not the same thing as being shy or introverted. When someone is shy it simply takes them a bit of time to “warm up” to people or “come out of their shell.” When someone is introverted it can be very draining to spend time socializing and engaging with other people; they need to recharge by spending some restorative time alone. When someone has social anxiety disorder, it begins to interfere with their life. How? Avoidance. Are you beginning to see a pattern? It all comes down to attempts to avoid difficult thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Someone with social anxiety disorder might stop socializing altogether in an attempt to avoid these things. They might restrict their social circle to only those they already know or avoid dating even though it is something they value. They might get held back from promotions at work because they don’t want to give presentations or network. ACT helps people with social anxiety disorder be present with their intense fears of embarrassment, judgment, or rejection through skills like mindfulness and acceptance. It helps them introduce themselves to new people, date, give presentations, and network. It is not that the fear goes away, it simply comes along for the ride, like a passenger on the bus. It is still present, but no longer gets in the way of committed ACTion.

TRAUMA AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Trauma can take many forms. Sometimes in the field of psychology, we differentiate between little “t” trauma and capital “T” Trauma. Some events might be experienced as “traumatic” in the sense that they were highly impactful but not be considered capital “T” Trauma. Capital “T” Trauma is an event in which there was exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Little “t” trauma might include other types of life experiences, which can be extremely difficult and highly impactful, such as a divorce or a miscarriage. In order to develop PTSD, someone must have experienced a capital “T” Trauma, which, once again, means an event in which there was exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. This could be directly experienced or witnessed, or someone may have learned that such an event occurred to a close family member or friend. It could also be experienced in the form of repeated or extreme exposure to

the details of a traumatic event; for example, first responders collecting human remains at the scene of an accident.

When someone develops PTSD they will experience several different types or clusters of intrusive symptoms, such as recurrent, distressing memories, nightmares, or flashbacks. People with PTSD typically try to avoid these distressing memories, thoughts, and feelings, or external reminders of the event, such as people, places, activities, objects, and situations. People with PTSD may also experience negative changes in their mood and thought processes; for example, thinking that they are to blame, that they cannot trust anyone, or that the world is dangerous. They feel emotions such as fear, anger, horror, guilt, or shame.

ACT is a present-focused therapy rather than one that focuses on past experiences, so how does it work with trauma? In the present. While trauma is something that occurred in the past, its impact is felt in the present. More importantly, healing occurs in the present. In ACT, we make contact with the thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations that arise in the present moment with nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance.

In addition to internal experiences, we look at what external experiences are being avoided. Oftentimes, people with trauma not only avoid their thoughts, feelings, and sensations, but also people, places, and things. Sometimes, they have lost all trust in others or think that the world is dangerous and nothing is safe, leading to extreme avoidance and restriction of activities in their life. ACT helps people be present with their thoughts, feelings, and sensations, including their fears related to trust and safety, while still living their values.

DEPRESSION

Depression doesn't look just one way. There are many different types of depression and it can be experienced and expressed very differently depending on the person. Traditionally, depression is characterized by low mood or feelings of sadness, a lack of interest or pleasure in things, weight loss or weight gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt, hopelessness, and sometimes thoughts of suicide. It can also be expressed as irritability and anger, particularly in men.

So, how does ACT help with depression? What is it that people with depression are avoiding? This one might shock you a bit because it is counterintuitive. People with depression are avoiding sadness. Like I said, it is a bit counterintuitive. An example might illustrate this best. Imagine that someone has a lot of body dissatisfaction and, as a result, avoids going to the gym to try and get healthier and feel better, and also avoids dating despite valuing intimate relationships. This person is avoiding the feelings of sadness that come up when they approach things that would make them feel better, which leads to them feeling stuck, depressed, and hopeless. ACT helps mitigate depression by giving people tools (the six core processes), with which to better approach and tolerate the feelings of sadness that might arise when going to the gym or downloading a dating app so that they can build a more fulfilling life.

If you struggle significantly with depression, you might also look into Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which was developed to treat individuals suffering from major depressive disorder.

If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide, please know that you can always call the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255. You can also call 911 or go to the nearest ER.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem refers to our perceived sense of worth or value. Issues with low self-esteem can sometimes lead to things like depression or addiction. But trying to improve your self-esteem can also lead to problems like narcissistic or self-absorbed behavior.

The very notion of self-esteem is itself problematic. Let me explain. Self-esteem involves a type of comparison, either upward or downward. Upward comparison is when you compare yourself to people you perceive as “better than you” in some way; perhaps they are more physically fit, attractive, successful, financially well-off, well-traveled, fluent in multiple languages, or whatever it is that you value. Engaging in upward comparison can lead to feelings of inferiority. It might indicate what you value, but beyond that, it is not particularly helpful,

and in fact, it can be detrimental. Sometimes people think that engaging in upward comparison can help motivate them to make changes and become “better,” but that is not what research shows. It actually reinforces a sense of yourself as inadequate or “less than.” A quote from Sharon Salzberg, a teacher of Buddhist meditation practices, captures it succinctly: “As long as we judge ourselves harshly, it can feel as if we’re making progress against our many flaws. But in reality, we’re only reinforcing our sense of unworthiness.” Downward comparison is when we compare ourselves to people who we perceive as being “better than” in some way. In this case, perhaps we are the ones who are more educated, successful, attractive, etc. It makes us feel superior. What is wrong with this if it makes us feel better? Because it only lasts for so long and, ultimately, comparison is a losing battle. So what are we supposed to do? I’ll offer you an alternative—self-compassion.

What is self-compassion? Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) involves relating to yourself the same way you might relate to a friend. If one of your friends was having a hard time, how might you relate to them? Do you relate to yourself in this same way? I am guessing probably not. Typically, at least in Western culture, we learn to relate to ourselves in a rather harsh or critical way. Sometimes this is referred to as the inner critic. I have worked with some clients who are incredibly hard on themselves and for whom the term “inner abuser” seems more appropriate.

When I begin talking to clients about trying to decrease the ways in which they relate to themselves critically and trying to adopt a more compassionate relationship with themselves, they are often hesitant. They imagine that the inner critic, or inner abuser, is serving them in some way and helping them improve themselves. When I ask them to examine the evidence and observe the ways in which their inner critic is helping, they often begin to realize that it is a myth. In fact, it might be maintaining their sense of worthlessness, depression, and feelings of hopelessness—while preventing them from taking ACTIONable steps to improve their lives.

MSC also allows you to see yourself accurately, flaws and all, without engaging in either upward or downward comparison. This is incredibly important when it comes to the process of change because the first step is self-awareness. Seeing yourself accurately can be threatening because it is damaging to your self-esteem, but when you see yourself from a self-compassion perspective, you can see yourself more honestly. This can allow you the opportunity to make real and important changes.

How does ACT help with low self-esteem? Remember the storytelling mind? Well, it plays a big role in maintaining low self-esteem. ACT helps us detach from the narratives the storytelling mind generates and the negative ways in which we are attached to viewing ourselves, which then allows for more flexibility.

More recently, ACT has adopted compassion practices to help people learn how to relate to themselves in a healthier way. Throughout the 7-week program, as you face your own suffering and work to make changes in your own life, I will also help you learn how to adopt a more compassionate, kind, and gentle way of relating to yourself to support you as you work toward committed ACTion.

PERFECTIONISM

I often see clients with perfectionism or perfectionistic tendencies. Some might think of this as an asset. It helps you improve yourself, right? Not quite. After learning about the difference between self-esteem and self-compassion, you'll see why perfectionism is problematic. When someone has perfectionistic tendencies, nothing is ever good enough. This can lead to chronic dissatisfaction and even depression. It's not constructive. It does not help people improve themselves; it makes life much harder and can rob you of any kind of satisfaction or appreciation. ACT will help you reduce these types of tendencies, primarily by learning how to practice acceptance.

ANGER

There is nothing wrong with anger. Anger is a natural and important part of being human because it helps us protect ourselves. So why is anger listed here? Because, as I am sure you have experienced, anger can become problematic.

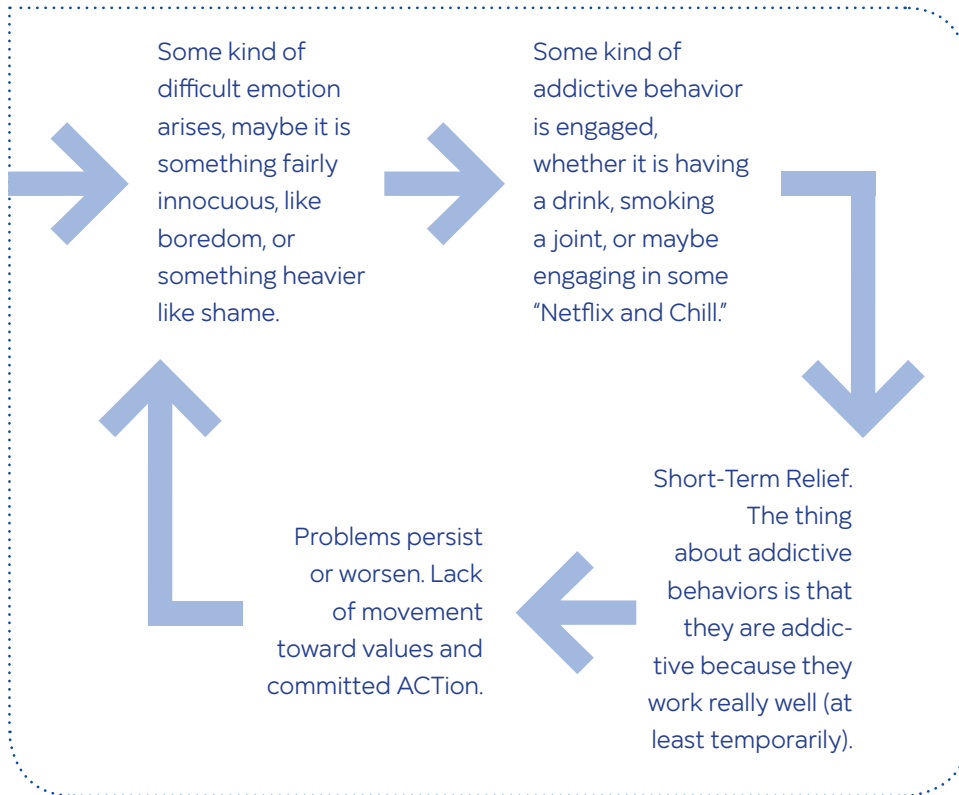
Anger becomes problematic when we are bad at being angry. How? It is helpful to differentiate between emotional experiencing and emotional expression. When I taught groups at the VA, there was often confusion about this. I would ask the veterans, “What does anger feel like?” They would say things like yelling, screaming, punching. But that is not what anger feels like; that is what anger might look like. Those are expressions of anger. There is a difference between feeling anger and expressing anger.

Anger can be expressed through yelling, screaming, or punching, but it can also be expressed through strong, appropriate, nonaggressive, and assertive communication. It can be used in very healthy and important ways to assert limits, create boundaries, and keep you safe. When anger is expressed that way, it is not a problem.

How is anger experienced? What thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations are associated with anger? This is what I mean by experiencing anger. For many people, anger is experienced through strong physical sensations in the body. I might notice, for example, a wave of heat run across my body, or a strong warm sensation in my chest, clenching in my jaw, and tightness in the muscles of my face. How do you experience anger? More importantly, how do you express anger? If you are able to excel at experiencing anger, that is, if you are able to bring nonjudgmental awareness to the thoughts and physical sensations associated with anger, you will be less reactive to it. The six core processes in ACT will help you learn how to be good at being angry and allow you to experience anger while decreasing your reactivity to it. The six core processes will also help you learn how to take appropriate ACTion in response to anger, such as assertive communication.

ADDICTION

Addiction is one of the classic examples of avoidance. People typically don't randomly use drugs. They use them to feel different, whether it's to feel good or to feel numb. I use the term *addiction* broadly, not just in regard to substances like alcohol, nicotine, and narcotics, but also sexual behaviors, gambling, playing video games, online shopping, or binge-watching Netflix. First, let's take a look at the cycle of addiction:



Do you notice something about the cycle? We end up right back where we started, at difficult emotions. Not only that, but in the process of trying to avoid difficult experiences, problems persist or get worse, and there is a lack of movement toward valued ACTION. Remember, painful experiences are just a part of life.

There is nothing wrong with occasionally doing something that makes you feel better temporarily, but when this become habitual and prevents you from pursuing your values and engaging in committed ACTION, it becomes a problem. Of course, it is also a problem if you develop a psychological or physiological dependence. Notice what role addiction plays in your own life. And remember, it is not just substances that can fuel addictive behaviors. My “drug of choice” tends to be online shopping with two-day shipping via Amazon Prime. Try noticing the next time you have an urge to engage in your “drug of choice” and notice what you are experiencing in that moment; try observing your thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Is it boredom, loneliness, discontentment? Remember, that there is a cost to ignoring difficult emotions. Sometimes it means you stop moving in a valued direction and get stuck. But, if you can excel at being present with your difficult experiences, it decreases your reliance on addictive behaviors or “quick fixes” and allows you more freedom to work toward building a life of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. If you have more serious issues with addiction, you might consider attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), SMART Recovery, or Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) in your area. Check out the Resources section (page 165) in the back of the book for more information.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

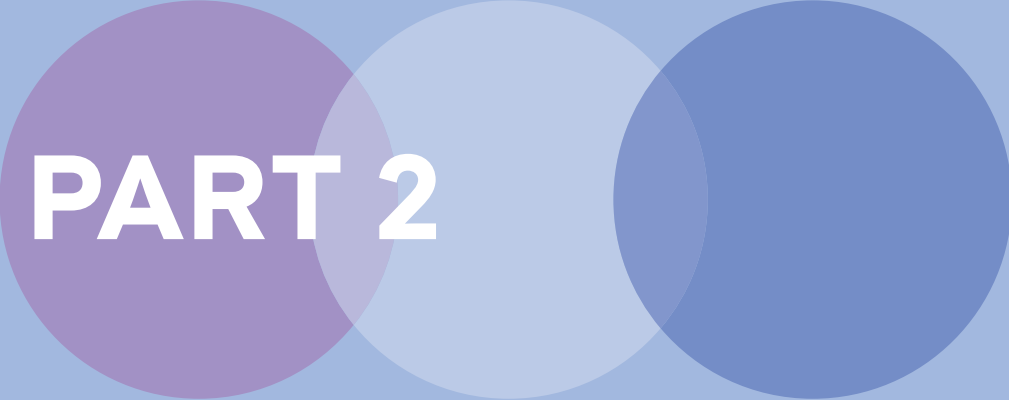
Sometimes, when people have difficulty being present with their thoughts and feelings, or are resistant toward them, people develop physical manifestations of them. This is sometimes referred to as somatization. Here are some examples of the way suppressing your thoughts might show up physically in the body:

- Aches and pain
- Muscle tension
- Clenched jaw and teeth grinding
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches
- Low energy or fatigue
- Weakness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Constipation
- Diarrhea

Do you experience any of these physical symptoms? Psychological distress may be causing or exacerbating your symptoms, but it's always important to consult with a medical professional and rule out any possible underlying medical condition.

THE 7-WEEK PROGRAM

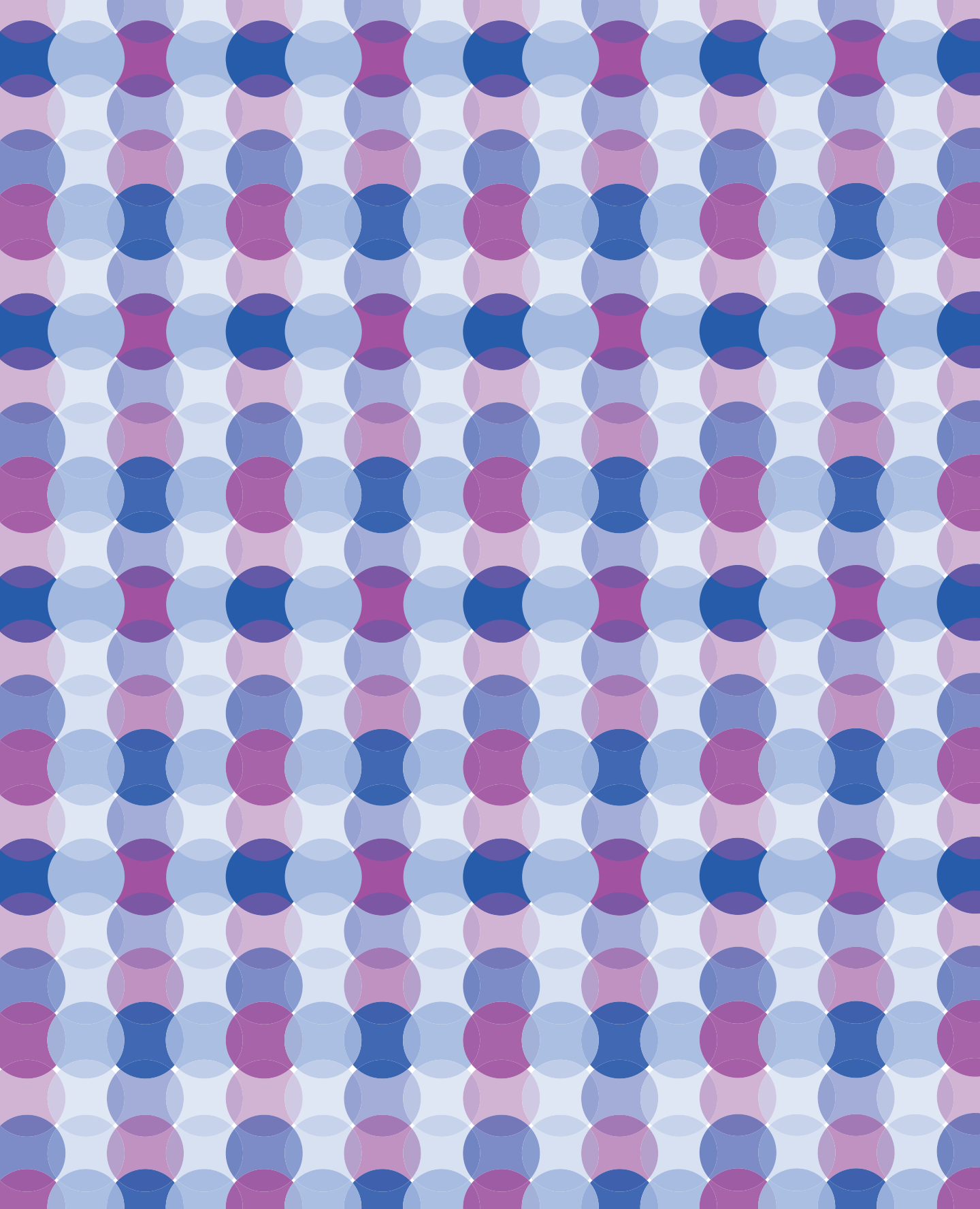
I highly recommend completing the seven weeks sequentially rather than jumping around because each week builds upon the previous one. Remember that change takes time. Give yourself the time you need to read each chapter and practice the strategies. There is nothing to gain from skipping ahead or rushing through. The first six weeks focus on one of the six core processes of ACT. Each of these chapters includes strategies for you to practice and questions to reflect upon. Like ACT, the strategies in this book are evidence-based. Give yourself time to implement them. This is what will lead to sustainable change. The seventh week ties everything together. As you move through the next seven weeks remember that, like anything else, the more you put into it, the more you will get out of it.



PART 2

THE 7-WEEK PROGRAM

Now that you have an understanding of ACT, as well as an overview of the six core processes, we are ready to dive in! Each of the following six weeks is organized around one of the core processes of ACT, with the seventh week bringing it all together. I will take you through each one, week-by-week, beginning with defusion in week 1.



WEEK 1

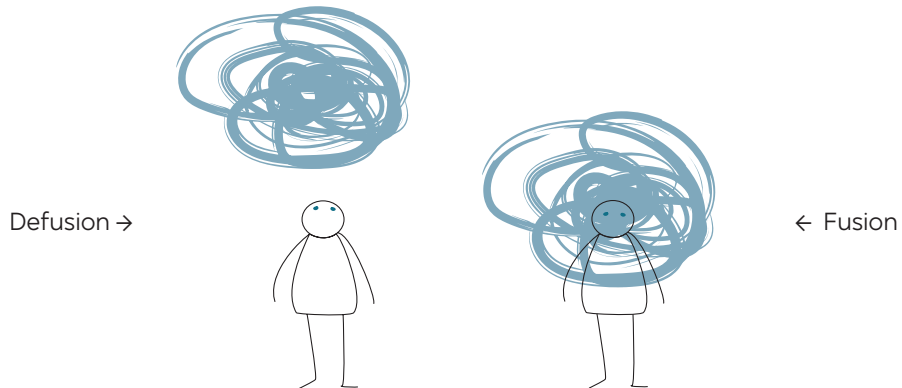
Your Thoughts Are Not Reality

This first week focuses on defusion and helping you get some much-needed distance from your thoughts. You will begin to understand that your thoughts truly are just mental events. They are not facts, or reality, despite how much your mind may try to convince you otherwise.

FUSION

Let's review the concept of fusion and defusion. Remember these little guys?

When you are fused with your thinking, you are tangled up with your thoughts, meaning that you don't have enough perspective to notice that they are, in fact, just thoughts and not absolute truths or realities. Another way to describe being fused or entangled with a thought is "being hooked on a thought."



TYPES OF FUSION

There are different ways in which people can become hooked on their own thinking. A veteran with PTSD or a victim of sexual assault might be fused with thoughts like "My life was wonderful before the trauma happened," "I am to blame," "Now I am broken," or "You cannot trust people; if you trust people, they will hurt you." These last two statements illustrate fusion of the self with judgment and rules. Someone with perfectionism may also be fused with thoughts about rules, such as "I must be exceptional" or "It is not okay to be average." Someone with depression may have fusion with thoughts related to the future, like "What's the point of even looking for a new job? They'll never hire me," or fusion with thoughts related to themselves, like "I'm an incompetent, pathetic loser." People can also be fused with reasons; for example, "I'm too anxious to try and meet new people."

Can you imagine how buying into or believing these thoughts as reality might affect the ways in which people show up, or don't show up, in their own lives? These kinds of thoughts, or fusion with these kinds of thoughts (remember, we're not necessarily going to get rid of these thoughts), are the reason that people tend to avoid moving toward their values through committed ACTION. For example, the person with trauma or PTSD may not enter into any kind of relationship, thus depriving themselves of the opportunity to establish the social connections they need to develop a sense of safety and heal. The person with perfectionism may not allow themselves to try things in which they might "fail" (or learn). The person with depression may never even try to look for a new job. The person with social anxiety disorder may never allow themselves the opportunity to learn that they can, in fact, tolerate (or accept) their anxiety and meet new people despite feeling anxious.

Imagine if these individuals could get some distance from their thoughts. What if the person with PTSD could notice their thoughts about not being able to trust others, but choose not to buy into them? They might be able to gradually open up to and begin to trust others, leading to an increased sense of safety and healing. Someone with perfectionism might be able to be more accepting of their humanness and limitations. They might have a healthier relationship with themselves and and take risks they may not have taken otherwise. The person with depression might look for new jobs. The person with social anxiety disorder might realize that their anxiousness doesn't need to restrict their lives and meet new people.

What thoughts are you fused with, entangled in, or hooked on? Are they thoughts about the past or future, thoughts about yourself, judgments, reasons, or rules? How does this impact the way you show up in your own life?

STRATEGY

LABELING

You may be noticing a lot of fusion within yourself and observing that it is restricting your life, but don't worry. Practicing defusion is the main goal of this first week. Let's start with our first strategy: a simple labeling exercise.

1. Close your eyes, if that is comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you, softening your peripheral vision and bringing your attention inward toward your breathing.
2. Take a few deep inhales and exhales,, using this opportunity to release any areas of tension from the body; release any tightness, perhaps in the muscles of the face, the jaw, neck, or shoulders. Use each exhale as a vehicle for discharging any stress or tension.
3. Focus on the breath as best you can, even if just for a few breaths. You will soon notice that thoughts are arising, even if you are keeping the breath at the forefront of your awareness. When you notice a thought arise, I invite you to label it "thought." Each time you notice a thought, just silently, inwardly note to yourself, "thought." If you would like, you can be more specific. For example, if you notice a judgmental thought arise, label it "judgment." If you notice a planning thought, you can label it "planning." If you notice a thought from the past, you might label it "remembering," and so on.
4. Continue to notice and label the thoughts that arise, and notice what thoughts are difficult to let go of. These thoughts are likely ones you are fused with. When we do not have a lot of attachment to a thought, it tends to be easier to release.

Try doing this exercise for a few minutes each day. You can also do it on the spot; for example, when you notice that you are lost in thought during your commute or even while waiting in line. Focus on the breath, notice the thought, label it, and release.

WHY WE FUSE

Why do we fuse with our thoughts? Because they can be helpful! Remember the storytelling mind that we are simultaneously blessed and cursed with? The storytelling mind is helpful when we are planning or preparing for something or solving a problem. For example, “Remember that last hike I went on? I got so sunburned. I better put on sunscreen this time!” Here, the storytelling mind is helpful.

The storytelling mind can also work against you. For example, “Remember that last job interview I went on? It went terribly. I am awful at interviewing. There is no way I am ever going to get a better job.” Your mind has a way of creating stories. This is a natural and normal part of being human. In and of itself, the storytelling mind is not a problem. It can become a problem, however, when you are fused with thoughts that may or may not be reflective of reality. In many ways, if you are fused with your thinking, your mind creates your own “reality,” which may, in fact, be very far removed from actual reality.

If you are heavily fused with your thinking, you may not even recognize it, which could result in living out your life based on a falsely constructed reality. For example, say that one of the narratives you have constructed is “I am too depressed to make changes in my life.” If you believe this, you are unlikely to make changes in your life that could help you be less depressed. You may have the ability to make changes, but be too fused with your thinking to see that reality. If you can gain some distance from your thoughts, you can observe them and hold them in awareness. This will allow you to act more flexibly.

“Wherever we are, we can take a deep breath, feel our body, open our senses and step outside the endless stories of the mind.”

—JACK KORNFIELD

STRATEGY

CHAT WITH YOUR MIND

Here's another simple strategy you can use to defuse from your thoughts. Each time you notice a thought arise, place the statement "I'm noticing that I am having the thought that..." in front of whatever thought arises. This very simple practice helps create distance so that you are no longer entangled. For example, if I have a thought such as "I am fat or overweight," instead of just thinking it, buying into it (to whatever degree), or even trying to challenge it, you might say to yourself in your own mind, *"I am noticing that I am having the thought that I am fat."* Do you see how this very simple reframing helps create some distance from the thought so it is less likely to be automatically believed? There are other quick strategies you can use; for example, saying "thank you" to your mind. I know that might sound strange, but try it out. The next time you have a thought, maybe it is something along the lines of "What is the point of even trying? I am just wasting my time. I am such a joke," try saying "Thank you, mind!" Or, if the thought is, "There is no way I am going to be able to pull this off," say, "Thank you, mind." Do you see how this creates some distance from your thoughts and frees you up to make choices based on your values?

I like to help clients identify the narratives they have created for themselves, particularly the false narratives they have constructed. What are some of your narratives? Are they reflective of reality? You are probably already well aware that your thoughts do not always reflect reality. So why are you buying into them?

SOME THOUGHTS ARE HELPFUL!

Not all thoughts are bad. Thoughts can be helpful, too. For example, when you randomly remember to follow up on that e-mail you sent last week or that you needed to pay a bill. Other thoughts, particularly those that can be damaging to your mental health and well-being, tend to be the ones we become fused with, entangled in, or hooked on—and it can be difficult to undo! Although being fused with your thoughts is not always problematic, there are definitely times when it is. I'll go into more detail on when it is a problem, how to identify it, and what to do about it.

UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Fusion is a problem when our thoughts are unhelpful. It is especially problematic when we are unaware of them, thus allowing them to create our “reality” and control our behavior. For example, if I think “I am stupid” and I accept this thought as reality instead of recognizing it as a false narrative that my storytelling mind has created, it will restrict my behavior. I'm likely to feel bad about myself and deny myself certain opportunities. I may even misinterpret events to fit my false narrative and miss the reality that, while I may not be a genius, I am certainly not an idiot.

IDENTIFYING UNHELPFUL VS. HELPFUL THOUGHTS

Sometimes it is difficult to identify which thoughts are helpful and which are unhelpful. It can be tricky, especially with something like anxiety, which is meant to help us plan or prepare for things, and fear, which is meant to keep us safe. For example, the thought “I am not doing well at work; I could lose my job” may or may not be helpful. It could help you try to do better at work or perhaps look for another job, but what if you are doing well at work and it is the anxious mind speaking? Sometimes I will ask clients, “Is this the anxious mind speaking?” Generally, this helps create enough distance for people to evaluate if the thought is helpful or not.

STRATEGY

IDENTIFYING UNHELPFUL VS. HELPFUL THOUGHTS

The first step in identifying helpful versus unhelpful thoughts involves using defusion to create enough distance from the thought to evaluate it. Try using some of the strategies in this chapter to observe your thoughts. Once you are able to observe them, imagine that you allow these thoughts to direct your behavior. What would you do? What actions might you take? Is this behavior helpful in some way or unhelpful? Is it leading you toward or away from the things you value?

Here are a few examples of thoughts. Think about whether and why they are helpful or unhelpful.

THOUGHT	HOW WOULD THIS THOUGHT DIRECT MY BEHAVIOR?	IS IT HELPFUL OR UNHELPFUL?
"I am stupid, lazy, and unmotivated."	It would decrease my motivation to try things.	Unhelpful
"This has to be perfect. I cannot make a mistake."	It would create a lot of pressure and make it harder to engage.	Unhelpful
"It is his fault. He is to blame."	It may or may not be true, but it doesn't change anything.	Unhelpful
"I better stop procrastinating and start working on this assignment."	It would help me get started.	Helpful
"I want to make it to the gym three times this week."	It would help me schedule workouts for this upcoming week.	Helpful

Use the last few lines to fill in some of your own thoughts. How do they direct your behavior? Can you tell which thoughts are helpful and which are unhelpful?

It might be easier to evaluate which thoughts are helpful and which are unhelpful after seeing them on the page instead of when you are lost in your own mind. Even the simple act of writing them down on paper can help you defuse from them. This is another strategy you can use to not only defuse from your thoughts, but also to evaluate whether the fusion is problematic or not.

IT'S NOT JUST IN YOUR HEAD!

Sometimes defusion strategies, especially the more playful ones, can feel like they are making light of very real problems. The point is not to minimize your problems, but to create enough distance from your thoughts so that you can choose how to act rather than allow your behavior to be controlled by them.

REMEMBER, YOU'RE NOT CHANGING YOUR THOUGHTS

Have you ever tried to change your thinking about something? Sometimes it can be helpful. Other times, especially when you are fused with a thought, it is much harder to do. The point of defusion is not to change your thoughts, because that often doesn't work.

In my experience, there are some thoughts that no amount of challenging or evaluating is going to change. This is why in ACT, the way we work with thoughts is more about acceptance and defusion. We don't engage the content of the thoughts. In fact, engaging with the content of a thought might cause us to become more entangled with it than we already are.

STRATEGY

THOUGHTS AS MEDIA

You can also practice defusing from your thoughts by imagining them as various types of media. For example, you could imagine that your thoughts are being played on the radio or a podcast: "Good morning and welcome to Carissa's daily updates. Let's review all the ways in which she is falling short." You could also imagine your thoughts as words being displayed across a TV, computer, or movie screen: "I'm an idiot." Or maybe your thoughts are being played as images, like the previews before a movie: "Here's a preview for the *I'm an Imposter* movie, one of my favorites."

In ACT, it really isn't about the content of the thoughts at all. Perhaps your thoughts are reflective of reality. For example, maybe you are performing poorly at work and would benefit from looking for another job. Maybe you are overweight and would benefit from losing weight. The point of defusion is simply to gain enough distance to evaluate the ways in which your thoughts are impacting you. When they are working for you and when they are working against you. When your thoughts are working against you, this is when it is important to be able to create distance, not to change your thinking, but to generate perspective to simply observe your thoughts rather than be fused with, entangled in, or hooked on them.

Your thoughts may not change. They may in fact be true and, even if they are not, you may still believe them to some degree, and they may still generate some discomfort. That's all okay. What matters most is that your thoughts don't get in the way of living your values through committed ACTION. You don't need to change your thinking.

STRATEGY

MINDFUL OF YOUR THOUGHTS

1. Close your eyes, if it's comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you.
2. Turn your attention inward toward your thoughts. Try not to get caught up in your thinking, just notice the thoughts.
3. Notice what the storytelling mind is saying, without engaging your thoughts. Try not to change the story or stop your thinking, which will only take you further away from the present. Just notice the storytelling mind, with kindness.
4. If you notice the mind going back to the past or jumping into some kind of imagined future, just notice, without engaging. Try not to stop the thoughts or push them away, just notice them.

YOUR THOUGHTS WON'T GO AWAY

Becoming defused, disentangled, or unhooked from your thoughts is also not about making them disappear or go away. Why? Because that doesn't really work either. In fact, research shows that trying to stop your thoughts can cause a kind of rebound effect.

I like to tell my clients that if we could all just change our thinking or make difficult thoughts go away, I wouldn't have a job! That is just not the way the storytelling mind works. Because we don't have access to other people's internal experiences and can't see what stories their minds tell them, sometimes we imagine that we are alone in having these types of thoughts or that something is wrong with us. In reality, everyone has difficult and distressing thoughts about themselves, and there isn't anything wrong with them. You are just a human being with a storytelling mind. These thoughts are normal. You can learn to defuse from thoughts, but some of them may never go away. You may always have the thought that there is something wrong with you. That is also okay. It doesn't mean that you can't live your values and commitments. Defusion can help create space for you to make choices about how you want to live rather than let thoughts get in the way. You don't have to make the thoughts disappear.

IF MY THOUGHTS WON'T CHANGE OR GO AWAY, WHY AM I DOING THIS?

If I had the power to simply change my thoughts or make them disappear, I would probably be very tempted to do so. I imagine that you would, too. Maybe you have already been trying to change your thoughts or make them go away, perhaps for a very long time. Has it worked? The answer is probably not. Defusion is the alternative. It is about learning to live with your

STRATEGY

VISUALIZE

Sometimes using different images or visualizations can help people defuse from their thoughts. Commonly used visualizations include leaves on a stream or clouds in the sky. You can imagine that each thought you notice is a leaf floating down a stream or a cloud passing by in the sky. Here, too, you can notice the nature of the mind in a given moment. Perhaps the stream is gentle and smooth, or it's rough and choppy with a strong current and rushing water. Maybe the sky is relatively clear, or maybe it's dark and stormy. Just notice, practicing defusion from your thoughts.

Another one of my favorite visualizations is standing on a train platform. Think of your thoughts like trains coming and going from the station. It might be rush hour and the trains could be coming and going quickly, or slowly pulling in and leaving. Here you have an option: Do you stay on the platform or get on the train? The train pulling in could be "the anxiety train," or "the regret train," or maybe it is "the judgment and blame train." Are these trains you want to board? Are they taking you in the direction you want to go? If not, why not let them come and go without hopping on? If you happen to board a train that took you somewhere you don't want to be, hop off and come back to the present moment.

thoughts—without controlling them or making them go away—and becoming friends with them. You take your thoughts along for the ride without letting them take the wheel. You are the one driving the bus, not your thoughts. You can steer your bus in the direction of your values, and you don't have to listen to whatever thoughts may be riding around as passengers on your bus.

YOUR UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS MAY STILL HAVE AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE

Remember that even difficult thoughts often have a message for us. Instead of just trying to make them go away, gain some distance from them, and try asking what these thoughts are telling you about what matters to you. For example, if you are fused with thoughts about the past and filled with regret, what might that thought be telling you? Could it be that you acted in a way that was inconsistent with your values? This is an important message to listen to.

PRACTICE FOR WEEK 1

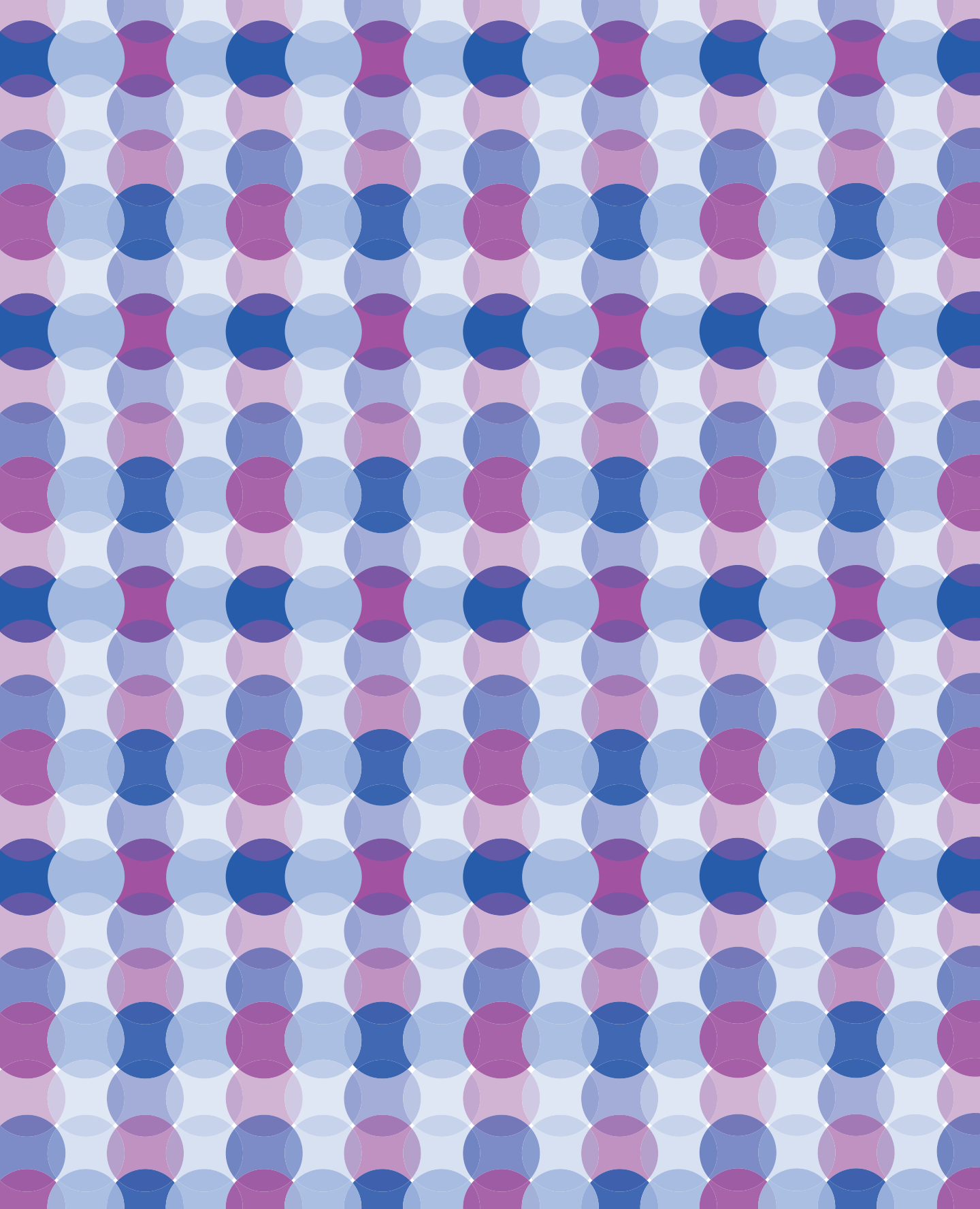
This week, I want you to experiment with the strategies from this chapter to begin defusing from your thoughts. I want you to gain enough distance from them to assess their helpfulness and to understand if they are moving you toward or away from your values.

REFLECTING ON WEEK 1

You took an important step in beginning your 7-week journey. Being able to create some distance from your thoughts will help you observe if your thoughts are moving you toward or away from the things that matter most to you. Take some time to reflect on what you have learned this week and how you are feeling. Here are some prompts to get you started:

- What are the thoughts you are fused with, entangled in, or hooked on?
- Are they thoughts about the past or future, thoughts about yourself, judgments, reasons, or rules?
- How does this impact the way you show up in your own life?
- What are some of your narratives?

- [illegible]



WEEK 2

Getting Unstuck

Now that you've had some practice distancing yourself from your thoughts, we're going to work on making room for unpleasant feelings, emotions, physical sensations, memories, images, and urges, instead of trying to suppress them or push them away. Don't worry, there's a good reason for this. Avoidance of feelings, just like fusion to thoughts, often leads to avoidance of valued ACTIONS. So, week 2 is going to focus on the core process of acceptance to help you get unstuck.

ACCEPTANCE

The word *acceptance* is often misunderstood as a kind of giving up or resignation. It is often associated with hopelessness. It's also been misunderstood to mean that something is okay or fair. Acceptance is an acknowledgment of the way things are; it embraces reality and doesn't just put up with it. Acceptance is not giving up or simply tolerating something. It is intended for those situations in which change is not an option. Acceptance does not apply to situations that are changeable. (I'll help you distinguish between the two a bit later.) For now, what is important is that you know giving up on, being okay with, and tolerating something are not acceptance, and acceptance doesn't apply to all situations.

What is acceptance? The word *acceptance* comes from the Latin word *acceptation*, meaning the “action of taking or receiving what is offered.” It is an active, not a passive, process. It is being open to the reality of the way things are rather than being stuck in the way you want them to be or the way you think they should be. For many people, myself included, there is a discrepancy between the way things are and the way you think things should be or the way you want things to be. Acceptance is letting go of this discrepancy and embracing reality. It goes a long way to helping people get unstuck.

*“We can struggle with what is. We can judge
or blame others or ourselves. Or we can
accept what cannot be changed. Peace comes
from an honorable and open heart accepting
what is true. Do we want to remain stuck?
Or to release the fearful sense of self and rest
kindly where we are?”*

—JACK KORNFIELD

WHY PRACTICE ACCEPTANCE?

Still not convinced that acceptance is a good idea? Why not continue to resist? First and foremost, resistance doesn't work. Check your own experience. How has resistance worked for you? Has it changed anything? Has it made anything different or better? Second, acceptance is required for change. Addiction is a wonderful example of how acceptance is needed to change. In traditional 12-step programs, acceptance is the first step and it isn't done for the sake of acceptance itself. You don't stop at "I have an alcohol problem" (or at least you shouldn't). Unfortunately, sometimes people will label themselves an "addict" in a way that is stigmatizing and shaming, and keeps them stuck instead of facilitating change. Do you see how important it is to balance acceptance with change? Acceptance without change will likely keep you stuck. You don't stop at acceptance; you use acceptance to facilitate change. ACT is not just about acceptance; it is a balance between acceptance and change (or commitment to change), hence the name acceptance and commitment therapy. Acceptance is not the end goal; acceptance is done in the service of your values, in the service of getting you unstuck and moving you toward the things that matter to you.

WHAT ARE YOUR PAINFUL EXPERIENCES TELLING YOU?

Remember that your feelings are not the problem; your feelings are communicating with you. If you avoid what you are feeling, you are missing important information. Avoidance of feelings, just like fusion to thoughts, often leads to avoidance of ACTions. The origin of the word *emotion* comes from the Latin word *motus*, which means movement or motion. So, you shouldn't just ignore your emotions because they are trying to get you to move. If you have been ignoring your emotions it's no wonder you feel stuck.

Let me give you some examples to illustrate this. Say you are miserable in your current job. You have to experience your own unhappiness in order to make changes. This unhappiness is a large part of what will motivate you to

look for other jobs, despite the reality that job searching is an inherently difficult and unpleasant process, and requires you to face difficult experiences like opening yourself up to judgment and scrutiny. If you avoid your emotions (the unhappiness at your job) and tune them out by playing video games or getting high all the time, you might fail to make use of your emotions the way they are intended. There must be an acceptance, openness, and willingness to experience these painful feelings in order to move toward the things you value and engage in committed ACTION. What are your emotions telling you? What are they trying to get you to move toward?

WHAT ARE YOUR PAINFUL EXPERIENCES TELLING OTHERS?

Not only is it important that you allow yourself to experience your emotions, but it may also be important to share them with others. It can be helpful to hide our feelings sometimes (maybe you don't want everyone to see you crying at work), but it isn't helpful to hide them from yourself. It often isn't helpful to hide our emotions from others either. Displaying sadness, for example, might help elicit support, if expressed appropriately or within appropriate relationships. If you expressed how you feel to others, what would it signal?

FINDING BALANCE

So how do we balance acceptance and ACTion? Let's look at an example. The check engine light comes on in your car. Does it make sense to accept this experience or is it a call to ACTion? I am guessing you would pretty quickly say that it is a call to ACTion and you need to take your car into the shop. Non-acceptance doesn't really make any sense, in this case, and could cause further problems. But what about when you are experiencing difficult or unpleasant feelings, emotions, sensations, and urges? What can you do about these experiences? It isn't as easy as taking yourself into the shop, but it is often what brings people into therapy. Sometimes when people come to therapy they are expecting or hoping that the therapist may be able to "fix" them the same way you might fix a car, but it doesn't work that way. Maybe that was what you had hoped for in picking up this book. But painful feelings are a part of being human and are there to help us move forward if we use them appropriately.

When difficult emotions show up it can be similar to a call to ACTion, not because there is something wrong with you that needs to be fixed, but because ACTion is needed. Ignoring your emotions in many ways is similar to ignoring a check engine light. You need to decipher the message your emotions are telling you and start moving to get yourself unstuck. Painful emotions may be signaling the need for many different things: finding a new job, leaving a bad relationship, sharing how you feel with your partner, etc. When you ignore them, it is just as silly as ignoring a check engine light and potentially a lot more damaging. Ignoring these painful feelings, or being unwilling to accept them, will move you away from rather than toward, your values. Do you see how, in many ways, healthy action is not possible without acceptance?

STRATEGY

IS IT WORKING?

It might be helpful to identify some of the things you are struggling with. What are some of the things you are struggling with? What difficult feelings, emotions, memories, physical sensations, or urges show up for you? In other words, what is it that made you pick up this book?

Identify whether the things you wrote down are external problems (such as a relationship problem with a partner who does not treat you with respect) or internal problems (like being sick and tired of feeling devalued).

Identify what you have tried to make it better.

Sometimes people come to therapy wanting to change other people rather than themselves. There are never any guarantees when it comes to other people. And as much as you may want to, you cannot change others, though you might be able to change yourself in terms of things like practicing more assertive

communication (for example, saying “When you dismiss my feelings, it makes me feel devalued” or asking more directly for what you need from the other person, such as saying “I need you to apologize and be more respectful of my feelings”). This could be a good step, but they still may not change. Here, too, acceptance becomes important. ACTION may also be needed in the form of ending the relationship. Do you see how your painful feelings tell you something important?

I want you to identify the ways you have tried to make your problems go away. Has it worked?

If it has, great! But my guess is that if you are reading this book, there is something that you are having trouble accepting. If whatever you have tried has not worked, particularly if what you are struggling with is an internal experience that you have had for a long time, there is a good chance that acceptance is the answer.

I have one last question for you: If what you are struggling with is not something that you can change, what have the consequences of *not* accepting it been? What has it cost you, both in the short term and in the long term?

AVOIDANCE

Sometimes avoidance or distraction is okay. When it gets in the way of valued ACTION, then it becomes a problem. Let's say that someone has a lot of anxiety related to work. Every time they sit down at their desk, they get overwhelmed and often find themselves getting up to talk to coworkers instead. That might be okay if it happens once in a while, but what if they start missing deadlines and end up getting fired because they keep trying to avoid their anxiety by avoiding their work? They don't have to experience the anxiety anymore, but in the long term, they lose their job. This is often the case when it comes to avoidance of difficult feelings. In the short term, there is relief—in the long term, there are consequences.

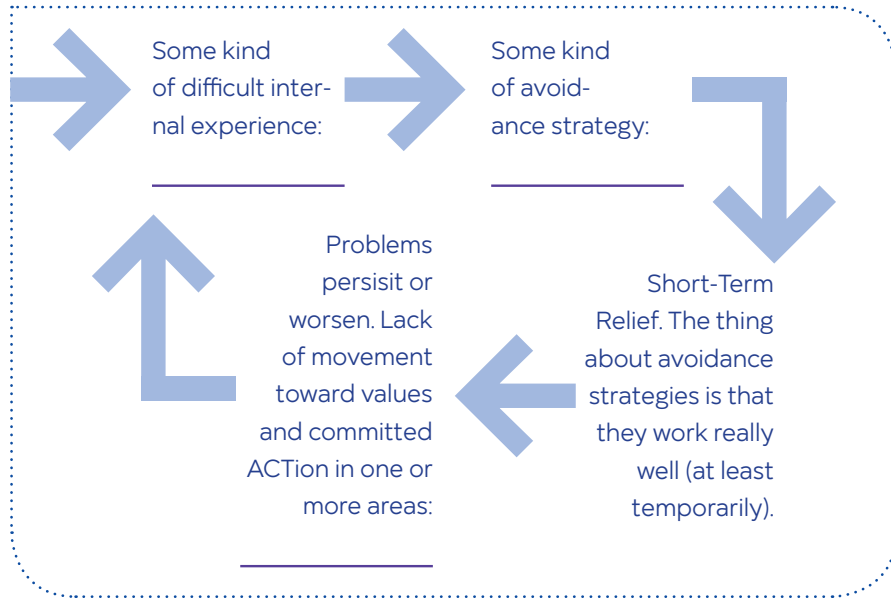
THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-COMPASSION

When you start allowing or accepting your internal experiences rather than avoiding them, it is really difficult, which is why you may have been trying to control or avoid your experiences for so long. It's only normal not to want to experience painful things. Avoiding pain can be helpful. Unfortunately, when it comes to internal things, this strategy can be very problematic. It can keep us stuck. This is why self-compassion is so important. Do you remember what self-compassion is? Self-compassion is relating to yourself the same way you might relate to a friend who is having a difficult experience. Imagine that one of your friends confided in you that they are experiencing intense feelings of loneliness, heightened anxiety, distressing memories, or intrusive thoughts. How might you respond to them? Typically, people would offer kindness, compassion, or support, maybe even a hug. I hope you wouldn't tell your friend to just "try not to think about," "get over it," "suck it up," "have a drink," that they are stupid for feeling that way, or something else along those lines. Now, how do you relate to yourself when you are feeling some of these things? Do you offer yourself kindness, compassion, or support? I hope so. If not, let's work on changing that. Imagine what would be most helpful to you when you experience distress. Is it "suck it up" or is it "I'm so sorry. I know this is hard. I am here for you"? That's what we want to move toward. Can you try being kind, compassionate, and supportive toward yourself as you move toward accepting your painful internal experiences?

STRATEGY

CYCLE OF AVOIDANCE

Remember this cycle? Try filling in the blanks below with your difficult internal experiences, avoidance strategies, and consequences.



Here is a list of difficult internal experiences, some avoidance strategies, and areas of potential consequences if you are having trouble:

DIFFICULT INTERNAL EXPERIENCES	AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES	AREAS OF POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES
Some kind of difficult emotion (e.g., boredom, loneliness, loss, feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame)	Some type of distraction (e.g., television, music, reading, computer or video games, work)	Education/Employment

Intense or difficult physical sensations (e.g., anxiousness, heart racing, tingling, numbness, shortness of breath)	Avoiding people, places or things (e.g., procrastinating on work or important tasks, not going to the grocery store or mall due to crowds, not dating)	Intimate Relationships
Distressing memories or images (e.g., traumatic experiences)	Trying to stop or change your thoughts	Health
Intrusive thoughts (e.g., obsessive thoughts, rumination)	Dismissing or minimizing your feelings	Family
Urges (e.g., drinking, smoking, arguing, sending angry text messages or e-mails)	Using alcohol, marijuana, or other substances	Friendships

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Feel free to fill in some of your own experiences. What have you learned about the difficult internal experiences you have, the ways in which you might try to avoid them, and the costs associated with doing so?

THE POINT IS TO EXPERIENCE YOUR PAIN, NOT STOP IT

The point of this kind of exercise is to put you in touch with your difficult feelings. Sometimes, just the simple act of getting in touch with your feelings will change them. Particularly if you are holding your experience with kindness, it might make your feelings less difficult, intense, or painful. Just like the point of defusion is not to change or stop your thoughts, acceptance is not meant to change your feelings, but sometimes it does make things easier. And sometimes it might make things harder. That's okay, too. I trust and believe in you and your ability to sit with your own experience. May you believe in yourself.

STOP PUTTING YOUR LIFE ON HOLD AND START LIVING!

Why get in touch with the pain? The idea is to stop putting your life on hold in unsuccessful attempts to try and stop or control your internal experience. Open up to your emotions, which contain an important message. If you can defuse from your thoughts and accept your emotions, you can use them to start living your life.

STRATEGY

ACCEPTING YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH COMPASSION

Here is an exercise that will not only help you practice accepting your experience, but bring a sense of compassion to it as well:

1. Adopt a posture that reflects a sense of ease. Close your eyes, if it is comfortable, or slowly lower your gaze down toward the floor in front of you.
2. Bring your awareness to your breathing. Notice as you inhale through the nostrils, as your chest and abdomen expand with each inhalation and contract with each exhalation. Follow this slow, rhythmic movement of the breath as it flows in and out of your body.
3. Bring to mind something you are struggling with—something that you have difficulty accepting, something that has you feeling stuck. What is this feeling? Can you label it? Maybe it is sadness, loss, or regret.
4. Notice any difficult physical sensations you feel. Is there a tightness in your chest, a lump in your throat, or a knot in the pit of your stomach? See if you can feel these sensations with a sense of willingness and openness. Turn toward the sensations, not away from them. Open up to, allow, and accept them. Hold your experience in kind awareness.
5. Notice if there is an urge to turn away or resist. Know that you can always return to your breathing, grounding yourself in the breath, but do your best to stay with your present-moment experience. Do your best to open up to, allow, and accept your experience. Hold it in kind awareness, however difficult, even if just for a few moments.

STRATEGY

NOTICING DIFFICULT INTERNAL EXPERIENCES

Just as you are not your thoughts, you are also not your emotions. They are all a part of your experience, along with physical sensations, but sometimes we talk about our emotions as though they are who we are. We say things like “I am sad,” “I am bored,” or “I am lonely.” Instead, you can try saying “I am noticing the emotion of sadness,” “I am noticing a heaviness in my chest,” or “I am noticing that I feel emptiness.” This is another quick strategy for gaining awareness of and distance from your emotions that might make it easier to accept or embrace them.

ACCEPTANCE AND YOU

Acceptance applies to everything we have talked about—stress, worry and anxiety, OCD, panic attacks and panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, trauma and PTSD, depression, low self-esteem, perfectionism, anger, addiction, and more. Let’s look at how acceptance can be applied to each of these issues.

Stress

Perhaps there is an ACTion you can engage in to mitigate your stress. If you are stressed at work, perhaps you could talk to your employer about your workload and responsibilities. Maybe it would be helpful to engage in more self-care (e.g., making sure you are sleeping, eating well, exercising, socializing with friends, and doing things you enjoy). If the source of your stress is a situation outside of your control, practicing acceptance is key.

STRATEGY

START LIVING!

What are the emotions, physical sensations, memories, and urges that are putting your life on hold? What would it mean to start accepting them and start living again? Here are a few examples of reasons we put our life on hold and what we *could* achieve if we accepted our emotions:

- If I weren't so self-conscious about my body, I could date.
- If I weren't so anxious, I could meet new people.
- If I didn't experience panic attacks, I could go to the gym.
- If I didn't feel so inadequate, I could accept the job offer.
- If I didn't have these memories, nightmares, and flashbacks, I could socialize.

Fill in the blank with your own emotional obstacle and what you could achieve:

If I didn't _____, I could _____.

What would you have to accept to get unstuck? Are you ready to stop the struggle and start living?

- ~~If I weren't so self-conscious about my body,~~ I could date.
- ~~If I weren't so anxious,~~ I could meet new people.
- ~~If I didn't experience panic attacks,~~ I could go to the gym.
- ~~If I didn't feel so inadequate,~~ I could accept the job offer.
- ~~If I didn't have these memories, nightmares and flashbacks,~~ I could socialize.
- If I didn't _____, I could _____.

When we are not investing our time and energy in what we are trying to avoid, we can invest in building meaningful lives.

Worry and Anxiety

With worry and anxiety, it may be acceptance of difficult thoughts related to uncertainty or the future. In this case, it is also important to accept the things outside of your control.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

With OCD, it is a matter of accepting the obsessive thoughts so that the need to engage in the compulsions to try and remove the distress associated with the thoughts is unnecessary.

Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder

With panic attacks and panic disorder, it is about accepting the intense physical sensations. In this case, it may be an openness and willingness to experience things like tingling sensations, shortness of breath, sweating, or facial flushing.

Phobias

When it comes to phobias, acceptance will involve the fearful thoughts and intense physical sensations associated with the feared object.

Social Anxiety Disorder

With social anxiety disorder, acceptance is about making room for fears related to judgment, evaluation, and rejection.

Trauma and PTSD

With trauma and PTSD, it may be about accepting that the experience happened (remember, acceptance does not mean that whatever happened was okay) or welcoming the memories rather than trying to push them away. It may also mean going to see the people, places, and things that remind you of the experience, and being willing to accept the distress that shows up, in the service of expanding rather than restricting your life.

Depression

With depression, it may be accepting the feelings of sadness and loss and learning how to make use of what these experiences are telling you to find a way to move forward. For example, if you are withdrawing and isolating due to depression or if you have stopped engaging in the activities you enjoy because of your depression, you may need to open up to the discomfort associated with getting out of the house, engaging with other people, and at least trying out some of the things you used to like, or even trying something new.

Low Self-Esteem

With low self-esteem, acceptance may be about accepting certain characteristics or traits you dislike about yourself.

Perfectionism

With perfectionism, acceptance will be about accepting (or better yet, embracing) imperfection.

Anger

With anger, it may be about accepting the sensations associated with anger, and the tension it creates, without immediately discharging it and lashing out at others to try and get rid of the discomfort.

Addiction

With addiction, it may be about learning how to accept the urges to drink or use without acting on them, or accepting the difficult emotions like boredom, loneliness, guilt, or shame that show up without using alcohol or drugs.

WHAT IF I STILL DON'T WANT TO ACCEPT?

That is okay! It's your choice and acceptance is not all or nothing. Maybe you are willing to accept your pain to some degree. It doesn't have to be 100 percent, but the more you are willing to accept, the more you open yourself up to getting unstuck in your own life. Remember, the point isn't just to feel the pain for pain's sake—it's in the service of your values and building a full and meaningful life. Acceptance allows difficult internal experiences to be present without being a barrier to committed ACTION.

Perhaps there is some specific barrier to acceptance. When you work through your emotional obstacle, fill in the blanks: "If I accept _____ it would mean that _____." Does something troubling present itself? Ask yourself if the outcome is true. For example, "If I accept that they refused to apologize, it would mean that their actions were okay." Remember that acceptance doesn't mean that something is okay; it is a simple acknowledgment of reality. "They refused to apologize and their actions were not okay." Is that something you can accept? It might be helpful here to notice the role of the storytelling mind and practice defusion while being careful not to dismiss or minimize your own emotions. Don't forget to practice self-compassion as well. Notice what barriers you might have to accept. Are they moving you toward your values or keeping you stuck?

PRACTICE FOR WEEK 2

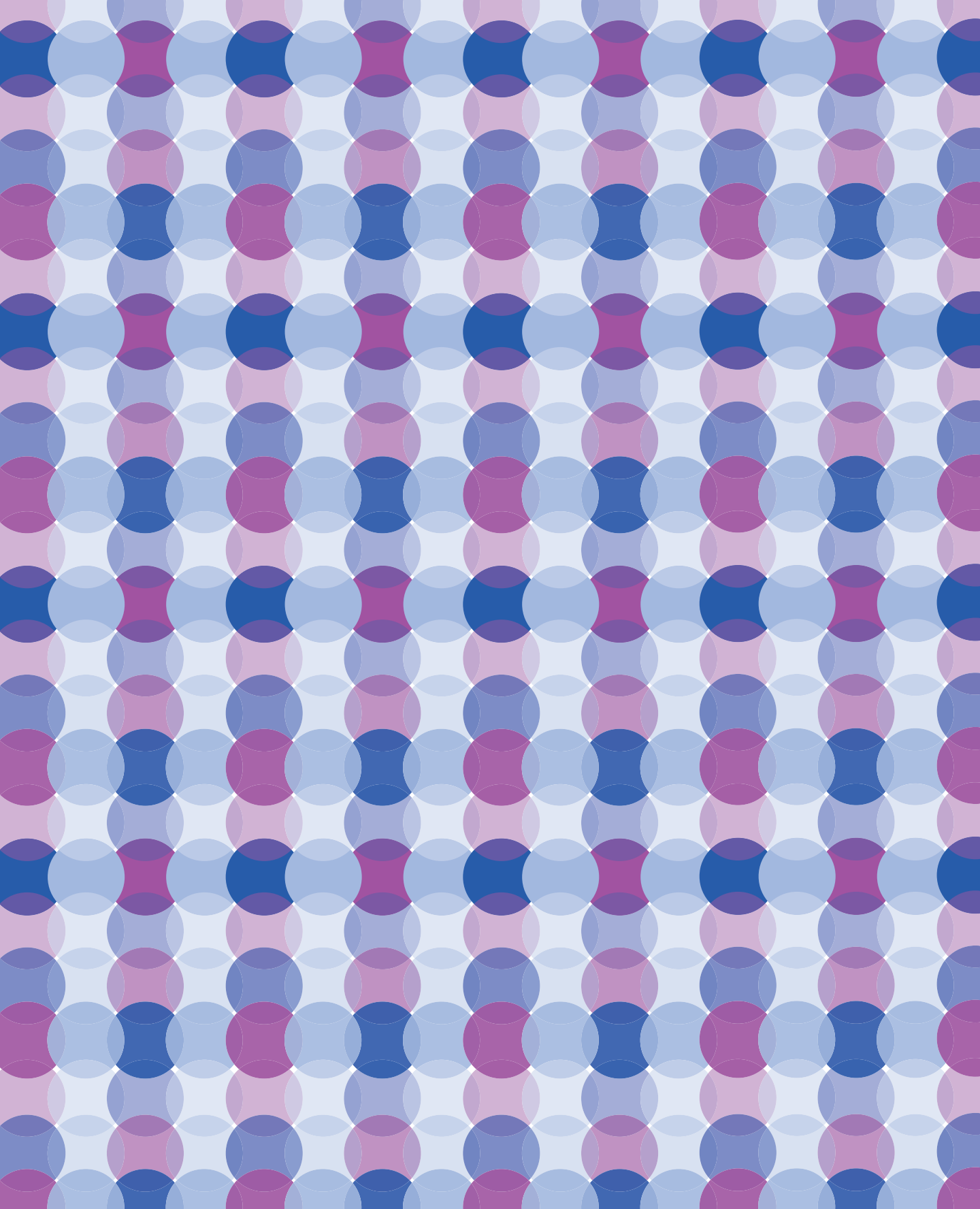
For this week, I would like you to work through the exercises from this chapter. These will start to open up to some of your difficult experiences and help you get unstuck.

REFLECTING ON WEEK 2

Congratulations on finishing week 2! This week focused on the core process of acceptance, specifically accepting the things outside of your control, like difficult feelings, in the service of moving toward your values.

Take some time to reflect on this week in relation to how you were feeling. Here are some prompts to get you started:

If what you are struggling with hasn't changed and nothing you've tried has worked, what has resisting rather than accepting cost you (e.g., work, health, or relationships)? What do you need to accept or embrace in order to move toward the things you want for yourself? What would you have to accept to get unstuck? Can you try being kind, compassionate, and supportive toward yourself as you move toward accepting your painful internal experiences? Do you notice any barriers to acceptance? What would it mean to start living again?



WEEK 3

Use Mindfulness to Be Present in the Moment

On to week 3! The core process for this week is present moment, which in many ways resembles mindfulness. In ACT, several of the skills contain elements of mindfulness, including the two we have already covered—defusion and acceptance. This week we'll build upon the skills you have learned and practiced over the last two weeks to include mindfulness as a way to live in the present moment.

MINDFULNESS IN A NUTSHELL

What is mindfulness? You may remember Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness: "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally." This is the definition of mindfulness that I like to use, although there are many out there. A succinct definition is simply "kind awareness." Mindfulness is simply about being present in the moment, in a way that is open, curious, and kind. If this isn't quite connecting, don't worry. Mindfulness is best understood experientially: it makes more sense the more you practice it. I will give you lots of practices to experiment with over the next week.

MINDFULNESS AND ACT

The skill we are focusing on this week, present moment, most closely resembles what is traditionally referred to as mindfulness. However, in ACT, there are mindfulness skills inherent to several of the other core processes, two of which (defusion and acceptance) we have already covered. If you have been practicing the strategies and exercises in the book so far, you have already been practicing mindfulness. Surprise!

MINDFULNESS MISCONCEPTIONS

Before we jump into different ways of practicing mindfulness, it might be important to clear up some common misconceptions about it.

MINDFULNESS IS NOT A RELIGION

Although it is often associated with Buddhism, mindfulness is found in many different religious traditions, including Christianity and Judaism. Yet, in and of itself, it is not a religion. Although mindfulness is sometimes associated with and practiced as part of various religious traditions, that is not the mindfulness you will practice in ACT or in this book. The practices here are completely secular.

MINDFULNESS IS NOT A RELAXATION TECHNIQUE

Many people believe the misconception that mindfulness is a relaxation technique. This truly misses the point. The purpose of mindfulness is not to change your experience in any way; it is to learn to be open and present with whatever is here in the moment, even if it is difficult. Oftentimes, people following a mindfulness practice will feel more relaxed (though not always), and this is just a welcome by-product. Mindfulness is about learning how to be present and welcoming of whatever your experience is. We are not trying to eliminate, control, or distract from difficult thoughts and feelings. In many ways, we are trying to do the exact opposite of that and make contact with them.

MINDFULNESS IS NOT ABOUT CLEARING YOUR MIND

A common misconception about mindfulness is that when meditating, one's mind becomes clear. Clients have told me, "Oh, I tried mindfulness, but it didn't work for me." Either they didn't feel relaxed while meditating, or their mind didn't somehow miraculously shut off while meditating. Sorry to break it to you, but if your mind ever shut off, you would be dead! This is the nature of the storytelling mind—there will always be some chatter. Some days there will be a little chatter and other days you will have racing thoughts that flood the mind. You will be able to use mindfulness to notice these thoughts without judgment.

The concept of nonjudgment is also often misunderstood. Practicing nonjudgment doesn't mean that you won't have reactions to things. (You are a human being; you are going to have reactions.) It simply means holding your judgments lightly or observing them as though from a distance. Sometimes I practice mindfulness in my office in downtown Los Angeles and will hear cars honking, construction noises, and people yelling. Sometimes they make me angry and I want them to stop. I simply notice these reactions as a part of my mindfulness practice.

MINDFULNESS IS NOT A QUICK FIX

You may not want to hear this, but the truth is that mindfulness is not a quick fix. You may have heard many wonderful things about mindfulness, and there are many wonderful things about mindfulness, but experimenting with mindfulness for a week isn't going to miraculously change your life. That's not to say that you need to become a monk and meditate several hours a day for years on end to experience benefits, either. In fact, a 2010 meta-analysis found that even small "doses" of mindfulness can be helpful. As with any skill you want to develop, it requires practice on a consistent basis over time. Mindfulness doesn't take much time out of your day or take years of practice before you start noticing benefits. I rarely meditate for more than 5 to 10 minutes unless I go to a sitting group or I'm on a retreat, and while I have been practicing mindfulness for several years, I noticed benefits after practicing consistently for just a few weeks. I would encourage you to start with something that works for you. Remember, ACT is about being flexible, so if you can meditate for 5 minutes a day or for 30 minutes a day, that's great. Here is one quick strategy you might try:

STRATEGY

QUICK MINDFULNESS STRATEGY

Set an alarm on your phone for a few different times throughout the day. When it goes off, check in with yourself and your present-moment experience. What thoughts, emotions, and sensations are present? Are you lost in the storytelling mind? Use these moments to practice coming back to the present.

“Most of us have spent our lives caught up in plans, expectations, and ambitions for the future; in regrets, guilt, or shame about the past. To come into the present is to stop the war.”

—JACK KORNFIELD

A NOTE ON TRAUMA

Particularly if you have experienced trauma or have PTSD, it may be helpful to begin your mindfulness practice by focusing on the external world with your eyes open, taking in the sights, smells, touches, tastes, and sounds that surround you. Be creative and experiment with what is around you. You could even mindfully pet a dog or cat.

LET'S PRACTICE

Start with an amount of time that feels realistic—5, 10, 15 minutes a day—and if every day doesn't feel realistic, see if you can commit to Monday to Friday or even three days per week. Most people benefit from listening to guided audio in the beginning. There are a lot of mindfulness apps and other resources available. Check out some of the Resources (page 165) and see what might work for you. Many people find meditating first thing in the morning works best for them, but experiment to discover what works best for you. The one thing to be cautious of about meditating at night is that you might fall asleep. While some people use mindfulness exercises to help facilitate sleep, that is not our intention here. We are trying to make contact with the present moment. Whatever you decide, try to stick with a regular, consistent time that will work for you.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

Here are some additional tips before we get started.

POSTURE

Most people choose to sit, but you don't have to be in full lotus pose. You can simply sit in a chair. You can also meditate lying down. In fact, this is the way I meditate most of the time, in savasana before or after yoga. The only thing to be cautious of here is that you don't fall asleep. On that note, sometimes people will also meditate while standing to make sure they don't drift off. If you are seated, you can tuck your chin slightly down or imagine your head is being pulled up from the crown of your head by an imaginary string. You can place your hands in your lap folded into each other or rest them on your thighs. Sit with your upper body erect, reflecting a state of alertness. Most people choose to sit, with your feet planted firmly on the floor or crossed in your lap, if that works better for your body. You can close your eyes, or if that is not comfortable, simply soften your gaze and bring your eyes to the floor in front of you.

DEALING WITH RESTLESSNESS

Sometimes while meditating, people imagine that you must remain entirely motionless. While remaining still might help you bring awareness and attention to the present moment, you may become very restless while meditating. Here, you have a choice: to move or not to move. Give yourself permission to move if needed, particularly if you are meditating for an extended period of time. I ask that you don't move reflexively, but rather with intention. In fact, you can make the movement a part of your mindfulness practice.

DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS

While it may be a good idea to limit distractions, you will never be able to eliminate them entirely. A good idea is to try to use them in your practice. Notice any sounds that arise or other distractions that might occur. Whether external or internal, I promise they will arise.

DEALING WITH JUDGMENTS

For those new to meditation, one of the biggest barriers is feeling like you are doing it wrong. This is another place where the “I am not good enough” story can show up. Your storytelling mind, after all, is not something you can shut off, even in meditation, so what can you do? Why not use it as an opportunity to sharpen your defusion skills and unhook or disentangle yourself? You can simply notice and label it silently, stating, “judgment,” or inwardly, saying, “thank you, mind,” and practice coming back to the present. Know that you are not doing it wrong. There is no way to incorrectly meditate so long as you are bringing your awareness back to your object of attention, whether it is sensations in the body, the breath, sounds, or even some external object or activity. Know that whatever judgments arise are coming from the storytelling mind. You will get caught up in the storytelling mind while meditating; it is inevitable. Truly, this is the practice of mindfulness—unhooking from the storytelling mind and returning to make contact with the present moment, again and again, as many times as needed. Try being patient, kind, and gentle with yourself as you practice. Remember, mindfulness isn’t just present-moment awareness, it is kind awareness.

FORMAL VS. INFORMAL MINDFULNESS

There are two different types of mindfulness: formal and informal.

WHAT IS FORMAL MINDFULNESS?

Formal mindfulness is when you take time out of your day to engage in a practice, such as a body scan, mindfulness of breathing, or some of the other strategies I’ll introduce this week.

WHAT IS INFORMAL MINDFULNESS?

Informal mindfulness is when you bring the same kind of awareness to a regular daily activity. For example, you can mindfully brush your teeth, watch a show, or prepare and eat a meal. I will give you several informal mindfulness exercises as well.

Note: Sometimes, particularly if people feel that they cannot fit formal mindfulness into their schedule, they will want to rely solely on informal practices, but I strongly advise against this. You truly need both. Remember, a formal practice doesn't have to be long. It could only take three minutes. It's not about the time it takes away from your day, but about your level of commitment. It can be difficult to commit to a formal mindfulness practice because it doesn't feel particularly productive. You may think, "You want me to take five minutes out of my day to just sit there?" Well, yes! You aren't sitting there doing nothing. What you are doing is quite important, even if it doesn't necessarily feel that way. You are retraining your mind. Know it is time well spent. Certainly, it is a more productive use of your time than mindlessly scrolling through Facebook or Instagram. How much time do you spend doing that? You might consider this as a cue to practice mindfulness instead. Whenever you have the urge to pick up your phone and start scrolling, stop and take a mindful pause. Bring your attention to the body, to the sensations of the breath, and ask yourself: What thoughts are here? What feelings? What sensations? Congratulations! You're practicing mindfulness.

INFORMAL STRATEGY

DAILY ACTIVITIES

You can bring mindful awareness to a large range of daily activities, such as brushing your teeth, taking a shower, and washing the dishes. If you choose to practice mindfulness while brushing your teeth, first of all, *slow down*: notice how the tube of toothpaste feels in your hand, what the sensations are like as you put pressure on the tube, as the toothpaste emerges and sits on the brush, notice the colors and shape of the toothpaste, the sensations as you brush your teeth, the taste, etc. If you choose to practice mindfulness in the shower, notice the sensations of the water as it pours over your body, the temperature, the smell of your shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. If you are practicing mindfulness while doing the dishes, notice what it is like to hold the dishes, what their weight and shape feel like, the water and bubbles, the sensations as you scrub them clean.

INFORMAL STRATEGY

MINDFUL EATING

You can practice eating mindfully, too. This is traditionally done with a raisin, but you can mindfully eat any food. I once mindfully ate yogurt and will never look at it the same way again—the texture of yogurt is unreal! Try eating one snack or meal mindfully this week. Remember to slow down, notice what your food looks like, the colors, and texture. Notice how it smells. Notice how it tastes. Notice what it feels like in your mouth as you chew and as you swallow.

INFORMAL STRATEGY

MINDFUL WALKING

People typically practice mindful walking when they aren't going anywhere, but rather walk a few paces in one direction before turning around and retracing their steps. Slow your pace down. You may want to practice near a wall or something you can grab on to to steady yourself, if needed, as slowing down while walking can throw off your balance. Notice as you lift one foot slowly into the air, move forward, shift the weight of your body, slowly place your foot back onto the ground, notice the pressure and contact that your foot makes with the floor, notice as you lift the other foot, and repeat.

FORMAL STRATEGY

BODY SCAN

In MBSR, the first formal strategy that is introduced is the body scan. It is a way of bringing awareness to the sensations of the body. Typically, the body scan is done lying down, but you can also do it sitting in a chair. You can start at either the tips of your toes or the top of your head and work your way up or down the body. Whenever you notice your mind wander off, bring it back to the sensations in the body on whatever area you were focusing on. You can do anything from a 5-minute to a 45-minute scan. I find it especially helpful to use audio while doing a body scan. Check out the Resources section (page 165) for recommendations.

FORMAL STRATEGY

MINDFULNESS OF EMOTIONS

You may have practiced mindfulness of emotions as a part of week 2, in which we were focused on acceptance; this is also a way of making contact with the present moment. Here, you make contact with whatever emotions may be present. Notice where they are arising in the body, notice any physical sensations associated with the emotion, label the emotion, notice where it is most present, notice as it changes in strength or intensity, and shifts or moves through the body. Do all this with a sense of openness, acceptance, and kindness toward yourself, particularly if it is a difficult or unpleasant, painful emotion.

FORMAL STRATEGY

MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

Simple awareness of breathing is by far the most traditional and commonly used mindfulness exercise.

1. Turn your attention inward toward the breath and notice as air moves in through your nostrils, fills your chest and abdomen, notice as they expand with the in-breath and contract on the out-breath, notice the brief pause between each inhalation and each exhalation.
2. Perhaps you pay attention to one particular aspect of the breath—the inhale, for example—using each inhalation as an opportunity to renew your awareness and attention.
3. Perhaps you experience the breath more as one continuous movement through the body, tracking it from moment to moment as it flows in and out, in and out.
4. You could also count your breaths up to 10 and start over again as a way of helping yourself stay in the present moment rather than get carried away by the storytelling mind.

FORMAL STRATEGY

MINDFULNESS OF HEARING

Sometimes, the breath can be hard to attend to, or if you have some difficulty with the breath, such as asthma, for example, focusing on breathing can be anxiety-provoking. For this reason, or simply as a matter of preference, sometimes people prefer to practice mindfulness of sounds. I love mindfulness of sounds. It is something that pulls for my attention quite easily and I enjoy allowing myself to take in the sounds around me, noticing as they change from moment to moment. You don't need to turn on music or do anything special.

1. Close your eyes, if it's comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you, and let sounds come to you.
2. Notice your reactions to sounds, pleasant or unpleasant. Notice moments of relative silence. Notice loud, jarring sounds if they should arise, or constant, quiet sounds, such as the air conditioner or the ticking of a clock.
3. You don't need to seek out sounds. Just let them come to you.
4. You don't need to label the sounds—just allow yourself to take them in, experiencing them, from moment to moment.

FORMAL STRATEGY

MINDFULNESS OF THOUGHTS

You may have practiced this strategy as part of week 1, in which we were focused on defusion, but it is also a way to make contact with the present moment. Here you can notice thoughts as they arise, without judgment, without hooking onto them or getting entangled, with a sense of kindness—noticing with a sense of openness, as an observer of thoughts, perhaps visualizing them as leaves in a stream or clouds in the sky.

FORMAL STRATEGY

CHOICELESS OR OPEN AWARENESS

This is one of my favorite mindfulness exercises and the one I most often use. Here, you don't try to focus your attention on any one aspect of your awareness, such as physical sensations, the breath, sound, thoughts, or emotions, as in the previous exercises, but open or expand your awareness to include them all. If in one moment you notice thoughts, notice thoughts; if in the next moment you notice physical sensations, notice physical sensations; if in the next moment you are aware of sounds, notice sounds.

WHY IS MINDFULNESS SO IMPORTANT?

You might be wondering why mindfulness plays such a large role in ACT. How does it fit in? Well, the skills of defusion, acceptance, present moment, and observer self, all of which contain elements of mindfulness, are important because they allow you to pay attention to difficult experiences like thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, and urges without immediately reacting to them. Instead, you make a conscious decision as to how you want to respond to any given situation based on your values. Once again, it is about creating the space, openness, and flexibility to engage in living out your values through committed ACTION.

In a way, all of the six core processes in ACT are linked to the present moment. It is in the present moment that defusion and acceptance are possible. It is also where values and committed ACTION occur. Remember that the point is not simply to be present, but to help increase your ability to attend to your present-moment experience so that you can respond rather than react reflexively through old habits that may not be serving you.

WHAT IS COMPASSION AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO MINDFULNESS?

Compassion is central to mindfulness. What is compassion? I like Sharon Salzberg's definition: "the trembling or quivering of the heart in response to seeing pain or suffering." When we sympathize with or feel the pain of another and wish to alleviate that suffering, that is compassion. When that suffering is in oneself, it becomes self-compassion. We briefly discussed the importance of compassion, specifically self-compassion, last week when we discussed acceptance, because acceptance can be really hard. It is also really hard to be present. When awareness, or mindfulness, increases, so do many difficulties. This is why as awareness or mindfulness increases, so must compassion. In the Buddhist tradition, they often talk about mindfulness as one wing of the bird and compassion as the other; you need both to fly. In other words, as you become more aware of some of the difficulties in your own life, you need compassion to sustain it. Compassion, like awareness or mindfulness, is a capacity we can strengthen.

WHAT ABOUT THE PAST AND FUTURE? AREN'T THEY IMPORTANT?

Sometimes people get confused about mindfulness or making contact with the present moment, suggesting that somehow it dismisses the past or future. This is also a misconception. Making contact with the present moment does not ignore the past or the future. Although, as far as ACT is concerned, the past and future are not here; it is only language or the storytelling mind that makes it seem that way. It is the storytelling mind that creates memories of the past and constructions of the future. Living in the past or worrying about the future are signs that you are caught up in the storytelling mind. Here, you want to try to unhook and come back to the present. Why not live in the past or the future? Because the present moment is the only place where change is actually possible. You can learn from the past or plan for the future, but that happens in the present moment too.

STRATEGY

MINDFUL MOVEMENT: YOGA, TAI CHI, OR QI GONG

You might also consider using mindful movement. The more that I practiced mindfulness, the less I gravitated toward high-energy workouts on a stationary bike and the more I began practicing yoga, which has become, in many ways, the foundation of my practice. If sitting isn't your thing, you might also enjoy some type of mindful movement such as yoga, tai chi, or qi gong.

PRACTICE FOR WEEK 3

What strategies do you think might work for you? I want you to choose one informal and one formal strategy. How long do you intend to practice? How many days a week? Where do you intend to practice? Take a look at the mindfulness resources at the back of the book (page 165). These will help you get started.

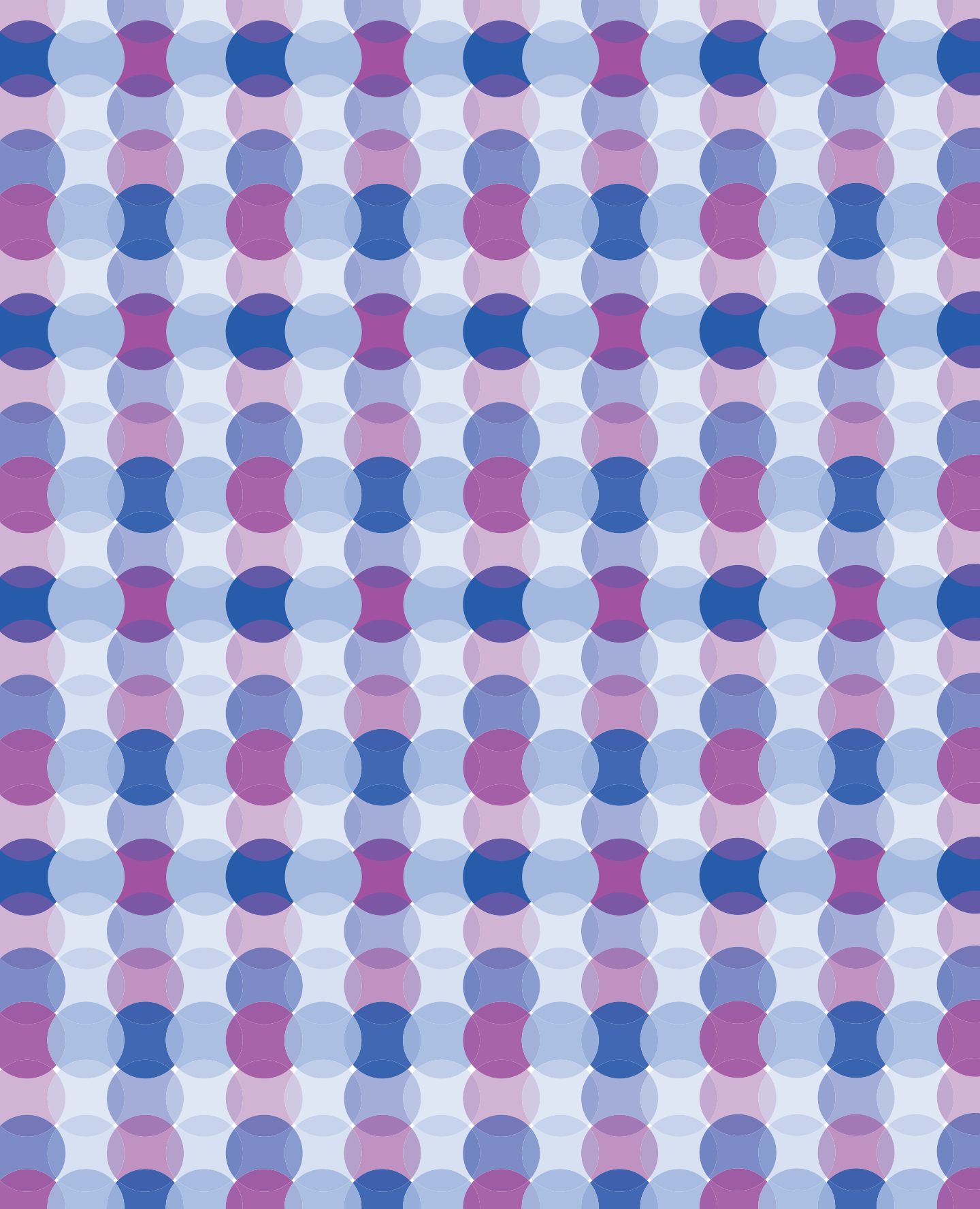
You can use the chart below to keep track of your progress and your observations:

	MON.	TUES.	WED.	THUR.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.
What informal practice did you do?							
When did you do it?							
Where did you do it?							
For how long did you do it?							
What were your observations?							
What formal practice did you do?							
When did you do it?							
Where did you do it?							
For how long did you do it?							
What were your observations?							

I don't want to sound dramatic, but mindfulness can truly change your life. I encourage you to not only continue practicing beyond this week but also to look into mindfulness groups in your area to help support and maintain your practice.

Congratulations on finishing week 3! This week you learned more about how to use mindfulness, beyond the skills of defusion and acceptance, as a way to make contact with the present moment. Take some time to reflect on what this experience was like for you.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines, similar to notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



WEEK 4

Observe Your Own Experience

In week 4, we are going to cover the ACT process of the observer self, or the self-as-context, as it is sometimes referred to. This process underlies the skills we have already covered, including defusion, acceptance, and the present moment, all of which involve a kind of observing or stepping back from your experience. This week we will take the mindfulness skills you have been practicing and developing throughout the past three weeks a bit deeper by connecting with the part of you that is able to observe or notice your experience.

WHAT IS THE OBSERVER SELF?

The observer self can be thought of as the part of you that is able to notice your own experience. For example, you can have thoughts or you can notice that you are having thoughts. You can even notice that you are noticing you are having thoughts. This is the observer self. It is the part of you that notices or even notices you are noticing. I like to think of it as the part within you that is aware, or is awareness itself.

The observer self involves the practice of mindfulness. It uses the skills of mindfulness to bring awareness to the ways in which you experience yourself. In ACT, mindfulness is involved in several of the six core processes, specifically defusion, acceptance, present moment, and the observer self.

The observer self is important because it allows you to connect with a safe place within yourself that is stable and unchanging. You can use this space to take a step back and observe your experience, which can make even very difficult experiences more manageable.

Think of it this way: the aspects of your experience, such as your thoughts and emotions, are like the weather. The observer self is the sky, which holds everything, no matter how dark and stormy it may be. As Pema Chödrön put it, “You are the sky; everything else is the weather.” Sometimes your pain might feel so big that it will destroy you, but if you are able to connect with this part of yourself, you may be able to hold your experience in kind awareness, no matter how huge. Remember, we are not confronting difficult experiences for the sake of pain, but rather in service of your values so that you can live your best life.

WHO AM I?

Connecting with the observer self can be a bit trippy. Sometimes, connecting with this part of yourself can make people question who, or what, they are. It is not that the observer self is the real you; it is simply a part of you that you can access. It is a safe place inside of you that can step back, observe, and make room for your difficult experiences. Being able to hold your difficult experiences in awareness will allow you to better live out your values.

If you are having difficulty connecting with the observer self, you may be attached to what we call the conceptualized self. This is simply your thoughts, ideas, and beliefs about who you are. They can also be facts. For example, I might say I am a 33-year-old, Caucasian, heterosexual, cisgender female. I am a psychologist. I live in LA. While these things may be true, they are not really who I am, but rather facts or realities about me or certain roles I play—they do not define me.

STRATEGY

YOU ARE NOT YOUR STRUGGLE

You may also be too attached to your struggle. For example, “I am depressed,” “I am anxious,” “I am traumatized,” “I am an addict.” Although these statements may very well be true, it’s important to also reflect on whether you’re allowing these parts of your experience to label you in a way that is limiting. What stories, ideas, beliefs, judgments, narratives, or labels about yourself are you attached to? Are they limiting your ability to reflect or change in any way?

Remember, this is not about trying to change your stories, ideas, beliefs, or narratives. Even if they are facts about you, they are not you. You are more than just the facts of your own life.

There may be self-imposed limits you are placing on yourself unnecessarily because you are attached to your idea of yourself. The goal here is to let go of your attachment to these concepts about yourself in order to create more flexibility in your thinking and, eventually, your behavior.

STRATEGY

NOTICE THAT YOU ARE NOTICING

Like mindfulness, the observer self is something that is best understood through experience. So, let's try an exercise that connects with the part of you that notices you are noticing.

1. Begin by closing your eyes, if that is comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you.
2. Feel into the physical sensations of your feet on the floor and the contact your body is making with the chair. What other physical sensations do you notice?
3. Notice that you are noticing these sensations. Observe any thoughts that arise in your mind, then notice that you are noticing your thoughts. Observe any emotions that may be present, even if subtle, and notice that you are noticing your emotions.

What was that experience like for you? Could you connect with the part of yourself that notices, observes, or is aware of your own experience?

STRATEGY

SELF-STATEMENTS

What are some of the statements you might make about your conceptualized self?

What are some of the other concepts, beliefs, judgments, or narratives you have about yourself? For example, how might you complete the statement, "I am a(n) _____ person."

What if some of the beliefs you have about yourself are "I am a bad person," "I am a good person," or some variation of either one of these? It might be more readily apparent how attachment to a belief such as "I am a bad person" may be more problematic than "I am a good person," but any belief or concept to which you have a high degree of attachment or about which you are rigid limits your ability to gain perspective. For example, if you believe that you are kind, are you able to see the unkind actions you have committed? If you believe you are a good parent, are you able to see the ways in which you have not parented well? This is not intended to shame you! Remember to use self-compassion here. It is simply an important part of being able to reflect. If you are too attached to certain ideas about yourself, it limits your ability to reflect and make changes that might allow you to behave in more value-consistent ways.

STRATEGY

THE YOU THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE

Let's try another strategy. This time try dismantling your conceptualized self to bring you more in contact with your observer self.

1. Close your eyes, if that is comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you.
2. Bring your awareness to your breathing, perhaps taking in a few deep inhalations and exhalations or simply allowing yourself to breathe naturally.
3. Center and ground yourself in the simple movements of the breath, from moment to moment, allowing any thoughts, sensations, or other distractions to come and go, like the rise and fall of your chest and abdomen as you breathe in and out.
4. Bring to mind a memory from your childhood. It need not be a difficult memory or even a positive memory. A neutral memory is fine.
5. Can you sense that the person you are now was present then? That there is a part of you that has always been there, that has been continuously present, a witness to or observer of your entire life? As you were a child, an adolescent, and even as you moved into adulthood? As you have changed and transitioned throughout your life and all the many roles you have played, there is a part of you that has remained unchanged, ever-present, observing from moment to moment as your life unfolded across brief moments of time and decades alike. A part of you that observed your entire life, from the earliest moments, all the way to this moment right now.

What was that experience like for you? Were you able to connect with the part of yourself that has been with you your entire life, remaining stable, unchanging, a witness to your experience, and observing your life at all times?

HOW CAN THIS NEW SKILL HELP ME?

Working on this new skill will allow you to step back and gain perspective on your problem: depression, anxiety, perfectionism, addiction, whatever it is you are dealing with. This perspective is what will allow you to take ACTION.

Whatever you are struggling with, if you are lost in the confusion of your own storytelling mind, refusing to practice acceptance by resisting some aspect of your experience, or not able to be present with the difficulties that your struggle invokes, you are going to have trouble moving toward your values. Connecting with the observer self will help you get both the distance and perspective needed from your struggle, and engage fully in your life in a meaningful way.

STRATEGY

"YOU ARE THE SKY; EVERYTHING ELSE IS THE WEATHER."

Let's try one more exercise that might help you gain more distance from your struggle. This time we will do a bit of a visualization, in which you will connect with the part of yourself that is the sky and notice that everything else is just the weather.

1. Close your eyes, if that is comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you. Turn your attention inward toward your breathing, connecting with the sensations of the breath as it moves in and out of your body. Anchor yourself to the present moment through the sensations of the breath. Ground yourself in your breathing.
2. Bring to mind a difficult experience, perhaps not the most difficult experience you have had, but something that carries with it a manageable level of distress that you feel ready to approach. Perhaps something that has you feeling stuck and that you may have been trying to change, avoid, or get rid of.
3. Once you have brought this experience to mind, notice what thoughts arise, what emotions are present, what physical sensations you feel. I want you to imagine your awareness like the sky, vast and limitless, able to hold all these things, unchanged by the intensity of the weather. This is not to minimize your experience, but to allow you to hold it in awareness, observing it all from a place of safety. And if it does not feel safe, you can always return to your breath.

4. As best as you can, hold your difficult experience in awareness as expansive as the sky and notice that the sky itself is not affected by the weather. Notice that even in turbulent times, the sky is not changed by the storms, no matter their intensity, and is able to hold and contain it all. See if you can observe these intense aspects of your experience without getting swept away in it.
5. Do your best to anchor to this place within yourself despite the intensity of the storms in your own life. Notice the part of yourself that is watching the storm rather than getting lost in it, almost as if observing it from a distance. Notice that the things you have been struggling with and are trying to change, avoid, or get rid of—those difficult thoughts, emotions, or sensations—are not you, they are simply the weather, whereas you are the sky.

What was that experience like for you? Were you able to connect with that part of yourself that is like the sky—able to contain all things and remain unaffected by the weather?

PRACTICE FOR THIS WEEK

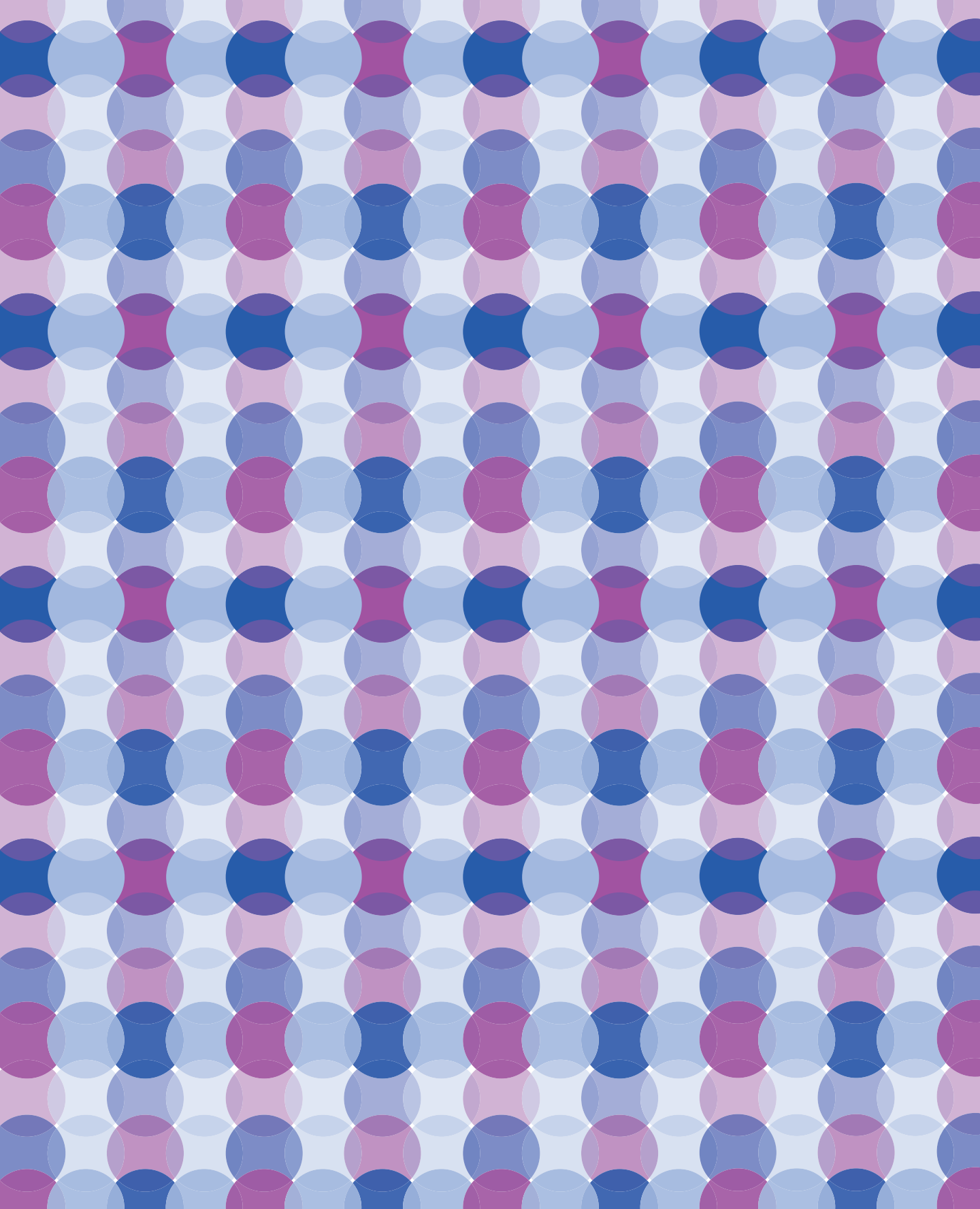
Please practice each of the strategies from this week as a way of beginning to experience and connect with that part of yourself that notices your experience rather than gets lost in it. The ability to connect with this part of yourself will help you move forward through the next two weeks, which focus on values and committed ACTion.

REFLECTING ON WEEK 4

Congratulations on completing week 4! You have done a lot of hard work over the past four weeks. You have learned to defuse from your thoughts and practice acceptance and mindfulness, and have even gone a step further this week by connecting with your observer self. These skills are crucial to moving forward with the final two core processes in ACT.

Take some time to reflect on your experiences with the exercises this week before moving on.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



WEEK 5

Figure Out Your Values

This week gets really fun! We transition from the mindfulness-based strategies to identifying your values, or the things that really matter to you. This is important because it will provide direction for your life as well as motivation to engage in committed ACTION. Everything we have covered so far—defusion, acceptance, present-moment awareness, and the observer self—promote greater psychological flexibility for living in a way that is consistent with your values. This week, we will explore what kind of life you want for yourself.

WHAT ARE VALUES?

Before I get into what values are and what they are not, let's make one thing clear. From an ACT perspective, you already have everything needed to live a full and meaningful life. It may have become unclear to you at some point in your struggle that there is nothing wrong with you. Even if you have a mental illness, there is nothing wrong with you. Let me to say it again: You are not broken! You don't need to be fixed or made whole. You are already whole and you have everything you need to live a rich and meaningful life.

Remember, a rich and meaningful life doesn't mean a pain-free life: pain is inevitable. Your storytelling mind may be telling you that you can start living your life when the pain ends. That when you are no longer depressed or anxious you can begin to engage in your career and relationships the way you want to or wish you could. These kinds of thoughts put your life on hold. This is *not* necessary. You can learn to defuse from your thoughts, accept your experience as it is, practice present-moment awareness, and observe your own experience. This will give you the distance and flexibility you need to move toward the things that matter to you. You don't need to reduce or get rid of whatever you are struggling with in order to begin. With that in mind, what are values?

VALUES AS GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Think of values as your compass or North Star. They are the things that matter most in your life. Values are the way in which you want to show up in the world or what you want your life to stand for. There is a wide range of values. Values can be everything from autonomy to zest. Values typically relate to a few domains or areas in your life, for example, family, intimate relationships, parenting, friendships, education, employment, recreation, health, spirituality, and community.

GOALS VS. VALUES

Values are not goals. What's the difference between the two? Values are something that cannot be accomplished. You don't get to check them off your to-do list. Goals can be accomplished. You can, for example, lose weight, get married, adopt a dog, and have a baby—these are all things you can achieve and they all have an end date. Values, on the other hand, never end.

Values may be things like health, love, or caring. These are things that provide direction for your life. A classic example is getting married versus being a loving spouse. Getting married is a goal that can be accomplished, whereas being a loving spouse is ongoing. You can choose to be a loving spouse, but it is a decision you must make over and over again, moment to moment. Weight loss and health are similar in the sense that you can lose a bunch of weight, but then what? Do you go back to your old ways and unhealthy habits or do you commit to a healthy lifestyle? What about parenting? In one moment, you may be present and patient with your kids, and in the next moment yelling at them. You can't check off being a good parent; it is something that you commit to and recommit to over and over again.

WHY FOCUS ON VALUES AND NOT GOALS?

Why think about things in terms of values and not goals? Precisely because goals end. This can actually create a sense of loss or disappointment. For example, I had wanted to become a psychologist since high school. I wasn't licensed until just before my 32nd birthday. That's a long time! After I was licensed, I experienced a kind of loss because the goal that I was working toward for so long was accomplished. But if I focus on *why* I wanted to become a psychologist—to help other people learn how to be present with their pain and continue to build a rich and meaningful life—I see that is something I can do for the rest of my life. If you are getting stuck on a goal or achievement you have for yourself, ask yourself why you have this goal or why it is important to you. I bet you'll uncover a value.

VALUES ARE FOR THE PRESENT

Along these same lines, values occur in the present moment. Each and every moment, you have a choice of how you will live out your values. Goals happen in the future, but values happen in the present moment. If, in the process of identifying your values, there isn't something you can do about it in the immediate future, you have likely identified a goal rather than a value. How might you convert this goal to a value?

YOUR VALUES

Remember, your values are your values: what you've decided is important. They're not your parents' values, society's values, or even your religion's values. Of course, these things might inform your values, but values are freely chosen, they are not imposed. So, if you grew up with or adopted certain values, then perhaps they have become your values. However, if they are rules, restrictions, duties, or obligations, they are not values. Perhaps your parents value stability, whereas you value autonomy. Or your society or religion values agreeableness, submissiveness, or obedience, whereas it is important for you to advocate for yourself and use your voice. Values are not about what you should or must do. Values are things that feel meaningful and important to you.

VALUES ARE NOT FEELINGS

You may be thinking "I value happiness." Let's take a look at that. Happiness may sound like a value, but happiness is not a value; it's a feeling. Feelings by definition are fleeting and outside of our control. Can you pursue happiness? Yes, but only in the sense of engaging in value-consistent behaviors or committed ACTION to build a meaningful life. This week, I want you to focus on

establishing your values in order to determine what kinds of committed ACTions you can engage in for next week. It is also important to note that in trying to pursue something like happiness, you may be keeping yourself stuck.

Instead of asking yourself what needs to change in order for you to be happy, try asking yourself, “If I did feel happy right now, what would I be doing differently?” This may indicate a value.

I also encourage you to ask yourself, “If I were more focused on the present, could I be happier right now?” I imagine so. Remember, this isn’t about changing your internal experience, it is about accepting your experience and changing your behaviors or engaging in committed ACTION.

STRATEGY

WHAT DO YOU WANT PEOPLE TO REMEMBER ABOUT YOU?

One of the most common exercises in determining your values is to imagine your own funeral. You could also imagine a significant birthday or a retirement party, graduation party, anniversary dinner, or even a family reunion. Whatever the event, imagine a milestone in your life and what the people you care about might say about you. Another quite morbid but often-used strategy would be to write your own eulogy. You could also write what someone else—a loved one, partner, family member, or friend—might write about what you mean to them. Pick three or so important people in your life and write down what you hope they would say about you.

VALUES ARE NOT THINGS WE GET FROM OTHERS

Values are not things that we get from other people, such as love, belonging, or acceptance; these are controlled by others. Some of these things may come as a result of following your values, but whether or not they happen is beyond your control. Your values are things that are within your control and should reflect what you want your life to stand for.

VALUES ARE ABOUT WHAT YOU DO, NOT WHAT YOU DON'T DO

Sometimes people try to identify their values as things that they don't want to do as opposed to what they will do. For example, "I won't get mad anymore." If you find yourself developing values such as these, instead try to reorient them to what you will do. For example, "When I notice myself getting upset, I will pause rather than lash out in some way." Perhaps you are in recovery for substance abuse and you do not want to experience cravings or urges to use anymore. While sobriety may be a great commitment, it is not possible to control if you will have urges to use, and it is rather unlikely that these will disappear, particularly early in your recovery. Instead, you might make a commitment to use "urge surfing," call your sponsor, or go to a meeting when struggling with urges while in recovery. Please make sure that your values are oriented around what you will do as opposed to what you won't do, and also that they are realistic.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU?

By now, you have a good idea of what values are and what they are not. Let's take a look at what is important to you. If in an effort to stop your struggle you have forgotten about your values, don't worry. We can figure them out together.

STRATEGY

VALUES STATEMENTS

For each area of your life, I would like you to write a bit about what matters to you. And remember, values are not goals, so you wouldn't write something like "I want to call my parents once a week," "I want to go on date night once a week," or "I want to exercise three to five times per week." Instead you might write "I want to be a loving daughter," "I want to be present with my partner and make them feel heard, valued, and understood," or "I want to live a life that respects both the vitality and fragility of my own body." It can be a bit tricky, so give yourself some time. We are often not used to thinking about things in terms of our values. Keep in mind that some of these categories may not matter much to you and that's okay! This is about *your* values, so feel free to skip over the ones that may not apply.

Family

Intimate Relationships

Parenting

continued

VALUES STATEMENTS, CONTINUED

Friendships

Education/Employment

Recreation

Health

Spirituality

Community

Other

CONFLICTING VALUES

Sometimes it can seem as though your values are in conflict with one another. Say that you value both your work and also your family. And yet, sometimes your work takes you away from your family. This is a very common example. In this case, perhaps part of how you express the value of your family is by working to provide for your family, but it may also be about other things—perhaps you love your work because you love learning, creativity, or excellence.

Another classic example is an apparent conflict between parenting and self-care. Perhaps you want to spend as much time with your children as possible, but begin neglecting yourself as a result of prioritizing their needs. Hopefully, you can see where this one is headed. While this may seem like a conflict, self-care is an important part of being a good parent. You cannot take great care of others unless you are taking care of yourself. These conflicts may be the result of rigidity, so remember to be flexible.

STRATEGY

VISUALIZING YOUR VALUES

You might also try this visualization exercise as a way of getting in touch with your values.

1. Close your eyes, if that is comfortable, or turn your gaze down toward the floor in front of you, and turn your attention inward.
2. Connect with the sensations of your breath. As you inhale and exhale through your nose, notice the rise and fall of your chest and abdomen. Allow yourself to anchor to the present moment with each inhalation and each exhalation.
3. Throw a question out like a rock into a pond: "What do I want my life to stand for? What is meaningful or important to me?" Allow the question to drop into the well of your consciousness and notice if there is an answer or a splash. "What do I want my life to stand for? What is meaningful or important to me?" Allow the waters to ripple out and listen. What did you notice about this experience? Did you hear anything? Did you get an answer or a response from deep within yourself about what you want your life to stand for or about what is meaningful or important to you?

PRIORITIZING

Sometimes it's a matter of figuring out which values you prioritize. While you don't always have to choose one value at the expense of another, you may need to prioritize them. This, too, can be flexible, so that in one moment perhaps you are valuing or prioritizing work and at other times creating more space for family.

STRATEGY

VALUES QUESTIONNAIRE

You may also be interested in taking the Values in Action questionnaire online at viacharacter.org. The values they examine are listed below:

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence
- Bravery
- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Fairness
- Forgiveness
- Gratitude
- Honesty
- Hope
- Humility
- Humor
- Judgment
- Kindness
- Leadership
- Love
- Love of learning
- Perseverance
- Perspective
- Prudence
- Self-regulation
- Social intelligence
- Spirituality
- Teamwork
- Zest

If you take the free online quiz, you will receive a ranking of these values based on your responses.

OTHER ROADBLOCKS

There are some roadblocks that can come up in identifying values. Let's go through a few of them in anticipation of what might arise and identify how to troubleshoot them.

THE STORYTELLING MIND . . . AGAIN

The biggest roadblock is probably fusion with the storytelling mind. While exploring values, the storytelling mind can sometimes become active and people find themselves fused with thoughts such as "There is no point in trying," "I tried and it didn't work," "It's too late for me," or "I am a bad person; I don't deserve a better life." This results in inflexibility and the inability to move ahead. I have had clients who have expressed believing that happiness is not for them, it is for other people. This could not be further from the truth.

Remember, you are already in possession of everything you need. You may simply have forgotten that due to fusion and avoidance. If you are thinking that it's too late for you, that you need to be "fixed" in some way, or that you are undeserving of a better life, I want you to stop right now and practice defusing from these thoughts. Take a minute, go back to week 1, and try some of the strategies. Recognize that they are just thoughts—not facts or reflections of reality—just a product of the storytelling mind. You don't need to buy into them.

I have also had clients who are too afraid to pursue their values because they imagine, in the storytelling mind, that doing so would only confirm their worst fears about themselves. For example, you may be fused with a thought like "I will never be happy" and recognize that you are unhappy in your current life, but be too afraid to make changes because if you do and you are still unhappy, it will confirm your fear.

What are the feelings that show up when you start to envision pursuing your values? What are the stories that begin to appear? See if you can defuse from them rather than buy into them. Ask yourself, if you didn't believe you were "flawed," what would you be doing? That is precisely what you should be doing now. If you keep waiting until you are "fixed," you may be waiting forever!

FIXATING ON OUTCOMES

Acting out your values is not about the outcome. It isn't a matter of failing and succeeding. It is about your commitment. We want to emphasize effort, not achievement. Why? Isn't achievement the only thing that matters? No, of course not. If anything, what matters most is how committed you are.

A great example is that of addiction and recovery. People in recovery from addiction typically relapse several times. Relapse, however, is not failure: it is part of the learning process. You also, in a way, don't ever achieve sobriety. Maybe you reach five or even ten years of sobriety. That is a huge accomplishment! And yet, at the same time, it is an ongoing commitment. So please, as we prepare to move forward to next week's process, committed ACTION, try not to focus too much on the outcome.

SOMETIMES YOU SLIP UP, AND THAT'S OKAY

Another really important thing to keep in mind is that none of us are perfect, and you are not going to be able to live out your values each and every moment. Remember, it is the commitment you make that matters most. Every step you take in the service of your values is a part of that process. When you do slip up and act in value-inconsistent ways, practice self-compassion and recommit to your values. "Well today, or at least in this moment, I didn't do a great job of living out my values."

Sometimes people fear that practicing self-compassion, or being kind to themselves when they mess up or make a mistake, will result in continued "failures." The truth is that you are going to mess up and make mistakes. That is just reality. Beating yourself up about it isn't going to change that. Sometimes people have reservations about practicing self-compassion because they feel like it is making an excuse or even letting themselves "off the hook," but self-compassion is neither of these things. Self-compassion is actually associated with increased initiative. For example, if you mess up and say to yourself, "This is pointless, why am I even trying? I am the worst mother ever and always will be," are these thoughts motivating? Does relating to yourself in this way help you be a better parent? Let's say that

instead of beating yourself up when you make a mistake, you respond with kindness and say to yourself, “I feel bad about yelling at the kids. That is not the kind of parent I want to be, but I get angry just like everyone else and it happens. I am going to do my best to take a breath when I notice myself escalating.” Practice self-compassion to increase initiative and to understand that it’s okay to make mistakes.

“I’M NOT EVEN CLOSE!”

Now that you have identified your values, you may notice some discrepancies. Perhaps there are large discrepancies. Don’t worry! It is not at all unusual for there to be discrepancies between your values and the way you are living your life.

Remember to practice self-compassion. We will learn more about ways to reduce this gap between your values and your actions in the next chapter. Keep in mind that while it can be difficult and uncomfortable to notice the discrepancies between your values and ACTions, this discomfort may be an important part of getting motivated to commit to change. Although I want you to acknowledge the discomfort, please don’t start beating yourself up. That’s not productive. Recognizing the discomfort and practicing self-compassion are productive.

Practicing self-compassion may be an important part of even being able to acknowledge the ways in which you are falling short of living out your values. Without self-compassion, it might be too hard to even acknowledge this gap. While working to identify your values can trigger fusion and avoidance, it can also serve as motivation to do the hard work, so long as it’s paired with compassion.

Remember, no one lives out their values 100 percent of the time. Feel the pain, learn from it, and move on. When you feel guilt or shame, use self-compassion and reconnect with your commitment.

STRATEGY

WHERE DOES IT HURT?

This is my favorite way to identify values, and it is kind of hard. I want you to think back over your life, or turn inward toward your current experience, and ask yourself, "Where does it hurt?" Where do you notice pain? What could this pain be telling you about what you value? Remember in ACT, pain is not confronted for pain's sake, but rather in the service of building a meaningful life. Your pain is trying to tell you something about what you value. What we care about most deeply is also where the pain appears. We cannot separate them; they are inextricably intertwined. One of my values is kindness, but I am not always kind. I have, at times, been very cruel. While this cruelty may also come from a place of deep pain, as it does for most people, it is also the source of a lot of my suffering, because I have acted in value-inconsistent ways.

Can you think of times big or small that you have acted in ways that are inconsistent with your values? Can you forgive yourself? Can you have compassion for yourself? None of us are perfect; we are all human and only doing our best. Sometimes we get lost and it can create a lot of pain and confusion, but we need not prolong it. We can practice acceptance and self-compassion, and renew our intention to live out our values. What is your pain saying about what you value? How can you use this pain, rather than turn away from it, to create a more meaningful life?

STRATEGY

NO MORE PAIN

I hope I've made it clear that it is *not* possible to eliminate pain from your life, but for the sake of this next exercise, we're going to pretend that you are magically free from pain and able to live the life you imagine for yourself. If you woke up tomorrow and your pain magically disappeared, and your fears of rejection or whatever underlies your pain somehow evaporated during the night, what would you do? How would you live your life differently?

"I STILL FEEL UNSATISFIED"

Let's say that after identifying your values, you are actually living them, but still feel unfulfilled. In this case, you might ask yourself whether you're present. Are you lost in the storytelling mind, either in the past or in the future? If you are living out your values but still feel dissatisfied, it can be that you're focusing too much on the past or future and need to work more on coming back to the present moment.

JOURNALING

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

As important as values are, I also want you to hold your values lightly. You don't want to become rigid or fuse with them. Remember that the goal in all of this is psychological flexibility.

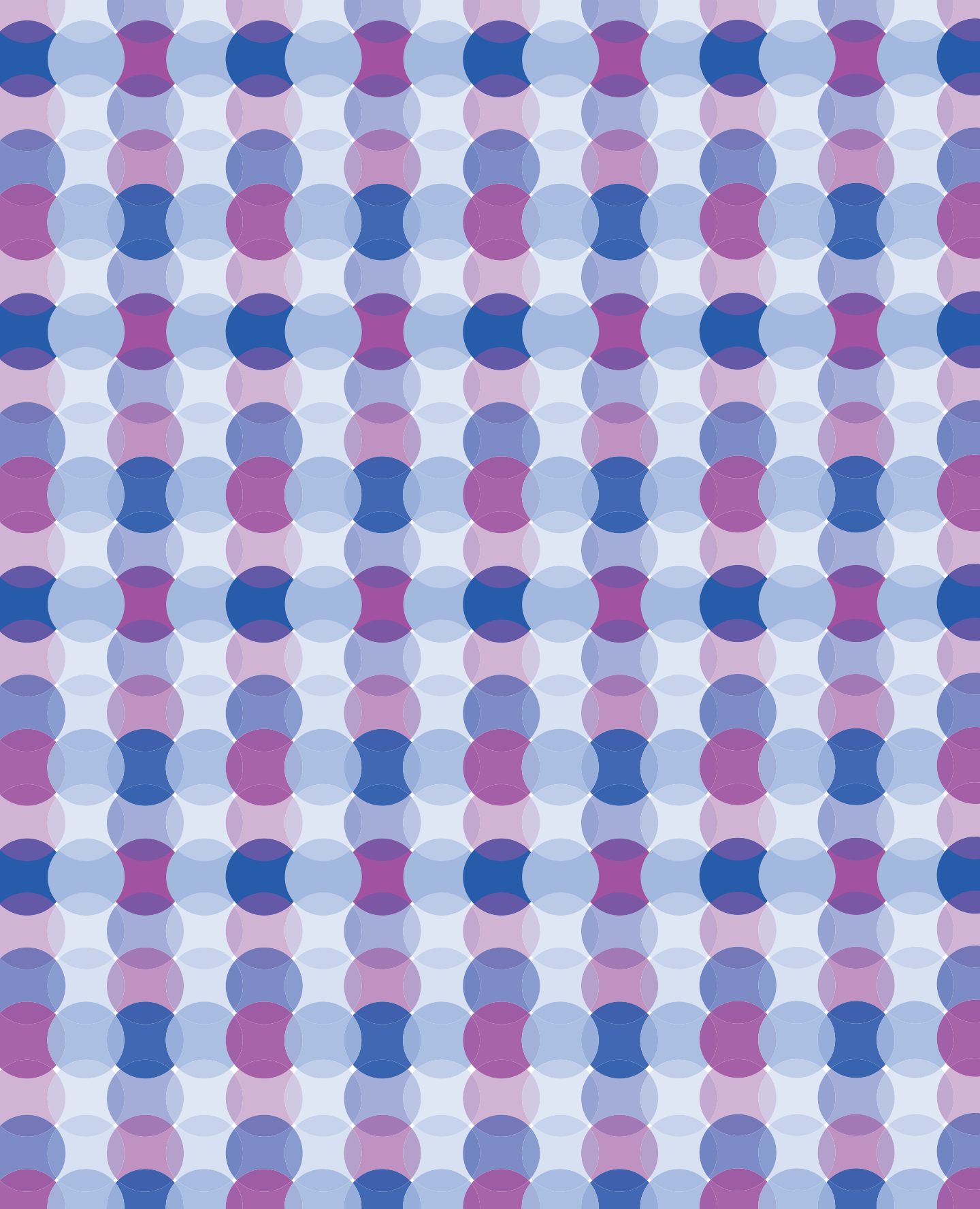
PRACTICE FOR THIS WEEK

This week, I want you to complete the Values in Action Questionnaire (page 111) or take some time to journal, write, or reflect on the exercises that resonate with you. Start to identify what is meaningful and important to you.

REFLECTING ON WEEK 5

Congratulations on finishing week 5! We are getting even closer to the end. Now that you have identified what your values are, we're ready for the final week, which is based on one of the six core processes of ACT—committed ACTION. This is what we have been building up to for the past five weeks! Before we move on to the final process in ACT, take some time to reflect on what you have learned so far, particularly this past week. What did you learn about what your values are? What is it that you want your life to stand for?

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, typical of notebook or legal stationery. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.



WEEK 6

Take ACTion

Congratulations! You have made it to week 6, and the sixth and final ACT process, committed ACTion. This is what we have been working toward for the past five weeks. In many ways, committed ACTion is the most important part of ACT. This is where you will put all of the skills you have developed up until this point—defusion, acceptance, present moment, the observer self, and values—to the test. Remember, the ultimate goal of ACT is to create enough psychological flexibility using these skills that you can live out your values through committed ACTion. We spent four weeks developing the mindfulness skills needed to create psychological flexibility and the fifth week identifying your values. This week, we will spend time identifying how you can live out your values through committed ACTion.

WHAT IS COMMITTED ACTION?

So, what is committed ACTION? It is any step you take that moves you toward your values. For example, if you value health, it may be committing to a plant-based diet. Committed ACTION takes many forms based on your values. This week is all about identifying exactly what kinds of steps you can take that will help you move toward your values. Because the focus this week is on ACTION, I have also included many different strategies for you to identify commitments and take ACTION toward your values. As we move through the chapter, I want you to keep a few things in mind.

GOALS AND ACTIONS ARE DIFFERENT

Working toward goals and achievements is important, but I would rather you think of committed ACTION as a commitment or intention. Why? Remember, we want to focus more on the process than the outcome. This isn't about success or failure. Try your best to think of these next steps as intentions or commitments rather than goals.

YOUR VALUES PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE

It is helpful to remember why you are engaging in committed ACTION. What value is it in the service of? Staying connected with your values or why you're even engaging in committed ACTION, which is often difficult, will help you stay motivated. Remember, all of the work we have done up until this point has been in the service of creating enough psychological flexibility so that you can live out your values through committed ACTION and build a meaningful life.

IT HAPPENS IN THE NOW

We also want to focus more on the present than the future. Whereas goals occur in the future, committed ACTION happens in the now. Stay in the present moment rather than letting the storytelling mind transport you into some kind of imagined future. Remember, the future is a construct; it doesn't actually exist. If we become fused with thoughts about the future, it can limit our

ability to engage in committed ACTION. Fusion with the past can also undermine committed ACTION, so try your best to stay in the present.

DON'T FOCUS ON PROGRESS OR COMPARISONS

When people get stuck on their moment-to-moment progress, they lose sight of the bigger picture. For example, if you are trying to lose weight, weighing yourself daily and getting either incredibly excited or discouraged based on small fluctuations can be counterproductive. It is better to stay focused on the healthy commitments you are making on a daily basis rather than the small changes on the scale.

I work with a lot of young adults and they will often lament that they are not dating anyone at the moment, but their friends are in long-term relationships or even getting married. I tell my clients that comparison is unhelpful overall. Comparison may help you identify a value—in this case, intimate relationships—but comparing your progress to others' is entirely unhelpful. I tell them that it is like hiking up a mountain. There are different paths; everyone is on their own path and has their own destination. It doesn't make any sense to look at someone who seems farther up the mountain than yourself and say, "I am falling behind." You may very well be on a different path than that person and have an entirely different destination. Your path may have many switchbacks or stretches in which you have to go downhill for a while before being able to move farther up. I know it is cheesy, but everyone is truly on their own journey and it is not about the destination. Try not to monitor your progress too closely and please don't compare yourself to others.

BIG OR SMALL, IT DOESN'T MATTER

Sometimes people get too fixated on big or long-term intentions or commitments, but committed ACTION doesn't need to be grand. It can be even the smallest, tiniest step you could take. For example, committed ACTION could be going back to graduate school or it could be texting an old friend.

IT CAN HAPPEN INSIDE OR OUTSIDE

Committed ACTion can be internal intentions or commitments such as defusing from anxious or perfectionistic thoughts. It can also be external/behavioral intentions or commitments, such as exercising 30 minutes a day, 3 times a week, to help with depression or manage stress.

IT'S GOING TO HURT

Whether big or small, committed ACTion does require you to experience pain. Remember, values are inextricably linked with pain. As you start to live out your values through committed ACTion, pain is going to show up. Willingness to experience pain is what makes committed ACTion possible.

“Since death will take us anyway, why live our life in fear? Why not die in our old ways and be free to live?”

—JACK KORNFIELD

BUT PAIN ISN'T THE POINT

Let's clarify something: there are situations when you need to be smart and prioritize your values and commitments. For example, if you are dealing with addiction, particularly if you are early in recovery, it would be critical for you to stay away from places and people that might be triggering. You would not necessarily want to go to a bar and tolerate the urges and cravings that arise in the service of attending a friend's party, for example, even if you value friendship. It may be too compromising to your sobriety. Remember to be flexible and prioritize your values and commitments. You might instead take your friend to dinner to celebrate.

STRATEGY

INCREASING YOUR MOTIVATION FOR COMMITTED ACTION

Let's start by taking a look at the benefits and costs of engaging in committed ACTION.

BENEFITS OF ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION	COSTS OF ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION
BENEFITS OF NOT ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION	COSTS OF NOT ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION

For example, if one of your commitments is dating, one of the benefits would be opening yourself up to the possibility of loving connections, and one of the costs would be opening yourself up to the possibility of rejection, abandonment, and betrayal. Benefits of not dating include protecting yourself from the pain of rejection, abandonment, and betrayal, but the cost is the pain of loneliness. How will you complete the grid with the benefits and costs of your commitment?

HOW CAN I TAKE COMMITTED ACTION?

Here are some examples of committed ACTION based on different areas of your life as well as the different struggles you may be having.

Family

Commit to calling your parents once a week or seeing them a certain number of times a year. Send money back home or provide some other kind of support, like helping babysit.

Intimate Relationships

Download a dating app, ask friends to set you up on a blind date, or identify a way in which you can be a better partner if you already have one.

Parenting

Make time for your children by having dinner together and asking them about their day. Read to them each night, and commit to using praise rather than punishment. Set consistent limits with them, or be a good role model in terms of how you treat other people.

Friendships

Text an old friend and invite them to brunch, or host a dinner party or BBQ. Have a wine night or go to happy hour (so long as you're not in recovery, in which case it may be attend an AA meeting and get involved with Fellowship).

Education or Employment

Apply for at least one new job per week, reach out to someone in your network, register for an upcoming networking event, enroll in a community college or online course, or identify a way in which you can improve your job performance.

Recreation

Try out a new class, interest, or hobby, such as aerial yoga, salsa dancing, a cooking class, a flower-arranging class, or maybe an art or pottery class. Read for 10 minutes every night or start listening to audiobooks or a new podcast on your commute.

Health

Go on a hike once a month, join a gym or yoga studio, go for a morning run, or exercise at home a certain number of times a week. You could also join a weekly meditation group.

Spirituality

Find a faith group to join or attend church once a week.

Community

Donate money to a cause you are passionate about or volunteer your time with an organization.

Stress

Practice meditation for five minutes a day in the morning, attend a yin yoga class once a week, or journal for five minutes before you go to bed at night.

Worry and Anxiety

Defuse from anxious thoughts or do something to face your fears.

STRATEGY

VALUE-DRIVEN EXPOSURE

Exposure is a great intervention for any type of anxiety, including OCD, panic attacks, phobias, and social anxiety. In ACT, the goal is not to reduce your anxiety, but to increase your psychological flexibility so that you are able to pursue committed ACTION. Any exposure exercise is also going to be linked to values. For example, if someone with panic attacks goes to the grocery store, the goal isn't just to stay there for X amount of time, or until the anxiety starts to reduce, but in service of doing something meaningful such as buying food to prepare a meal for a loved one. I'll give you a few more examples.

For someone with OCD who has a fear of germs:

WHAT COMMITTED ACTION CAN YOU ENGAGE IN?	WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE ROOM FOR (E.G., THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS, PHYSICAL SENSATIONS)?	WHAT VALUE IS THIS IN THE SERVICE OF?
Cooking a meal for your family, which involves handling raw meat	Distressing, obsessive thoughts related to contamination	Family

For someone with panic attacks, exposure will involve engaging in things that bring on physical sensations similar to panic. Take a look at the example below:

WHAT COMMITTED ACTION CAN YOU ENGAGE IN?	WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE ROOM FOR (E.G., THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS, PHYSICAL SENSATIONS)?	WHAT VALUE IS THIS IN THE SERVICE OF?
Going to a spin class	Increased heart rate, which provokes thoughts and feelings of anxiety related to having a heart attack	Health

For someone with a phobia of flying:

WHAT COMMITTED ACTION CAN YOU ENGAGE IN?	WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE ROOM FOR (E.G., THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS, PHYSICAL SENSATIONS)?	WHAT VALUE IS THIS IN THE SERVICE OF?
Getting on a plane to attend a friend's wedding	High anxiety	Friendship

For someone with social anxiety:

WHAT COMMITTED ACTION CAN YOU ENGAGE IN?	WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE ROOM FOR (E.G., THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS, PHYSICAL SENSATIONS)?	WHAT VALUE IS THIS IN THE SERVICE OF?
Going to a friend's birthday party	Anticipatory anxiety, physical discomfort associated with anxiety	Friendship

If you are experiencing OCD, panic attacks, phobias, or social anxiety, it may be helpful to come up with a list of things that produce some level of anxiety or uncomfortable emotion. Rank them 1 through 10, with item number 1 being the most anxiety-provoking thing you can imagine and item number 10 being something that brings up some anxiety but feels manageable. When you start to engage in committed ACTION, start at the bottom or with the situation that causes the lowest level of anxiety and work your way up to number 1. Or, as I like to tell my clients, you don't have to jump into the deep end of the pool; you can stick a toe into the water to see how it feels, and slowly walk your way in.

continued

VALUE-DRIVEN EXPOSURE, CONTINUED

WHAT COMMITTED
ACTION CAN YOU
ENGAGE IN?

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO
MAKE ROOM FOR (E.G.,
THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS,
PHYSICAL SENSATIONS)?

WHAT VALUE IS THIS
IN THE SERVICE OF?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Defuse from obsessive thoughts or engage in an exposure exercise, such as putting your hand in the garbage if you are afraid of germs or touching every doorknob you can find without washing your hands.

Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder

Go to a crowded mall to buy a gift for a friend.

Phobias

For a phobia of flying, commit to a trip to see a friend across the country. If you have a fear of needles, perhaps you start donating blood.

Social Anxiety

Attend a weekly social anxiety group or try introducing yourself to someone new.

Trauma and PTSD

If you have experienced trauma, committed ACTION could mean going to see people, places, and things that remind you of the experience and being willing to accept the distress that shows up. It could also be something small like inviting someone you recently met to coffee to try and begin to build trust and relationships.

Depression

If you have depression, you might commit to getting out of bed at a certain time of day and doing at least one thing each day that brings you a sense of enjoyment or accomplishment, no matter how small.

Low Self-Esteem

When it comes to low self-esteem, committed ACTION may be to remember at least five qualities or traits you appreciate about yourself or things that you are good at.

Perfectionism

With perfectionism, committed ACTION may be committing to practicing self-compassion for 15 minutes a day.

Addiction

If you are struggling with addiction, you might make the commitment to go to 30 AA meetings in the next 30 days.

Anger

If you struggle with anger, you might commit to taking a mindful pause before reacting.

Finding a therapist or talking to your doctor, or a psychiatrist, about medication are other great examples of committed ACTION.

STRATEGY

BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

This strategy is useful for depression. One of the things that can contribute to and/or maintain depression is a lack of activity. I don't just mean physical activity like exercise, although that would be a great example of committed ACTION: I mean anything that gets you up and out of bed or brings you a sense of pleasure or accomplishment. If you struggle with depression, you might consider making a commitment to engage in activities that are meaningful to you. Here, it might be helpful to take a look back at the values you identified. Take a look at some of the examples below and fill in the blanks:

DAY/TIME	COMMITTED ACTION	VALUE
Monday/7:00 a.m.	Making a healthy breakfast in the morning	Health
Monday/7:15 a.m.	Taking my vitamins and medication	Health
Monday/7:30 a.m.	Doing yoga	Health
Monday/8:30 a.m.	Meditating for 10 to 15 minutes	Health
Monday/8:45 a.m.	Driving to work while listening to a favorite podcast	Recreation
Monday/9:00 a.m.	Working	Education/Employment
Monday/12:00 p.m.	Having lunch with a coworker	Friendship
Monday/5:00 p.m.	Coming home and taking the dog for a walk	Parenting
Monday/6:00 p.m.	Making dinner and watching a favorite TV show	Recreation

STRATEGY

INTENTIONS OR COMMITMENTS

Using the same areas of life where you identified your values last week, I would like you to identify a related intention or commitment. Here, it would be appropriate to identify things I asked you to avoid last week, such as "I want to call my parents once a week," "I want to go on date night once a week," or "I want to exercise three to five times per week," in the service of the values you have related to family, intimate relationships, and health.

Family

Intimate Relationships

Parenting

Friendships

Education/Employment

Recreation

Health

Spirituality

Community

Other

STRATEGY

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS WITH S.M.A.R.T. COMMITMENTS

In identifying your intentions or commitments, I would like you to keep a few things in mind. A very common and helpful acronym you might use is S.M.A.R.T. There are different variations of this acronym out there, but the one we will use here is specific, measurable, aligned with your values, realistic, and time-sensitive. Write down your commitments that align with each part of the S.M.A.R.T. acronym.

Specific

Measurable

Aligned with Your Values

Realistic

Time-Sensitive

Now that you have identified some S.M.A.R.T. commitments, I want you to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 both how important the commitment is and how confident you are in your ability to make each commitment.

How important is each commitment on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not important at all and 10 being extremely important?

How confident are you in your ability to follow up on your commitments, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not confident at all and 10 being extremely confident?

If either one is below a 7, I want you to modify your commitment in some way that makes it more important or makes you more confident in your ability to make the commitment. For example, say you are working on recovery and 30 meetings in 30 days is not a commitment you feel is important or that you are not confident in your ability to commit to. Perhaps you have some ambivalence about sobriety. In this case, you might modify your commitment to attend even just one AA meeting to see what it is like.

ANTICIPATE BARRIERS

While taking committed ACTION, it is also important to identify potential barriers. What might come up when you're about to take ACTION? Barriers can be external or internal; for example, with anticipatory anxiety you will need to remember to practice defusing from thoughts such as "This is hopeless."

UNWELCOME VISITORS

Engaging your values through committed ACTION will bring up unwelcome visitors. Remember the poem "The Guest House" by Rumi that I mentioned in part 1? It might be helpful to look it up and read through it once more to remind yourself of the visitors you may need to prepare to welcome. Different visitors—or experiences—like sorrow or joy might show up at your door. Refusing to make room for these visitors may be a part of how you found yourself stuck in the first place. And remember, this is all in the service of building a more vital, vibrant life. A client with social anxiety and depression explained it in this way: when you don't make room for the visitors who will show up while engaging in committed ACTION, in her case meeting new people in LA, life is gray. You can make the choice to live a life in gray tones or the choice to live a life with vibrant colors, but it requires welcoming some unwanted visitors, in her case anxiety and fear of judgment and rejection. I'll give you another example: I had a client who had an affair, but had trouble facing his own guilt and shame in order to take steps to repair his relationship with his wife. In this case, guilt and shame were some of the visitors he had to welcome in order to engage in committed ACTION. What visitors might you have to welcome?

STRATEGY

PROBLEM-SOLVING

This problem-solving worksheet can help you identify and implement committed ACTION. Remember to identify a problem that is actually in your control. For example, you wouldn't want to identify a goal, like changing someone else's behavior.

1. Use your mindfulness skills (defusion, acceptance, present moment, and the observer self) to step back and get some perspective, then identify the problem.

What is the problem?

2. Identify your goal and how it relates to your values.

What is your goal and what value is it in service of?

3. Brainstorm solutions without evaluating them.

What are *all* the possible solutions you can think of?

continued

PROBLEM-SOLVING, CONTINUED

4. Chose a solution that aligns with your values and is likely to work.

Which possible solution aligns with your values and is most likely to work?

5. Put it into ACTion.
6. If it doesn't work, you might try another possible solution or practice acceptance and self-compassion.

FOCUSING ON THE PAST

A major barrier is fear of failing to keep your commitments, along with fusion with what the storytelling mind has to say about the past. Although there are probably many examples of things you may not have followed through on, there are certainly things you have. It may also be helpful to think about the mindfulness skills you have learned over the past few weeks, which will help you relate to your pain in a different way. It is likely that the pain was a major barrier before, but now you are better equipped to deal with it and follow through on your commitments.

FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE

Fusion with future is also a possible barrier. If you are telling yourself that it is hopeless and there is no point in trying, defuse from these thoughts. Remember that the future is a construct; it doesn't actually exist. If we become fused with thoughts about the future it can limit our ability to engage in committed ACTion.

FUSION WITH PAIN AND SUFFERING

Sometimes people have an attachment to their pain and suffering that can also be a barrier to committed ACTion. If you are strongly attached to a conceptualized self, filled with fear of failure or shame, or think that you are undeserving, this may limit your ability to engage in committed ACTion. Practice defusing from the conceptualized self. Sometimes the emotions you need to make room for are actually positive ones.

PAST MISTAKES, GRIEF, AND LOSS

This week, more than any other, can bring up past failures, grief, and loss. Remember to be patient, gentle, and kind with yourself. Try not to beat yourself up for the time you have lost, practice acceptance and self-compassion, bring yourself back to the present, and commit.

IDENTIFY RESOURCES

Similar to identifying barriers, I want you to identify resources. Think back over the past five weeks and all the tools you have available. Remember to keep in mind why you are engaging in committed ACTion; it is all in the service of building a more meaningful life. What are some of the resources you have?

STRATEGY

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

While you cannot control other people, you can influence them. How? Your best bet is assertive communication. Communicating in an assertive way can be contrasted with communicating in either a passive way or an aggressive way. I'll give you some examples of each and explain why assertive communication is ideal.

Passive Communication

If you are communicating passively, you are prioritizing the other person's feelings, needs, and wants at the expense of your own. You may not be standing up for yourself, which can lead to feelings of resentment.

Assertive Communication

If you are communicating assertively, you are standing up for yourself while also taking the other person's feelings, needs, and wants into account. Communicating assertively maintains the health of the relationship.

Aggressive Communication

If you are communicating in an aggressive way, you are only considering your own feelings, needs, and wants. You may get what you want, but the other person may no longer like or respect you. It is not a good way to maintain long-term relationships.

Let's practice. Remember, assertive communication doesn't necessarily mean you are going to get what you want. Before completing the questions below, it might be helpful to imagine taking the other person's perspective; use your mindfulness skills to defuse from the story or narrative you have developed about the situation and try to imagine what the other person's feelings, needs, and wants are. This might be really difficult, but it could also be helpful to practice compassion, not only for yourself for going through this difficult situation, but for the other person as well.

1. Describe the current situation. Try to stick with the facts and don't make assumptions—especially in regard to a person's intentions (e.g., "You forgot about an important event and did not acknowledge my feelings when I expressed them").

"You did X."

2. Express how you feel (e.g., "This was hurtful and made me feel disrespected").

"It made me feel Y."

3. Assert your needs or wants (e.g., "I need you to respect my feelings and apologize").

"I want Z."

Remember, you can only control your own actions, not other people's. There will be times you can't get what you want or need from other people; this is when you want to practice acceptance and self-compassion.

THIS IS YOUR LIFE

Pain is inevitable. There is pain associated with engaging in committed ACTION and there is pain in choosing not to. It is your choice whether you want to engage in committed ACTION or not. You don't have to and no one can make you. It is your choice how gray or how vibrant and colorful you want your life to be. You likely already know the pain associated with avoidance. This is a choice you can make. You can experience the pain of avoidance or experience the pain associated with living a value-driven life, but you can't avoid pain. A great example of this is people who close themselves off from relationships in an attempt to protect themselves from the pain of rejection or loss. In doing so, they often experience the pain of isolation. So, while committed ACTION involves pain, in this case making yourself vulnerable in the service of forming connections with others, avoidance results in pain as well. The choice is yours.

MAKE A PLAN

Now that you have worked your way through the chapter, I want you to list at least five solid commitments you can make for the next week.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

PRACTICE FOR THIS WEEK

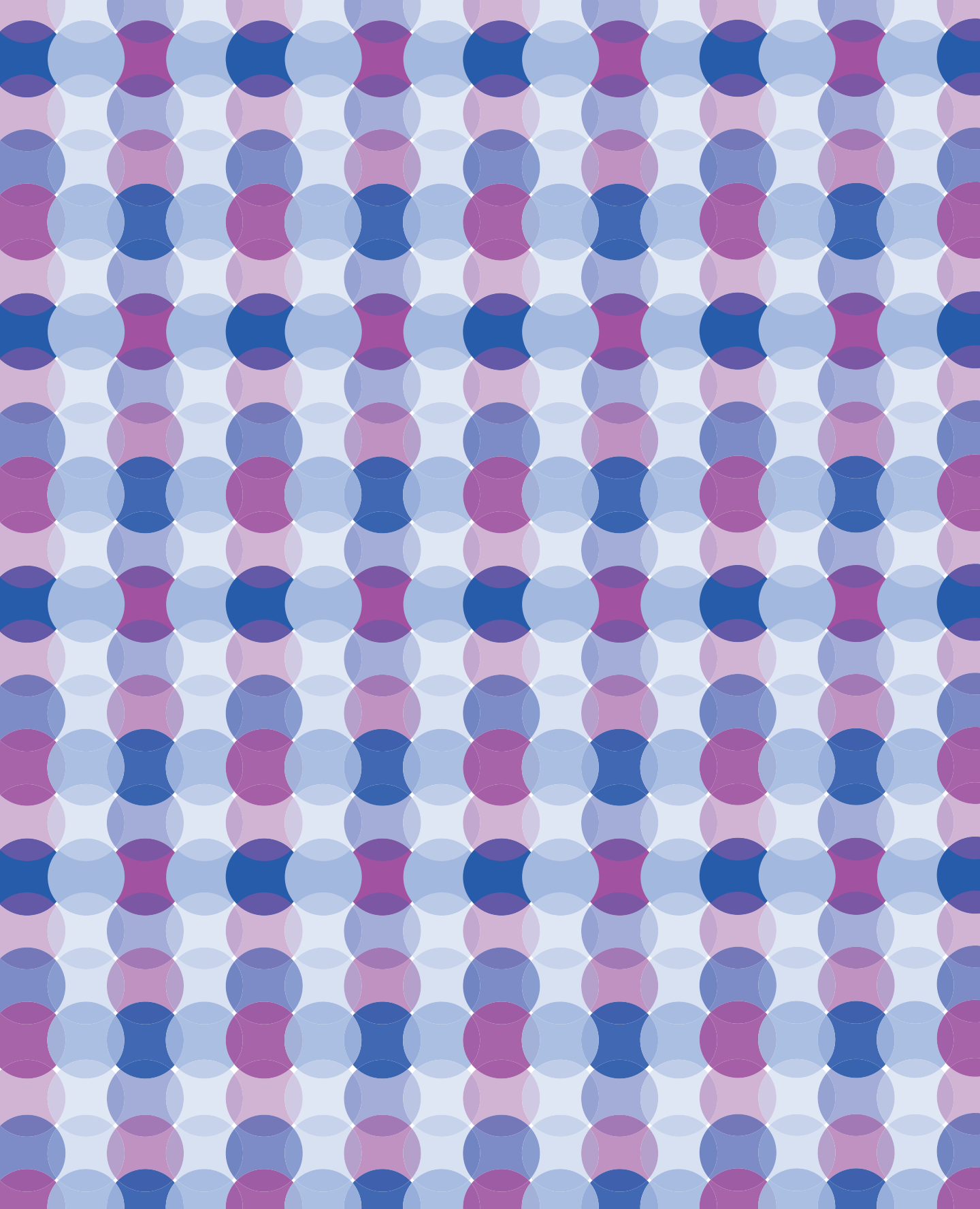
Now that you have identified your commitments, the next step is putting them into ACTION. Put the five ACTIONS you have identified into motion over the next week.

If you get discouraged, remember what value your committed ACTION is in the service of—this is the best thing you can do to keep yourself motivated. Don't forget to practice self-compassion when you are feeling down. It may also be helpful to keep in mind that some of the discomfort you are experiencing could be a growing pain and a sign that you are moving in a valued direction.

REFLECTING ON WEEK 6

Congratulations on finishing week 6! You have completed the final chapter that reviews an ACT process, meaning that you have completed all six ACT processes. Take some time to reflect on your experience.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



WEEK 7

Bringing It All Together

Congratulations on making it through all six ACT core processes! You have done a lot of hard work to get here. In this final chapter, I will help you identify ways to stay motivated and find help or support when you need it.

ACT EVERY DAY

Over the past six weeks you have learned to defuse from your thoughts, practice acceptance, be present, observe your own experience, identify your values, and begin to engage in committed ACTION. All six ACT processes are intended to help you create enough psychological flexibility so that you can engage in the behaviors needed to build a meaningful life. But building a meaningful life doesn't end after six weeks! Building a meaningful life is not something you ever complete. It is an ongoing commitment.

In this final chapter, we will focus on how you can continue to practice the core processes of ACT every day. Like anything else, it gets easier with time. For example, only six short weeks ago you were introduced to a number of different defusion strategies. Hopefully, you have been practicing them, and you may have noticed that some of the thoughts your storytelling mind generates are especially compelling or that some thoughts are very sticky, so to speak, and difficult to separate yourself from. Maybe it's the "I'm not good enough" story or the "This person wronged me" story. It takes time to learn how to defuse from narratives that have a long history or that have a strong emotional charge. Be patient with yourself. Be kind to yourself. And continue to practice. Remember—it isn't about success or failure, it's about creating a meaningful life.

QUIZ: ARE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS CONTROLLING YOU?

Remember this quiz from part 1? I would like you to fill it out again to see if you notice any difference before and after the last six weeks.

QUESTIONS	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
1. I want to stop or control my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I believe that I am my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I find some of my thoughts intolerable or unacceptable.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I try to distract myself from my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My thoughts get in the way of me living my life.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I want to stop or control my emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I see my emotions as a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I think some of my emotions are bad or that I should not be feeling the way I do.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I resist experiencing or avoid my emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My emotions get in the way of me living my life.	1	2	3	4	5
Score:	+	+	+	+	=

So, how does your score compare with the results on page 18? Has it increased, decreased, or remained the same? Hopefully, it has decreased. If so, great! This is an indication that you are less fused with your thoughts, more accepting of your emotions, and no longer letting these things become a barrier. If your score has increased or stayed the same, what might account for that? In either case, try not to get discouraged. You just need more practice. Take some time to reflect on what your score means.

FROM STRATEGIES TO HABITS

The more frequently and consistently you practice the strategies you have learned over the past six weeks, the more they will become second nature, or habits. Defusion might be an example of this as well. Perhaps at the beginning of this book, you were quite distressed when having the thoughts “I am annoying” or “I am stupid,” but after having practiced defusion, you notice that you aren’t as distressed by these thoughts anymore. Or perhaps prior to week 3, you had been living your life largely on autopilot, but have been practicing a brief mindfulness exercise daily. If so, you may notice that you are less reactive, or able to stop yourself and pause at crucial times. Maybe you are more connected with the present moment as you move throughout your day. These are great examples of strategies becoming habits that can have a lasting impact on your life. Keep practicing!

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

The more that you practice the skills you have learned over the past six weeks, specifically defusion, acceptance, mindfulness, and observing your own experience, the more psychological flexibility you will have to engage in behaviors that are consistent with your values, which will allow you to build a meaningful life.

PLANNING FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

In many ways, the last six weeks were just the beginning. You have been introduced to the six core ACT processes, including many skills and strategies that you can continue to implement and practice for years to come. Hopefully, you are more defused from your thoughts and more accepting of your emotions. If you are still struggling, remember to be patient, gentle, and kind with yourself while you continue to work on the skills to create the psychological flexibility needed to engage your values through committed ACTION. Anytime someone engages in change it can be scary. Remember the passengers on the bus metaphor? I imagine that as you commit to change, some of your passengers, maybe fear, doubt, and anxiety, are going to start acting up. Remember that you are in charge. You don't have to listen to what the passengers on your bus are telling you to do. You now have the tools needed to drive your bus in the direction of your values.

STRATEGY

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

This worksheet may help remind you of the strategies and skills you can implement as you work toward your values through committed ACTION:

What is the committed ACTION you are trying to engage in?

What thoughts are arising?

Defuse from your thoughts and use mindfulness to come back to the present moment

WHAT EMOTIONS ARE ARISING?

WHAT PHYSICAL SENSATIONS
ARE ARISING?

--	--

Practice acceptance of your experience and connect with the observer self

What value is this committed ACTION in the service of? Are you willing to engage in it despite the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that may be arising? Are you able to commit to value-directed ACTION while holding these thoughts in kind awareness?

CHECK-INS AND TUNE-UPS

Remember to stay more focused on your intentions or commitments than your moment-to-moment progress, which can make you lose sight of the big picture or feel discouraged. That being said, it is important to keep track of how you are doing. Try to make time to check in with yourself to see if you are moving toward your values and engaging in your commitments.

STRATEGY

CHECKING IN AND TUNING UP

Make a note to yourself about how you are doing in terms of moving toward your values in the following areas of your life:

Family

Intimate Relationships

Parenting

continued

CHECKING IN AND TUNING UP, CONTINUED

Friendships

Education/Employment

Recreation

Health

Spirituality

Community

Other

If you are not making as much progress as you would like, what is getting in the way? Are you fused with your thoughts or having trouble accepting a difficult emotion or physical sensation? If so, what strategies can you use? It may be helpful to refer back to earlier weeks.

REMEMBER IT ISN'T ABOUT SUCCESS OR FAILURE

The storytelling mind likes to create narratives of success and failure. It is especially important as you continue to practice the strategies you have learned to notice what the storytelling mind is telling you. In many ways, the storytelling mind is the biggest obstacle to living a meaningful life. While you work toward building that meaningful life, it might start telling you that you aren't good enough, that you don't deserve it, and that it is all hopeless. If or when this happens, go back to week 1 and practice some of the defusion strategies. It may also be helpful to think back to some of your biggest achievements thus far. Oftentimes (because of that pesky negativity bias) people pay more attention to the ways in which they are challenged and less attention to their achievements. Let's take a more balanced perspective and look at both.

STRATEGY

YOUR BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES SO FAR

Take some time to reflect on your biggest achievements and challenges so far. What does this tell you about planning for the road ahead?

STAYING MOTIVATED

It is okay to get discouraged or feel hopeless at times, because everyone does; these may be some of the things you need to make room for. That being said, it may be helpful to go back and remember why you are engaging in committed ACTION in the first place and what the costs or consequences of not engaging in these behaviors are, particularly if some of your visitors or passengers, like anxiety, fear, or doubt, are acting up.

STRATEGY

STAYING MOTIVATED

Let’s reexamine the benefits and costs of engaging in committed ACTION.

BENEFITS OF ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION	COSTS OF ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION
BENEFITS OF NOT ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION	COSTS OF NOT ENGAGING IN COMMITTED ACTION

KEEP TRYING

If you are feeling discouraged, it may also be because you have set unrealistic goals for yourself. Unrealistic goals set people up for disappointment. If this is the case, it may be helpful to revise some of the commitments you wrote on page 136 so that they are now more attainable.

STRATEGY

REVISING YOUR S.M.A.R.T. COMMITMENTS

Specific

Measurable

Aligned with Your Values

Realistic

Time-Sensitive

Rate on a scale of 1 to 10 both how important the commitment is and how confident you are in your ability to complete this commitment.

How important is your commitment on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not important at all and 10 being extremely important?

How confident are you in your ability to follow up on your commitment on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not confident at all and 10 being extremely confident?

If either one is below a 7, I want you to modify your commitment in some way that makes it more important or makes you more confident in your ability to make the commitment.

TAKEAWAYS

If there are just a few things you take away from this book, these are the things I want you to remember:

1. You don't need to believe what your mind tells you.
2. Your emotions are not the problem. They are telling you something—listen!
3. Focus on what you value.
4. Hold on to your commitments.
5. Be kind to yourself as you make changes.

STRATEGY

SELF-COMPASSION EXERCISE

When things feel especially difficult, or when you are feeling discouraged, I want you to practice self-compassion. You can practice it in three easy steps by saying to yourself:

1. "This is hard. It is not easy to defuse from my thoughts, to be present with my emotions, and to observe my experience. It is not easy to move toward my values and engage in committed ACTION."
2. "I am not alone. Other people struggle in this same way."
3. "May I be kind, gentle, and patient with myself as I continue to work toward building a meaningful life."

THE HIKE UP THE MOUNTAIN ISN'T STRAIGHT

Remember the hiking metaphor? Sometimes, when you are standing at the base of the mountain, the storytelling mind might say, "You'll never be able to do that!" However, step by step, you make your way to the top. There may be moments when you stop hiking and take a break. You should pause when you need to. There may be moments when you feel discouraged and think about heading back down—do your best to defuse from the storytelling mind, practice acceptance of difficult emotions, and remember why you are engaging in committed ACTION. What value is it in the service of? What is the cost of turning back around? Does it help you build a more meaningful life? Also, remember that switchbacks are a part of the process. Sometimes you will slip up or backslide. It is all part of learning. Do your best to stay true to your values and commitments; stay focused on the path and take one step at a time. Don't forget to take some breaks. Take time to take in the view—these are moments to look back and see how far you have actually come.

BUILDING YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

If you feel especially lost or stuck, or even if you don't, you might consider building your support network. Support could take many different forms, including finding a therapist, considering medication, finding a group, or accessing other resources.

FINDING A THERAPIST

It is always harder to do things alone. This is one of the reasons you might want to consider finding a therapist. You can go to the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science website (contextualscience.org) to find an ACT therapist. You might also look for a psychologist through the online *Psychology Today* directory at psychologytoday.com/us/therapists. If an ACT therapist is not available in your area, don't worry. The research on therapeutic efficacy consistently indicates that it is less about what approach the therapist uses and more about the therapeutic relationship. Because of this, I want you to focus more on how you feel about the therapist than what you think (remember, your emotions are telling you something!). Do they seem genuine and authentic? Do you feel heard, understood, and respected? Do you feel like they are someone you can learn to feel safe with? These are the things that matter most.

MEDICATION

Sometimes people have misconceptions or reservations about going on medication, which is very unfortunate. It may seem contradictory to recommend medication as a potential source of support after emphasizing how your emotions are not the problem and that pain is a part of the human experience. This is still true, but sometimes medication can make all the difference in helping a person get to a level of functioning in which they are better able to practice the six ACT core processes. For example, clients who are depressed may have an especially difficult time defusing from thoughts, but after beginning an antidepressant may find it easier to do. Clients with anxiety may benefit

from medication to help them engage in committed ACTions that may be too overwhelming otherwise. If you are still feeling stuck and having difficulty using the skills you have learned over the past six weeks, you might consider talking to your doctor or finding a psychiatrist in your area to discuss what medications might help. Medication might be able to help support you as you work toward building a more meaningful life.

GROUPS

You might also consider joining a group. You could look for support groups in your area specific to what you are struggling with, such as a social anxiety group, AA/NA, or SMART Recovery. I would also recommend looking for a mindfulness community or meditation group to help you maintain your practice. You might even consider trying out a meditation retreat, but I would recommend doing a few daylong retreats before trying something longer. You may also be interested in some of the mindfulness-based groups mentioned in part 1, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), if you are struggling with depression, or Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) if you are in recovery.

OTHER RESOURCES

There is a Resources section (page 165) in the back of the book that includes HelpGuide.org, which is one of my favorite online resources for mental health and wellness. I've also included a number of mindfulness resources, including popular apps such as Headspace and the website for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center, which has wonderful free meditations in both English and Spanish.

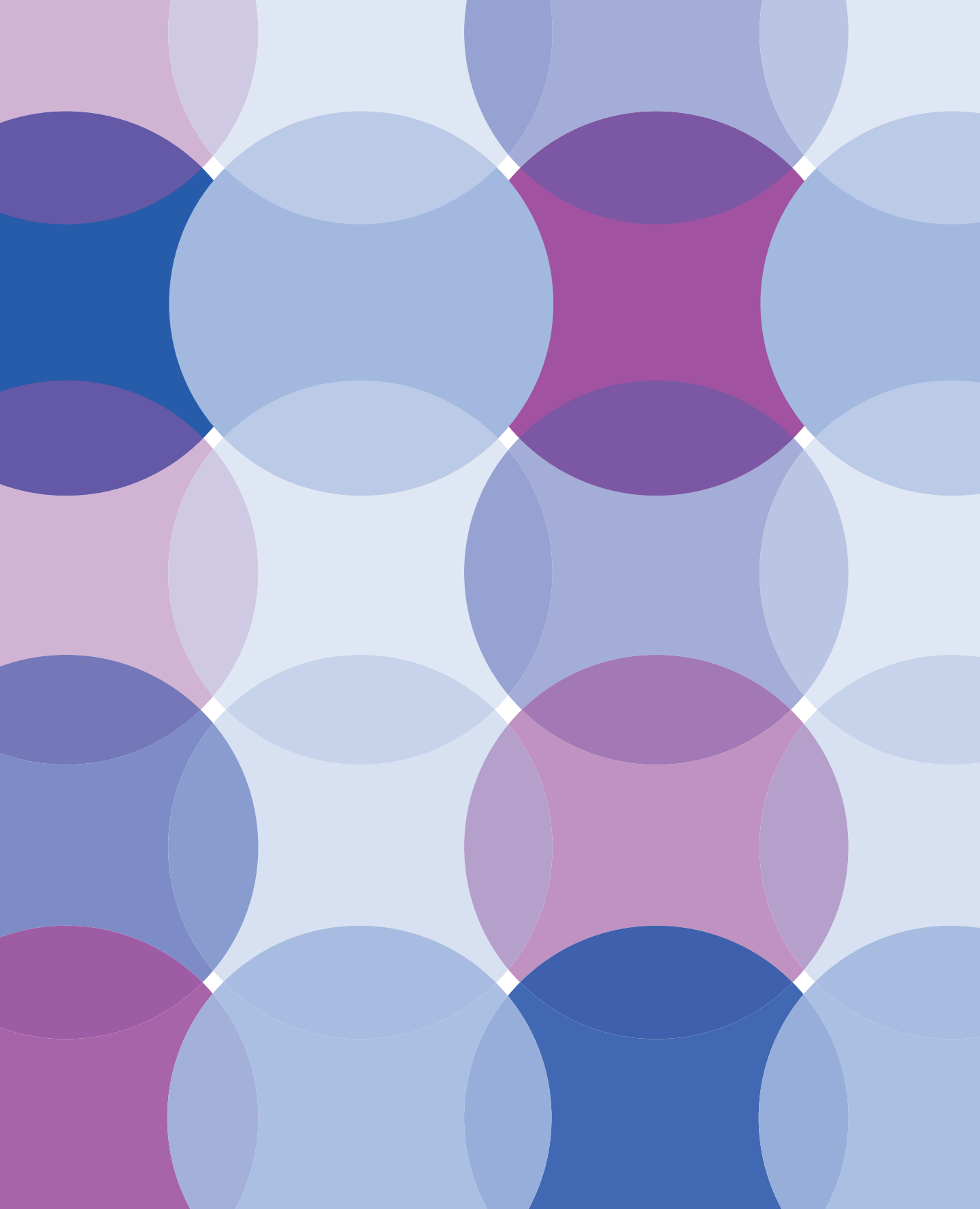
STRATEGY

A LETTER TO YOURSELF REFLECTING ON THE LAST 7 WEEKS

I would like to end this last chapter with one final strategy: a letter to yourself. Write something to yourself about what you have learned from reading this book that you can refer back to when you are feeling lost or stuck. Remember to keep your values in mind and what you are working toward: a meaningful life. Lastly, don't forget to be patient, kind, and gentle with yourself—now and always.

KEEP GOING!

Remember, despite whatever the storytelling mind is telling you or how hopeless or discouraged you may feel at times, you are not broken. You are fundamentally, unconditionally whole and in possession of everything that is needed to live a meaningful life.



RESOURCES

GENERAL WEBSITES

Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS)

www.contextualscience.org/acbs

HelpGuide

www.helpguide.org

Psychology Today

www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists

Society of Clinical Psychology, Division 12 of the APA

www.div12.org

MINDFULNESS WEBSITES

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC)

www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations

MINDFULNESS APPS

Calm

www.calm.com

Headspace

www.headspace.com

Insight Timer

www.insighttimer.com

JKZ Series 1, 2, or 3

www.mindfulnessapps.com

The Mindfulness App

www.themindfulnessapp.com

MINDFULNESS GROUPS

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

www.mbct.com

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP)

www.mindfulrp.com

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-based-programs/mbsr-courses/find-an-mbsr-program/

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC)

www.chrisgermer.com

www.self-compassion.org

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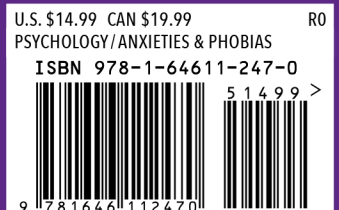
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DR. CARISSA GUSTAFSON, PsyD, is a licensed clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles, CA and an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University, specializing in third wave cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT) like acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Her mission is to help people learn how to relate to their distress with a sense of acceptance and compassion. For more information, please visit DrCarissaGustafson.com.



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