

LEARNING
TO *thrive*

AN

**Acceptance and
Commitment
Therapy**

WORKBOOK

GIULIA SURO, PhD

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Production Editor: Melissa Edeburn

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WELCOME

Hi there. My name is Giulia, and I'm a therapist, writer, wife, and mom. I'm so excited to share this workbook, which has been a long time in the making for me. The impetus for the book came from my clients, who had spent way too much of their lives feeling stuck. The feeling of losing momentum or motivation or not having clarity about which direction to take is familiar to most of us. "Stuckness" can present as depression, fatigue from being beaten down by a nasty inner critic, or anxiety due to a longstanding game of tug-of-war with painful emotions. However it manifests, the feeling of being stuck can be demoralizing and exhausting.

I can relate. The truth is, long before I became a therapist, I had my own battle with a persistent inner critic and self-consciousness. As a kid, I would wake up in the middle of the night to get dressed for school because my worst nightmare was walking into class late and having all eyes on me. I would do mental gymnastics to avoid feeling embarrassed, ashamed, or just different.

So, I know what it's like to feel stuck or like things can't change. For me, this shifted when one of my mentors introduced me to a therapeutic approach called acceptance and commitment therapy (or ACT, pronounced like the word *act*). For the first time, I could see another way of facing life, and I began to become unstuck from unhelpful patterns of thinking. I realized that my approach to the world is within my control. Since discovering ACT, one of my greatest joys has been sharing this realization with others.

As a clinical psychologist, I've spent years helping others get unstuck by applying ACT concepts. We know ACT works because we have decades of scientific studies showing that it's effective in reducing feelings of depression and anxiety and increasing feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment. I know ACT will help you because I've seen it change the lives of countless clients. And it changed my life, too.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is organized around the areas in which people most often want to pursue improvement or enrichment: family and relationships, health and wellness, community and social life, work and hobbies, personal growth, and spirituality. These are the life domains in which we find meaning and purpose, establish connections with others, and strengthen our relationship with ourselves. Some of these areas may already receive a lot of your attention; others might not have made it onto your priorities list.

Each chapter of this book is structured in a similar way and can stand alone, meaning you don't have to read every chapter in order. But begin with chapter 1 because it gives you the information you need to get started. Then you can go to the chapter covering the domain that currently feels most relevant to you. For example, if you're feeling stagnant in your work life, go straight to chapter 5. If you've never thought about spirituality in a deliberate or intentional way but wish to, start with chapter 7.

Not sure where to begin? Each chapter opens with a quick-start guide so you can see which issues will be targeted. Of course, you can work through the book in order, which is what I recommend. Ultimately, you should plan to read every chapter to get the most benefit from ACT's empowering approach to life. Even if a particular domain doesn't seem to be a high priority for you right now, you'll likely find that doing the exercises brings you new insight on that domain.

You'll see that each chapter has several exercises. These exercises are where the magic happens. They will help you clarify your priorities and better understand what's keeping you from living the life you truly want. I recommend that you actually complete each of the exercises as written rather than just reading them. You may not connect with all the exercises, but with repetition, they will help you acquire and appreciate the value of ACT skills.

We'll be talking a lot about the here and now, and many of the exercises focus on how you can shift your attention from what's going on in your head to what's happening in the present moment. That moment is when you can make changes.

CHAPTER

1

What Kind of Life Do You Want?

YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

You're ready to start living better, but what does "better" mean for you? Maybe you're tired of dealing with an anxious mind that never stops giving you things to worry about or reasons to criticize yourself. Or perhaps you've been fighting a battle with uncomfortable feelings—shame, fear, or loneliness—for so long that you've worn yourself out. Or maybe nothing in particular is bothering you, but you just feel stuck. Life doesn't seem as fulfilling as you wish it did. Your work, relationships, or personal life are stagnant or out of balance.

The good news? Real change is possible for you through the techniques in this workbook. The even better news is change is available to you whenever you're ready. This book provides you with the tools to transform your life in a profound way right now.

Getting unstuck is easier than you may expect. It doesn't require spending large sums of money or totally uprooting your life. It does mean being willing to feel, to not give those critical thoughts too much power, and to listen deeply to what's truly most important to you.

If you consistently use the strategies outlined in this book, you will start to see big changes, fast. Day-to-day life will feel richer and more balanced. Your relationships with your loved ones will become stronger, and your knowledge of yourself will deepen. And by returning to this book's strategies when life throws you curveballs, you'll see yourself coping wisely.

IF YOU NEED MORE SUPPORT

This book provides research-based strategies to enrich your life from the comfort of your own home. However, some mental health symptoms require more support. If you experience thoughts or feelings that are so severe they make it hard to take care of yourself, or if you have thoughts of hurting yourself or giving up on life altogether, it's vital to get in-person help right away. Reach out to your doctor immediately. In an emergency, these hotlines have trained staff ready to listen and help.

- » **NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE**
1-800-273-TALK (8255) Available 24 hours.
Live chat: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.
- » **NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS**
Help line: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)
Available Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST.
- » **SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION**
Treatment referral and information: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
Available 24 hours.

HOW THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT

The approach you'll find here is different from that of a typical self-help book. You aren't going to try to fix, change, or get rid of any part of your reality—even an uncomfortable or hard part. Instead, you're going to learn how to embrace your life and use your most cherished values to start making meaningful and important changes.

But to get there, you'll need to get more comfortable with, well, feeling uncomfortable! In ACT, we don't try to change anything about painful internal experiences. In fact, this book is going to help you understand that the very common tactic of trying to avoid or suppress pain ends up backfiring and breeding distress. So, one of the things you'll learn is how to let go of the idea of getting rid of, or even lessening, your pain.

This approach may sound counterintuitive for a self-help book, and you're not wrong. We know that as soon as we label an emotion or thought as "bad" or

“negative,” or describe it as “a symptom,” the brain attempts to eliminate or fix the identified problem, which is what the mind is built to do: solve problems. Unfortunately, in this case, trying to do so usually ends up making things worse. Why? *Thoughts and feelings are not problems to be solved*—they are experiences we all have, and will continue to have, for as long as we’re alive.

Is your heartbeat increasing as you’re reading this? Most of us don’t like to sit with this truth for too long—or at all. Our instinct is to run in the opposite direction of pain and discomfort. We avoid things, numb or distract ourselves, act out, or otherwise keep ourselves from feeling one emotion or another. You may have already realized that these strategies don’t get you too far, which may be one of the reasons you picked up this book.

In the realm of psychology and self-help, ACT has shaken up the status quo. It challenges the notion that we need to “fix” our thoughts, emotions, moods, or memories in order to live better. Rather than trying to problem-solve our thoughts and feelings, we’re going to work on relating to them in a different way. The best part about this method? Thoughts and feelings tend to become less bothersome and go away on their own once we start giving them less attention.

ACT is about taking action, and this book is about making changes.

But not just any kind of changes. ACT is about taking meaningful action that will enrich your life in deep and lasting ways. Action goes way beyond waking up an hour earlier, getting a gym membership, or organizing your desk. This book will challenge you to reflect on your true purpose, live a more authentic existence, and find balance among all areas of your life.

When we’re willing to accept our internal experiences and commit ourselves to doing what matters, we create a mental state known as psychological flexibility. If you’ve ever tried yoga or any activity that requires physical flexibility, you can probably relate to how hard it was at first to touch your toes. But if you kept at it, over time, you likely became more limber and could reach farther. With practice, you gained agility that gave you access to more options. A similar process takes place with the mind. Right now, we may have only a limited set of coping skills or responses available to us. When we are stressed, angry, or scared, we respond in the same few ways. However, with practice, we can develop new ways of relating to our thoughts, riding the waves of our emotions, and finding meaning when things get tough.

How ACT Can Help You

At this point, you may be wondering if a therapeutic approach that doesn't focus on getting rid of painful experiences will actually help you. Rest assured. We know that ACT works. There are thousands of studies across settings, populations, and mental health diagnoses demonstrating that ACT not only reduces symptoms like anxiety and depression but also positively impacts well-being and quality of life. Increasing psychological flexibility has been shown to improve outcomes in dozens of ways, from stopping smoking to easing chronic pain to enhancing workplace performance and everything in between.

The reason ACT is effective across so many cross sections of mental well-being is because it is not about solving a specific *problem*. Instead, the model outlined in this book offers a whole new approach to living. There's a reason you don't see *depression*, *anxiety*, or *stress* in the book's title. Rather than focusing on the internal experiences that bother you, you'll gain skills that apply to all areas of your life, including your thoughts and feelings.

The beauty of ACT is that once learned, these new ways of living can be kicked into gear whenever you face any of life's many challenges. Whether you are going through a period of depression, high anxiety, discord in relationships, a job loss, physical pain, or existential distress, the ACT approach is always available to you.

Where do you currently find yourself on life's roller coaster? Did you pick up this book because you've been on a stomach-churning drop and are feeling helpless and scared? Or are you on one of those excruciatingly slow rises to the top and can't see where it ends? Wherever you are, the exercises in this book will support you in making empowering and rewarding changes to your life.

The ACT model operates on the assumption that you, and only you, know what is of most importance and meaning in your life. There is no imposition of a way of living deemed to be the "best" or "right" way. You are the expert here. My goal is to help you understand what makes you feel like your truest and most authentic self and what barriers have made it difficult to translate that understanding into action.

We're going to be copilots. I'll offer new ways of thinking about things and share exercises to help shift your perspective. But you're going to decide where we go and the path we take. Let's begin with an exercise to help you home in on what matters most to you right now.

EXERCISE**What Matters to You Most?**

In the table are the life areas that you will explore in the following chapters. Consider each of these areas in regard to your own life and decide which are higher priorities for change. Then, for each area, write a sentence or two about what matters most to you. Don't think about it too hard; just go with your gut response. Finally, rank each area from 1 to 6, with 1 being highest priority right now and 6 being lowest.

LIFE AREA	WHAT MATTERS MOST?	RANK
Family and personal life		
Health and wellness		
Community and social life		
Work, hobbies, and vocation		
Personal growth		
Spirituality		

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ACT

ACT is the outcome of years of research on the psychological mechanisms that lead to improved well-being. We won't go into the ins and outs of these technical elements too much. Just like you don't need to know exactly how an engine works in order to drive a car, you can benefit from ACT without in-depth knowledge of the intricacies. If you are interested in learning more, check out the More Resources section (page 164).

For now, all you need to know is that there are six main building blocks of ACT—psychologists call them the core processes—which are basically a set of psychological skills. When all the skills are strong and working together, we have psychological flexibility, the ability to engage in values-based action while being fully in contact with the external and internal experiences that arise, even when they're difficult. Remember, the goal of ACT is to strengthen our ability to experience all our thoughts and feelings while simultaneously moving closer to our values.

In each subsequent chapter, you'll see a sidebar labeled "What's It All About?" Each describes one of ACT's core processes:

- » **VALUES** are our deepest understanding of what makes our personal lives rich and meaningful.
- » **COMMITTED ACTION** means being willing to do what it takes to live a life that is true to our values, even if doing so comes with pain.
- » **ACCEPTANCE** is the act of opening up to painful feelings and sensations that we might otherwise want to avoid or fight.
- » **DEFUSION** entails learning to create space from our thoughts and memories rather than being tangled up in them.
- » **CONTACT WITH THE PRESENT MOMENT** means being fully in touch with the present moment without judgment or interference.
- » **SELF-AS-CONTEXT** refers to the place in your mind that only observes and doesn't participate in the production of thoughts.

ACT's building blocks are interconnected skills that, when practiced, will help you develop greater psychological flexibility. You will learn more about each core process as you move through the chapters.

LET'S GET STARTED

You can work at your own pace through this book, but to get the most benefit, it's important to practice your new skills daily. Try to set aside about 15 minutes three or four days a week, at minimum, to practice. The more you practice, the faster you'll see results. It helps to have a notebook for reflecting, working through exercises, and planning action. So, are you ready to get this party going and to start seeing some changes? Then let's do this!

Family and Personal Life



START HERE IF YOU . . .

- » want to inject more richness into the time you spend with your family.
- » are seeking more meaningful relationships with the people you care about.
- » treat your marriage as a place where you hide, distract, and put up walls.
- » feel lost or lonely in your personal life.

PICTURE YOUR BEST LIFE

Clarifying what's most important to you—your values—when it comes to family means examining what sort of a family member you want to be, what type of relationships you want to build, how you want to define your legacy, and how you want your descendants to remember you.

These are big issues and may leave you stumped. This feeling is totally normal. We're not really oriented to reflect on these deeper contemplations in our daily life.

If I were to ask you, "Do you want to have children?" or, "What kind of life partner do you want?" your responses would probably come much more easily. That's because the answers to these questions reflect a goal or an aspiration rather than a value.

Goals differ from values in that once goals are achieved, we can cross them off our list. Getting married, having children, moving to Japan, and cooking a Thanksgiving turkey all on your own are examples of goals.

Values, on the other hand, are directions we're always moving toward but that can never be fully attained. Being loving, caring, patient, and creative are examples of values. There will never be one thing we can do that will result in being able to say, "That's it! I'm officially patient and I don't have to work on it ever again."

Maybe you've always known that you wanted to get married and have children or that you wanted to travel the world on your own. But what type of partner do you want to be? How do you want to contribute to your family? What do you want your children to learn from you?

These questions challenge us to think about what's most important deep down. Connecting with what we stand for and how we want to behave in our relationships allows us to forge strong and rewarding connections in our family. Understanding our values leads us to a richer and more meaningful life.



Use the exercises in this chapter to clarify your values in the area of family and how closely you are living these values today. Take a look at the Values List (page 163) if you'd like some inspiration.

EXERCISE **Best Day Ever**

For this exercise you'll need 10 index cards or similar-size pieces of paper.

- 1 On each card, write an example of your "best day ever" with your family. These examples could include experiences you've already had or things that seem like they could happen only in your wildest dreams. Don't think too hard about them; just go with your gut. Examples could include the following:
 - » Spending your 40th birthday in Paris with your spouse
 - » Taking your kids to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter
 - » Watching old movies in your pajamas on a rainy day
- 2 Now spread out all the cards in front of you and read them. Observe what emotions or sensations come up as you imagine you and your family having the best day ever.
- 3 After reading each of the cards, pick one experience that you are most willing to live without and put it to the side. Notice what it feels like to take that experience away as an option.
- 4 Repeat the process of scanning the cards, noting the sensations, and eliminating the experience that you are most willing to give up four more times, until you have five cards left.
- 5 Now consider the remaining five cards. What do they have in common? What sorts of things are you doing? Where do they take place? Do they cost money?
- 6 Rank the five experiences in order from the one that you feel you just couldn't live without to the one you are most willing to give up.



What do these last five cards reflect about what is most important to you when it comes to life with your family?

Use your answers from this exercise to create a list of three to five core values for this domain.

CORE VALUE 1

CORE VALUE 2

CORE VALUE 3

CORE VALUE 4

CORE VALUE 5

Family is often the setting for the greatest highs and lows of our lives. Family can be a source of abundant joy as well as deep pain. At the same time, this area of life is one we may take for granted or not think about very often. Staying grounded in our values will help us ride the emotional roller coaster that comes with family life.

When we're not connected with our values, home life can be a place to coast or decompress from work. We miss out on the opportunity to truly savor the pleasure of being in an intimate relationship with someone else or of being part of a larger family unit. Instead of walking through the door and feeling connected and a part of something, we may feel isolated, in our heads, or even lonely.

Once you have clarified your values, you need to identify what it looks like when you're living them. For example, let's say you identified creativity as something of value to you. Does creativity look like playing silly games with your kids, making up stories, or planning out-of-the-box excursions?

This next exercise will help you understand what living your values can look like in your everyday actions.



EXERCISE Living the Life

Return to your list of core values from the Best Day Ever exercise (page 10).

- 1 Write down the core values in the table in the right-hand column.
- 2 Circle where you are on a scale of 1 to 5 in terms of living that value daily.
On the scale, 5 represents living completely aligned with the value, whereas 1 indicates your behavior is taking you in the opposite direction.
- 3 Last, jot a few words down about what it looks like when you are living that value. Remember to focus on your actions and behaviors.

SCALE	EXAMPLE VALUE: Contribution
1	Being shut down, isolated
②	Participating in family activities only when asked directly
3	Doing my own thing for the most part
4	Being more communicative, helping without asking
5	Initiating projects (e.g., making dinner for everyone)

SCALE	VALUE 1:
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

SCALE	VALUE 2:
1	
2	



SCALE	VALUE 2:
3	
4	
5	

SCALE	VALUE 3:
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

SCALE	VALUE 4:
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

SCALE	VALUE 5:
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

.....●.....



GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

Values give us a sense of direction, a North Star to guide us as we navigate life. Achieving the sense of meaning or connection we crave means taking small steps in the right direction every day. Taking these steps is where committed action comes in.

Committed action means engaging in values-based behavior. It means taking the clarity of what's most important (your values) and translating it to tangible action. When we're acting in line with our values, we tend to be less caught up with worry and stress and more engaged in the present moment.

Let's say that intimacy is an important value in your home life. You crave deep conversations and quality time with your loved ones. Your favorite memories are those of staying up late with your partner or kids, talking about each other's thoughts and dreams. Although acknowledging your values is key, it doesn't mean much if it's not converted to action. Knowing you value intimacy doesn't get you very far if you spend your time at home staring at your phone or watching your family members stuck on their phones. Getting closer to your values requires taking concrete steps in the direction of what's important to you.

Committing to action can be scary. Acknowledging what we truly want and making the choice to go for it pushes us to be vulnerable and brave. Sometimes it means putting ourselves out there in new ways or surprising the people around us.

The scariest part about taking committed action is that there's no guarantee we'll get the outcome we're looking for—particularly in relationships with family members. The good news is that the outcome is not why we're doing it. When values drive our actions, the journey itself is the reward.



MEET ALEJANDRO

Alejandro spent his childhood moving every two or three years because of his father's job in the military. As a result, it was difficult to form strong friendships with other children his age. His mother suffered from chronic migraines and often spent several days a week in bed. Many of his childhood memories centered on looking after his two younger brothers and their mom.

As an adult, Alejandro finds that caretaking is still a big part of his life. He calls his mother every day and visits his dad, who lives about an hour away, every Sunday. He spends a lot of time worrying about his brothers. They've both struggled to find stable careers and often ask Alejandro for advice or money.

Alejandro recently noticed that all this caretaking was leaving him exhausted and feeling taken advantage of. He started to keep track of how much he was doing for his family and how little they did for him. He would make a mental tally of how many questions his mom asked him versus how many he asked her. He would drive away from his dad's house grumbling about how many other, better things he had to do. In a moment of anger, he told his brother to figure it out on his own when he asked for job advice. Finally, Alejandro decided that he needed a break.

Setting these boundaries and asserting his feelings gave Alejandro a brief taste of empowerment, but it didn't last long. Lying in bed, he fantasized about his brothers calling him to express gratitude for all that he had done for them over the years. He dreamed of his dad showing up at his door to let him know that from now on, he'd be the one to make the drive every Sunday. But none of these things happened.

Alejandro's resentment was still there, and now a major role in his life was unfulfilled. He felt aimless and confused about his sense of family. He began to wonder whether keeping things as they had been was better than having nothing at all. He used this opportunity to take stock of his values. After reflection, he identified dependability, helpfulness, and connection as most important to him in the realm of his family life. He felt like he was his best self when he was serving as a reliable and trustworthy source of support for his family members. It was meaningful for him to take care of the people he most cared about.

However, he realized that over time, his actions had become attached to an expectation of a certain outcome. Some of the things he was doing were no longer in the service of his values but really were small tests or attempts to see what he would get back. His behavior stopped being values based and instead became a means to an end. ➔



← Alejandro made some changes. He continued to check in on his mother, support his brothers, and make visits to his dad. These actions were undeniably important to him and brought him closer to his best self. However, he became more flexible about it and took breaks when he needed to.

When Alejandro let go of expectations of reciprocation, his anger and resentment faded. Committing to moving closer to his values regardless of the outcome led to a feeling of calm and a sense of liberation from the resentful thoughts. He was able to appreciate his actions for the meaning they brought him.

.....

In the next exercise, you'll consider some values-based actions you can make.

EXERCISE Moving Relationships Forward

In the left column, write down your core values for the domain of family. Look ahead to the next 24 hours and consider what values-consistent actions you could take and what actions would be inconsistent with those values.

VALUE	CONSISTENT ACTION	INCONSISTENT ACTION
Teamwork	Ask wife to make dessert for dinner and have kids help make the meal	Do everything by myself



VALUE	CONSISTENT ACTION	INCONSISTENT ACTION

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

VALUES

Here's our first introduction to one of the core building blocks of ACT. Values are the things that are most important to you, whether very concrete, like physical fitness, or a little more abstract, like fairness. Acting in ways true to our values makes life meaningful and rich. Clarifying your values means peeling back the layers of what you've been taught you *should do* or *ought to care about* and getting in touch with what really makes you tick.

Identifying your values is truly invaluable (pun intended!). When we gain insight into what is most important to us, we can make more informed decisions about where to invest our time and direct our attention and how to expend our energy and resources. What's more, our values are a compass to guide us through the highs and lows of life.

Although everyone has their own set of values, no two people's values are identical or experienced in the same way. In other words, values are not the same as morals. Whereas morals come from an external code of conduct, values emerge from our deepest, most personal selves. Not stealing from others may be a moral we adhere to, whereas justice and equality are values that are important to us individually. Both can guide our behavior but in different ways.

Our values also span multiple life domains. For example, being a good spouse may be of great importance to you and may influence much of your behavior. However, this idea limits your actions to one specific role and relationship. Conversely, being loving is something that can be practiced with your spouse, friends, pets, strangers, and maybe most important, your relationship with yourself.





Values are not a destination you reach but ideals you are always working toward. This characteristic is one that most distinguishes values from goals. Graduating from college may be a goal. Once that diploma is in your hand, that goal is met and you can check it off your list. Learning, on the other hand, is a value that you can move toward for the rest of your life. Our values can stay with us as long as we live.

Last and perhaps most important, honoring our values has the potential to positively change our behavior and increase our well-being in profound ways. In moments when we feel lost, frightened, aimless, or hopeless, our values provide a powerful guide. In this way, values are a critical ingredient in helping us develop more psychological flexibility in the way we respond to life, one of the central aims of ACT.

MAKING CONTACT

Staying in the present moment when we walk into our home is sometimes the very last thing we want to do. After a long day at work, we may prefer to check out in front of the TV or phone. Preparing an exciting meal may seem like too much trouble, so we heat up something that we barely taste. Then, as we try to fall asleep, we replay the events of the day or worry about the day to come.

How would your life change if, each time you walked through the door, you could be fully present for your family members? You might be able to enjoy each bite of dinner and appreciate taking a hot shower or falling asleep in a comfy bed. Instead of grabbing your phone the minute you wake up, you could listen to the sound of the birds outside your window or the rhythm of your ceiling fan.

More often than not, our mind keeps us ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, and we tend to neglect the present moment. Paradoxically, our mind is the only place where we have the power to make changes. The present moment offers opportunities to take action, whereas the past and future are either gone or yet to come. Consider how many moments have passed you by because your head was stuck in another place.

Making deliberate efforts to direct your attention out of your head and into the current moment has the potential to add depth and peace to your days. The next exercise is a classic example of devoting your attention to the present moment.



EXERCISE Seeing and Hearing

This exercise is best done in a setting with some visual stimulation. Outdoors, you can do this exercise on a park bench or sitting on your front stoop. Indoors, sit in front of a window or face a wall with artwork or multiple objects to look at. You'll need a phone or computer and headphones to play a piece of music. Choose a song that is at least three minutes in length.

- 1 Sit in a comfortable position with both feet on the floor. Start by taking a few deep breaths, and deliberately slow your breathing.
- 2 Take in the scene in front of you. Notice and observe the shapes, colors, and movement in your direct line of vision. If a car drives by or you notice someone walking in the background, simply observe these changes in the scene.
- 3 Now place your headphones in your ears and play the song you have chosen. Close your eyes and notice what it is like to shift to a different sense. For a minute or so, simply take in the song and observe the various sounds and tones as if hearing them for the first time.
- 4 Now open your eyes and imagine you are a scientist conducting an experiment on the senses. Observe how the experience of hearing and seeing changes as you engage both senses. If you notice that you've become distracted by a thought, take another deep breath and reorient yourself to the scene in front of you. The objective is not to relax but to simply observe.

A major consequence of getting stuck in our head is that our thoughts can sometimes make it difficult to decipher what is truly going on in the present moment. Have you ever had the feeling when you're with your family that each person is experiencing the same event in a different way? This situation can be particularly true during a conflict.

A couple I worked with in therapy shared how an argument about loading the dishwasher blew up into a knock-down, drag-out fight. Rob acknowledged that he made a snarky comment but that it was meant in humor. Gayle thought that Rob was taking his work stress out on her *again*. She retorted that she didn't want to be his punching bag just because he wasn't doing well at work. This reaction set off a



chain of thoughts in Rob revolving around *always* feeling criticized. He responded with more anger, and off they went.

Family dynamics can be a trigger for some of the thoughts and stories that shoot us right out of the present moment and into our own head.

Connecting with the here and now doesn't mean that we don't have thoughts and feelings that distract us. The difference is that when we are grounded in the present moment, we recognize that our thoughts can be just pesky, unhelpful, and sometimes wacky prattle that our mind throws at us pretty regularly.

Rob and Gayle's fight may have gone differently if they both had been able to see where their own "stuff" was getting in the way. The more in touch you are with the present moment, the more opportunities you have to move closer to your values, not the mental chatter. Try it with this next exercise.

EXERCISE **Every Time I See Your Face**

This exercise is a meditation to do when you are with one of your family members. Read through the instructions now, so you can practice this exercise at your next opportunity.

- 1 Identify someone in your family whom you care about deeply.
 - 2 The next time you see them in person, observe them as if you've never seen them before.
 - 3 Try to take in their physical appearance in detail. How do their facial expressions change as they speak? How do they eat, drink, or gesture with their hands? Examine the color of their eyes, the detail of their hairline, and any freckles or wrinkles on their face. Listen to the tone and timbre of their voice, and notice what makes their laugh unique.
 - 4 What emotions come up as you take in this person in their purest and most human form? Take a few moments to really soak in these feelings without holding on to them too tightly. Notice what it feels like to not try to chase these emotions but simply let them be.
 - 5 As you shift out of this headspace, be aware as the feelings change or eventually fade away.
-



LET YOURSELF BE

Acceptance means making room for all the painful feelings, sensations, and urges that we experience as part of being human. It requires us to drop our weapons and allow these experiences to wash over us without fighting them. There may not be a more challenging setting to practice this principle than in the context of family.

Having a full and rewarding home life with deep relationships does not mean there is no strife, conflict, or loss—quite the contrary. Certain experiences are just baked into the reality of being human: anxiety, sadness, anger, grief, and fear, to name a few. Trying to fight those experiences doesn't work in the long term and typically ends up causing more suffering.

As is often said about family, “Can't live with them; can't live without them.” The truth of this old saying really comes down to the emotional experience of being a family member. If we are willing to show up fully to our family life and all that comes with it, a few things are guaranteed.

There will be anger, sadness, grief, and jealousy—just a few of those “can't live with them” feelings. And there will also be joy, love, and belonging—the “can't live without them” experiences.

We may wish we lived in a completely “can't live without them” existence. For better or worse, committing to moving closer toward the values that maximize family life means going through some of those “can't live with them” feelings.

And yet, we will fight this reality tooth and nail. Our mind can go to some pretty crazy lengths to get out of feeling pain. The problem is that being in a close, intimate relationship means getting hurt at some point. What are some of the ways you have tried to manage, suppress, or altogether avoid those “can't live with them” feelings that come up around family?

Maybe you distract yourself through alcohol or by staying at work for long hours to keep out of the house. I worked with a client named Rebecca who would get back from regular Saturday visits with her elderly, ill mother and spend the rest of the weekend on the couch watching reality TV to avoid the pain of witnessing her mother struggle.

Maybe you try to think your way out of difficult emotions. The uncertainty of whether your spouse will recover from a recent surgery has you obsessing over different outcomes. After a meal with your uncle who speaks openly about different political views, you lie awake making mental bullet points of everything you wished you had said to him about how you really feel.



A more aggressive way to deal with the “can’t live with them” feelings is to opt out altogether, meaning you avoid completely any situations with the potential to bring up some of those emotions you would pay never to feel again.

A client, Louis, had a difficult relationship with a sister. After a particularly heated conflict, Louis decided to cut his sister off totally. He figured they would probably make up eventually, but as time went by, it became easier to ignore the situation rather than face the painful emotions that came up when he thought of her. The longer it went on, the more difficult it was to reach out. After two years, he went as far as lying to his parents about why he couldn’t attend a family wedding where he knew he would see her.

Tactics like distracting, numbing, getting caught up in our head, or opting out do give us a break from whatever it is that we want to avoid. But do any of these tactics make you completely bulletproof from pain in the long term? The answer is no. That part of life is guaranteed, remember?

What’s more, what have been the costs of trying to get out of those difficult experiences? Maybe you missed out on opportunities to get closer, receive support, or repair old wounds. By trying to avoid the “can’t live with them” feelings, we end up missing out on the “can’t live without them” moments, as well.

If you want deep and meaningful relationships with your family members, you can’t cherry-pick the situations you share. We can’t throw away the pain, anger, and fear without diminishing our capacity for love, intimacy, and gratitude.



DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

Family dynamics have the potential to generate mental chatter like nothing else. From concern about a struggling family member to resentment over past hurts, family has the potential to trigger worries, ruminations, and old stories and scripts that can flood our mind. Sometimes the noise in our head gets so loud it's difficult to engage with what is actually happening around us.

One of the quintessential ACT metaphors likens the noise in our head to a bus filled with passengers. Each of the passengers represents a different voice. They tend to clamor for attention during times of stress, in states of transition, and when we're starting something new.

We can all relate to a small argument taking on larger meaning. For example, maybe there is a conflict about whose turn it is to take out the garbage. After the argument ends, the passengers get started. First, one pipes up: *I'm always the one to do this*. Then comes, *She thinks her time is more valuable than mine*. Someone in the back of the bus chimes in with, *I'm not valued at all. I've never been appreciated*.

Having a bus full of passengers makes you human. Every person on the planet has their own bus filled with a cast of wacky riders, critical thoughts, and loud, unwanted voices. And yet we tend to think we're the only one who deals with this dilemma. How much do you beat yourself up or judge yourself for your bus full of passengers? *There's something wrong with me. I'm more messed up than normal people. I'm crazy*. Sound familiar? Well, those thoughts also come from passengers on your bus.

Situations that involve family really get the passengers riled up. They get a kick out of reminding you about old dynamics, things to worry about, and reasons you should be angry or jealous. It can be distracting, even irritating, but it doesn't have to go further than that. Where we get into trouble is when one of the passengers takes control of where the bus is going.

Having a bus full of passengers is out of our control; it's part of the human experience. How we relate to the passengers, though, is within our control.



EXERCISE **Wheels on the Bus**

Take a moment to consider a family dynamic that really tends to wake up your passengers and get your thoughts cranking. Maybe it's feeling like you're unappreciated by your spouse or there's an ongoing power struggle with your child.

- 1 With this situation in mind, make a list in the table of the primary passengers who will likely have something to say about it. If there is a name you can assign to them or way you can describe them, even better. Write down the primary automatic thoughts likely to arise in response to this situation.
- 2 Next, write down how these passengers can impact your behavior if they get hold of the steering wheel.

EXAMPLE SITUATION: *My son was suspended for skipping school.*

PASSENGER	THOUGHTS	ACTION
Incessant criticism (looks/sounds like my mother)	You are a bad father. You failed at your most important job. You should have been more involved.	Isolate from family, skip meals, drink wine, snap at spouse.

SITUATION:

PASSENGER	THOUGHTS	ACTION



[illegible]

.....●.....

The next exercise asks you to consider your stories.

EXERCISE Noticing the Story

- 1 Return to the table from the Wheels on the Bus exercise (page 24) and look at the thoughts triggered by your family dynamics. Now write down responses to these questions:

» Is there a particular story associated with this collection of thoughts?

.....

» If you step into the story and start living it, where is it likely to take you?

.....

» It is a helpful story or an unhelpful story?

.....

- 2 Come up with a title for the story as if it were a book or movie. Examples include *The Black Sheep*, *Always Forgotten*, or *Working Hard for Love*.

.....

- 3 Write the title on a small piece of paper and keep it with you for a week or so. Leave it in a place where you'll see it throughout the day, maybe tucked into a wallet, slipped inside your jacket pocket, or taped to your computer.

.....

- 4 Each time you see it, ask yourself, "Am I living the story right now?"

.....

Your only job is to notice how often you may be floating in and out of the story.

.....



Chapter Highlights

- » Generating more meaning in our family life means understanding what is most important and viewing the journey as the reward rather than the outcome.
- » Staying present in our interactions with family helps us reap the most from our relationships.
- » Committing to deep relationships means being willing to feel the full range of emotions that come with a full family experience.
- » It's important to keep an eye on the thoughts and stories that come up in family situations and the ways they can influence our actions.



Health and Wellness



START HERE IF YOU . . .

- » set the same health resolutions every year or season and they never seem to stick.
- » are tired of being bombarded with thoughts about what you “should” be doing to be healthy.
- » have a fractured relationship with your body, food, or exercise.
- » would like to expand your practice of wellness beyond diet and exercise.

PICTURE YOUR BEST LIFE

The media pounds us with messages about what we should look like, what we should be eating (or not eating), and how we should be exercising, not to mention that we *should* also be meditating, taking expensive vitamins, and drinking green juices. The icing on the cake is that the *shoulds* are always changing; there's always a new diet, lifestyle, or workout to keep up with.

What's worse, in the United States, our commitment to our health (or lack thereof) has come to represent something about who we are *as a person*. If we can stay on top of all the *shoulds*, we're disciplined, driven, and generally good at life. If we aren't eating or exercising the "right" way, we "should" see ourselves as lazy, undisciplined, and failing at life.

What would it be like to approach your relationship to health from a stance that keeps you on the same team as your body? How about if you saw your body holistically and valued your mental well-being just as much as your physical health?

If you had to give yourself a grade for how you treat your body, what would it be? If you think you'd earn a C (or below), don't worry, you have plenty of company. Most of us don't quite live up to our aspirations—let alone society's expectations—in the realm of health. Unfortunately, this facet can become another source of judgment and shame. When we've had a long-standing relationship with our body based on dislike or even disrespect, it may be difficult to connect with a sense of gratitude.

Consider just a few of the many things a body can do:

- » Walk, run, jog, and dance
- » Heal itself after being injured or sick
- » Experience physical pleasure
- » Conceive, carry, deliver, and feed a baby (okay, some bodies!)



A conscious focus on gratitude can be an important step in shifting our overall relationship with our body and health. When was the last time you acknowledged what your body does for you?

EXERCISE Count Your Blessings

Write down five aspects of your body that you are the most grateful for. Notice any judgments that show up around how difficult or easy a task this is.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

As you start to view your body from a place of gratitude, what thoughts or emotions come up?

.....

.....

What do your answers illuminate about what you most appreciate when it comes to your body?

.....

.....

If you were able to connect with this sense of thankfulness every day, how do you think your actions would change?

.....

.....



MEET ALISHA

Alisha has had a difficult relationship with her body for as long as she can remember. Her parents always told her she was beautiful, yet as she observed the world around her, she absorbed messages that certain bodies are acceptable or desirable and others are not.

As a teenager, Alisha struggled to feel accepted by her peers. Her days at school were filled with anxiety and self-consciousness. Alisha coped with these new emotions by directing all the angst and awkwardness she felt socially to her body. She believed that achieving an ideal weight or shape became the ticket to fitting in and being liked.

Over time, attempting to control her body became a way for Alisha to try to control her feelings. Her mind produced rules such as, “You can’t be happy until you’re a size 6 or, “If you lose 10 pounds, everything will feel better.” But regardless of her weight, which fluctuated greatly over time, Alisha couldn’t shake the feeling that she didn’t fit in and just wasn’t good enough. The feelings she was trying to control never fully went away and sometimes got worse.

One morning, Alisha let out a sigh of disgust when she saw the number on the scale. She felt exhausted, mentally and physically, keeping up the fight against her body. Alisha started by telling herself she was just going to take a break from her rules. She put her scale in the closet and gave herself permission to eat flexibly and to not work out if she didn’t feel like it. She was surprised to observe that her body didn’t change in the scary ways she had imagined it would.

What did change, however, were Alisha’s feelings, which became more difficult to ignore. Without her body to focus on, Alisha had an opportunity to finally go to the source and take care of her emotional needs. Feeling her feelings without the crutch of attempting to control her body provided her a sense of peace and ease.

Alisha’s break from trying to control her body translated to a new way of living. Finding body acceptance didn’t necessarily mean she woke up every morning and loved the way she looked. Accepting her body meant dropping the fight and respecting her emotional and physical cues without judgment.



This exercise will help you discover your core values when it comes to your health.

EXERCISE Being Healthy Means...

Complete the following sentences in a few words. Don't think about it too hard; just go with your gut response.

EXAMPLE: Being physically healthy means having the energy to keep up with my children.

Being physically healthy means

.....

Being mentally well means

.....

Feeling strong means

.....

Being connected to my body means

.....

Now finish the next set of sentences with one or two words. Again, go with your gut response.

EXAMPLE: I want to be a person who eats mindfully.

I want to be a person who eats

I want to be a person who sleeps

I want to be a person who cooks

I want to be a person who exercises

I want to be a person who treats my body



Use your answers from this exercise to create a list of three to five core values for this domain.

CORE VALUE 1

CORE VALUE 2

CORE VALUE 3

CORE VALUE 4

CORE VALUE 5



GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

Think about some of your past health goals. Maybe you've wanted to lose weight before a vacation or have worked hard to fit into a smaller-size outfit. Maybe you trained to run a marathon or learned a new sport. Whatever the goal, it sure feels good when we accomplish it.

Once we achieve a goal, how we respond after the dust has settled can be telling. Do you feel a bit lost, like you need to set another goal immediately? Or do you feel like you have a clear sense of what's next on your path of moving closer to health?

What about if you don't meet your goal? Do you feel shame and a sense of failure, or are you able to flexibly recalibrate to a new goal?

The answers to these questions lie in whether your goals are connected to your values.

Imagine two people, Tom and Larry, who set the same goal of going for a run before work three days a week. For Tom, this goal comes from a place of body dissatisfaction, not feeling good enough, and wanting to lose weight to feel better. For Larry, this run is motivated by his values of peace, nature, and respect.

When Larry runs in the morning, it's an opportunity to spend time outside, clear his head before a busy day, and take care of his body. It's a ritual he looks forward to because it brings him joy and calm. Tom, on the other hand, feels like getting up for a run is a disagreeable chore.



One morning, both Tom and Larry wake up feeling a sharp pain in their foot. Tom continues to run, despite his injury, out of desperation. Larry can still move closer to his values through flexible action. Perhaps that day he sits outside and reads the paper before work, or perhaps he goes for a light walk instead of a run.

The initial goal may look exactly the same on the outside, but it feels very different depending on what is driving it.

This next exercise helps you plan how to work toward your health goals.

EXERCISE From Big to Small

Imagine what your health and wellness routine would ideally look like a year from now. Be concrete about the actions you would be engaging in, and make sure they're connected to your core values in this domain. For example, perhaps you would like to be getting eight hours of sleep regularly, eating vegetarian three days a week, participating in a charity bike race, meditating for 20 minutes a day, and keeping your blood pressure down without medication.

Sleep:

Nutrition:

Exercise:

Mental wellness:

Overall physical well-being:

Now step back and work out what steps you need to take to get from your current routine to your goal in one year.

What will your routine look like in six months?

Sleep:

Nutrition:

Exercise:



Mental wellness:

Overall physical well-being:

What will your routine look like in one month?

Sleep:

Nutrition:

Exercise:

Mental wellness:

Overall physical well-being:

What can you do this week?

Sleep:

Nutrition:

Exercise:

Mental wellness:

Overall physical well-being:

What is something small you can do today?

Sleep:

Nutrition:

Exercise:

Mental wellness:

Overall physical well-being:



How do you feel now that you have a plan?

.....

.....

.....



For many of us, our relationship with our body has a complicated history. Our baseline may be grounded in dissatisfaction, disregard, or even self-loathing. This could look like compulsively weighing ourselves, not eating when we're hungry, exercising when we don't want to, or numbing ourselves with alcohol or drugs.

An important place to start taking action is self-care, which may feel like a foreign, abstract, or even laughable concept. You may think it means taking a bubble bath with candles and a glass of wine. I've had many clients share that their mind gives them messages that associate self-care with laziness or privilege or that self-care is superfluous.

Self-care, at its core, means respecting, preserving, and improving your health. On a day-to-day level, self-care means getting enough restorative sleep each night, including nutritious food in your diet, having a balanced relationship with movement and exercise, and taking care of yourself when you're sick or injured.

In terms of mental well-being, self-care might look like using your available paid days off rather than losing them every year. It could also entail ignoring your work e-mail after 6 p.m. or committing to six months of weekly therapy. It might be simple acts, such as journaling or calling a friend after a hard day. And yes, for some of us, self-care may also look like taking a bubble bath with candles and a glass of wine.

Use this next exercise to make a self-care plan.



EXERCISE

Self-Care

Take a look at these areas of health. For the following week, write down one act of self-care for each category that is in line with your core values that you can commit to.

- » Sleep (e.g., *Turn off all screens one hour before going to bed*)
- » Nutrition (e.g., *Prepare lunch for myself three days during the workweek*)
- » Exercise (e.g., *Take a yoga class with a friend*)
- » Mental wellness (e.g., *Download podcasts on mindfulness*)
- » Overall physical well-being (e.g., *Make appointment to get overdue blood work done*)

DAY	ACT OF SELF-CARE
SUNDAY	
MONDAY	
TUESDAY	
WEDNESDAY	
THURSDAY	
FRIDAY	
SATURDAY	



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

COMMITTED ACTION

Now we turn to the next ACT building block: committed action. When we take committed action, we are intentionally acting in ways that align with our values and move us closer to them, or we are learning to act in new ways that more fully reflect the person we want to be. These new actions may start as small shifts in our daily routine that eventually grow into bold moves and big changes.

Committed action means being willing to do what it takes to move closer to our values, even if that process is difficult or gives rise to unpleasant emotions, such as fear. In fact, the process of using our values to guide our behavior in the face of emotional pain and discomfort is at the heart of committed action.

Here's an example from my own life. In the months before my grandmother died, it was very difficult for me to see her in pain and face the reality of her mortality. I remember sitting in my car in her driveway and feeling like every ounce of my being wanted to put the car in reverse and head home. Yet, certain values I hold—connection, compassion, gratitude—trumped my urge to run from a painful situation and guided me to her bedside.

When we engage in committed action, we are deciding to show up to life and everything it brings, because that's what makes our experiences rich and meaningful. For this reason, committed action and values go hand in hand. Our values are like the North Star, showing us the direction to take, and committed actions are the steps that get us there.

Committed action is flexible. It involves being open to life and adapting to all the speed bumps and potholes. When life throws you a major challenge or you find yourself at a low point, committed action means always returning to your values and persisting, no matter what.

The first step in taking committed action is identifying an area where you would like to make changes—such as work, relationships, or your health—that just isn't fulfilling or leaves you wanting more. You then need to reflect on what is most important to you right now in this realm. What is it that you're craving? Maybe it's connection, a sense of purpose, or making a contribution. Then, with these values in mind, you can start developing specific and realistic goals that will take you where you want to go.



MAKING CONTACT

How well do you hear and feel your body and what it has to tell you? Moving closer to our healthiest self depends on listening to our body. We use our body all day long and yet probably don't pay it too much attention.

Are you hungry? Are your legs sore from yesterday's workout? Have you noticed that you are losing more hair? Is your heart beating a little bit faster than usual? Over the course of a day, our body communicates with us in dozens of ways that we may not notice if we are not present.

Listening to the body is difficult in today's chaotic world. How many times have you realized that it's three o'clock and you haven't eaten lunch yet because you've been so consumed with work? Or maybe you realized that you're way overdue for a teeth cleaning, but you keep putting it off because at this point you don't want to hear what the dentist may say. Have you ever had to go to the bathroom but didn't because you didn't want to interrupt a meeting or ask where the bathroom was?

What are the costs of not listening? At worst, ignored injuries or illnesses become exacerbated over time. On a day-to-day basis, we're disconnected from our most vital cues. In the long term, we miss out on the opportunity to have a deep and connected relationship with our body and health that is founded on respect and consideration.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a powerful way to draw attention to the areas of the body where we may be holding tension and to relieve that tension through a deliberate tensing and relaxing of muscles. It reminds us to connect with our body and helps us develop a more focused awareness of our various muscle groups.



EXERCISE Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise is best done in a quiet place where you won't be interrupted and you can lie down and stretch out on a comfortable surface, such as a carpeted floor.

Read through each muscle group, and once you assume each posture, take a big inhale and hold the position for 4 to 10 seconds. Release the position with a big exhale and notice how it feels when tension leaves your body.

- » **HANDS AND ARMS:** Hold your arms and hands out to your sides in a T shape and ball your hands into tight fists. Imagine you are squeezing a lemon in each hand as hard as you can.
 - » **ARMS AND SHOULDERS:** Raise your arms high above your head. Feel the pull in your shoulders, and raise them a little higher if you can.
 - » **SHOULDERS AND NECK:** Pull your shoulders up to your ears and your head down to your shoulders as if you were a turtle retreating into its shell.
 - » **FACE AND NOSE:** Imagine an itch on your nose that you cannot scratch with your hands. Scrunch up your face and make as many wrinkles as you can in your nose.
 - » **STOMACH:** Put your hand on your belly and tighten up the abdominal muscles as hard as you can, as if bracing yourself to take a punch.
 - » **LEGS AND FEET:** Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your feet toward you, keeping them as flexed as possible. If you can, tighten your thigh muscles at the same time.
-

Being mindful of our body means also paying attention to the physical processes that keep it running, such as eating when we're hungry, going to the bathroom when our bladder is full, and sleeping when we're tired.

The body communicates a need for nourishment through a feeling of hunger. Listening and responding to this cue is essential for sustaining life. Moreover, our body lets us know what it needs. Some days we may have an itch for something rich and filling; other days, green vegetables. Some days we may want something sweet after dinner; other days, something salty.



As babies and young children, we intuitively eat when we're hungry and stop when we're full, without any judgment or second thought. Over time, we receive messages that food, eating, and health mean so much more than nourishment. Certain foods are "good" whereas others are "bad," some foods are allowed if you've "earned" them, and some foods you "should" be eating even if you don't like them.

Use the next exercise to become more mindful about your relationship with food.

EXERCISE Hungry/Full/Content?

Complete the following worksheet during a meal when you are by yourself. Prepare your food and sit down where you plan to eat. Put your phone away and remove any other potential distractions. Fill out the first section before you start eating, then eat your meal as mindfully as possible, noticing flavors and textures as you take each bite. Afterward, complete the second part of the worksheet.

Mindful Meal Log

BEFORE THE MEAL

Rate your hunger by circling which number on a scale from 1 to 10 best represents your hunger.

extreme
hunger 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 uncomfortably
full

- » What thoughts, feelings, or expectations do you have about the meal before you eat it?

.....

.....



AFTER THE MEAL

Rate your fullness by circling which number on a scale from 1 to 10 best represents your fullness after eating your meal.

extreme hunger 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 uncomfortably full

» What thoughts or feelings do you have about the meal you have just eaten?

.....

.....

Last, rate your satiation on the following scale by marking which number on the scale best represents your level of satisfaction.

completely unsatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 perfectly satiated

» Is there anything you can think of that would help you feel more satiated?

.....

.....



Consider how your relationship with your body might change if you approached each meal or snack with this same intention and thoughtfulness. Can you commit to using this worksheet for one meal a day? Or three meals a week? Look in the back of the book in the Bonus Worksheets section for a blank copy (page 152).



LET YOURSELF BE

Let's zoom out for a second and view your body from the perspective of an alien who has never encountered a human before. First, you have a skeleton, muscles, ligaments, and tendons that allow you to move in fascinating and incredible ways. You have a heart, liver, lungs, and other organs that work in perfect harmony to keep your body functioning without any input from you and often in spite of how you treat it. You have a brain that provides thoughts—some unhelpful, some inspiring—and communicates with your organs to produce hundreds of emotions. And the genes passed down from your parents interact to produce a face, personality, and physique that make you completely different from any other human on the planet.

Over time, we lose touch with this objective perspective. Rather than seeing it as a collection of cells, we view our body as a representation of who we are as a person or how well we're succeeding at life.

Ever hear the expression “Look better, feel better”? The gist of it is that we can change our emotions by changing our body. If we buy into this logic, it can start to produce some confusing consequences.

I worked with a client named Ella, who would look in the mirror and berate her appearance any time she felt she had failed at something. When she experienced rejection from a romantic partner, her first instinct was to identify all the ways she believed her body was deficient and to try to fix them. When she was nervous about a job interview, she would spend more money than she had on a new outfit and haircut to feel more confident. Living by this reasoning made her body the place where she tried to fix, get rid of, or control the things that brought her pain.

It's easy to see how we can end up using our body to try to avoid feeling difficult emotions. This next exercise lets you explore how you may try to avoid some of the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that come up around your body.



EXERCISE Price of Avoidance

Which of these avoidance strategies have you used?

- ☐ Trying new diets, detoxes, or cleanses
- ☐ Exercising compulsively
- ☐ Eliminating food groups from diet
- ☐ Weighing self excessively
- ☐ Eating only “clean” or “organic” foods
- ☐ Undergoing plastic surgery
- ☐ Skipping meals
- ☐ Spending excessive amounts of money on cosmetics
- ☐ Changing image frequently through hair color, tattoos, or piercings
- ☐ Eating or grazing mindlessly
- ☐ Overeating or bingeing
- ☐ Scrutinizing body parts or excessive mirror time
- ☐ Not showering or brushing teeth
- ☐ Going extended periods of time without a physical checkup
- ☐ Avoiding wearing a bathing suit
- ☐ Self-harming
- ☐ Opting out of situations that require physical expression or intimacy, such as dancing or sex

Have any of these strategies worked in the long term?

What have they cost?

The problem with avoidance strategies is that they leave us running on a hamster wheel. There’s nowhere to go. We can’t escape our body. And when we get down to it, it’s not our body that we really have an issue with, at least not completely.

It’s the sense of discomfort, self-consciousness, and unease that we feel within our body that we want to escape. It’s the emotions we would love to shut off forever, the memories we want erased, or the thoughts that keep us awake. It may be the feeling of not fitting in or always being on edge.



It is our internal experiences that we are truly at battle with, not the body that houses them.

The only way to get off the hamster wheel is to accept our body, emotions, and self as a whole by letting go of all our efforts to avoid, numb, reduce, control, or change our internal experiences, and simply let them be.

Accepting our body and all that comes with it doesn't mean just finding a way to tolerate it. Acceptance requires letting go of all the ways we are fighting with ourselves and making some space for emotional experiences to come and go. The next exercise will help you let yourself be.

EXERCISE And... ?

Write down 10 sentences to describe, in neutral and objective terms, the ways you struggle with your body at this moment. Stay away from judgmental language. For example, don't write "I'm a fat loser." Instead, write "I don't feel as if I can be happy at this weight."

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10



Now, add the word *and* at the end of each sentence, and complete it with a reason you're willing to accept it.

EXAMPLE: *I don't feel as if I can be happy at this weight, and I deserve to treat myself with self-compassion and kindness.*

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10



We aren't able to get to the second half of the sentence if we don't accept the first. If we fight our feelings and pretend they aren't there, we don't have the opportunity to move closer to our values. Furthermore, when our behavior is motivated by trying to get rid of a feeling, we can end up doing things that hurt us or keep us stuck.



DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

I've already tried this before and I've never been able to keep it up. . . . I know what I'm supposed to be doing, and for some reason I just don't do it. . . . There's no point in trying because I always end up failing. . . . I have too much going on to add anything new to my routine. . . . I'm too old to make any changes. . . . I just can't do it.

Any of this sound familiar? If our mind were a radio, we would all have some version of an “I can’t” station. Sometimes it may be out of rotation and we don’t hear from it often. Other times it’s on all the time at the highest volume and with the same message: *I just can't do it. Why bother?*

The volume tends to get really turned up when we’re trying new things or feeling vulnerable, scared, or self-conscious. For many of us, the volume blasts when we try to make changes to our health, maybe by joining a gym, committing to cutting out alcohol, or trying a new activity, such as skiing or rock climbing.

When we set out to try something new, on some level—maybe way deep down—we must believe we can do it. And yet, this kernel of confidence gets drowned out by what the “I can’t” radio station has to say.

I worked with Sarah, who struggled with an eating disorder. She would enter treatment and invest tons of work, energy, and resources to get herself to a healthy place. She was deeply motivated for recovery and was desperate to live a better life. She left treatment each time feeling pumped up and strong. However, as soon as she got home and there was no one watching her, the “I can’t” station started to get louder. It reminded her of all the times she’d tried before and how they hadn’t worked. Many times, the thoughts became unbearably loud, to the point that it felt easier to give in just to make them stop.

When you think about the times you tried something and it didn’t stick, how often was it because you responded to the “I can’t” station as if it were an emergency broadcast? How big of a role did those messages play when you first considered giving up?

The next exercise takes you from “I can’t” to the root belief behind that message.



EXERCISE I Think I Can't, I Think I Can't

Start with an “I can’t” thought that tends to be really disruptive. Then ask yourself a series of questions about what this thought would mean to you should it be true. Keep going until you land on a belief that seems like it may be at the core of your chain of thoughts.

I can't

because



If this were true, it would mean

.....



If this were true, it would mean

.....



If this were true, it would mean

.....



If this were true, it would mean

.....

EXAMPLE:

I can't *lose weight*

because *I'm lazy.*



If this were true, it would mean

I'll never have the body I want.



If this were true, it would mean

no one will ever be attracted to me.



If this were true, it would mean

I'll always be alone.



If this were true, it would mean

I'll never be happy.

Working through this exercise may have illuminated some of the unhelpful thoughts and beliefs that may be floating through your mind at any given time and what drives your inner critic. Consider the impact of any one of these thoughts should they take front and center of your headspace.



A critical body image voice is a specific line of thinking that can get in the way of self-acceptance *if we listen to it*. These thoughts may look like nitpicking, general shaming, or downright verbal abuse. Buying into such thoughts can lead to self-defeating behaviors that perpetuate a cycle of shame. Maybe these thoughts echo actual messages you received from someone else, or maybe they are the product of your own mind. Either way, the pain is real.

How do you speak to yourself when it comes to your body?

EXERCISE **Body Bashing**

Write down what automatic thoughts you would expect to come up in regard to your body in the following situations:

- » Trying on bathing suits

- » Doing a new workout class for the first time with people who are more experienced

- » Looking in the mirror first thing in the morning

- » Seeing someone younger than you wearing the same outfit



- » Hearing your partner commenting about how good-looking an actor or actress is in the movie you are watching

- » Getting weighed at the doctor's office

What is it like to see these thoughts on paper? What feelings come up as you see them from a distance? Start to create a character in your mind to represent this body-critical voice. Is the voice male or female, young or old, aggressive or sly? Is your negative body image voice a mean girl in high school or a condescending older man?



One of the keys to sustaining long-lasting changes to our health is developing a new relationship with the thoughts and stories that may get in the way, which means observing and acknowledging our thoughts and moving in the direction of our values. Imagine saying, “Hello there, I see you and know you” to the most critical, nasty, and fear-based thoughts and then engaging in kind, compassionate choices for your well-being anyway.

Maybe as you're reading this, you're thinking, *That sounds weird or, I'll give it a shot.* These reactions are simply more thoughts. The key is that *your thoughts don't have to define your future actions.* You can have a thought such as, *This is the most preposterous idea ever* and still choose to give it a try. Taking back the power over your behavior is one of the essential ingredients to generating more psychological flexibility.



Chapter Highlights

- » Moving closer to health means respecting our body in a holistic and non-judgmental way.
- » In order to make sustainable changes to our health routines, we must connect our goals to our core values.
- » Listening mindfully to our physical and emotional cues is the foundation of a peaceful relationship with our body.
- » It's important to notice all the thoughts and stories that come up around our sense of wellness and say hello to them from an objective stance.
- » Developing body acceptance involves understanding the ways our body becomes a means to control internal experiences we would likely prefer to avoid.



Community and Social Life



START HERE IF YOU . . .

- » would like to be part of something bigger but aren't sure where to start.
- » want to develop stronger connections with the people in your community.
- » would like to explore new ways to enhance your social life.
- » are craving relationships with others that are based on shared values.

PICTURE YOUR BEST LIFE

What are the communities and who are the individuals you share your everyday life with?

Maybe there are groups that you attend with regularity, like a weekly basketball game or a monthly book club. We can also find communities in places of worship or organizations founded on causes we believe in, such as a political campaign or a local issue. These groups are where we get to express our opinions and views with people who may share our beliefs.

Community can also be made of up people who live in and are invested in the same area. These people could include your mail carrier, a neighbor you're friendly with, or the manager of a local restaurant who has come to know you by name. These are the people who, if something were to happen to your neighborhood, would be impacted in the same way as you and could be counted on to help you in a time of need.

We can even form communities within already-existing groups, such as work or family. I happen to have a cluster of cousins who live in my area. We were not necessarily close as children but have connected as adults and developed a routine of having dinner and celebrating special occasions together.

Communities give us a sense of belonging and a connection to something larger. They provide a setting where we can make a contribution and form relationships with people based on shared interests or values. Communities also hold us accountable and allow us to exercise our strengths.



EXERCISE

100th Birthday Party

Imagine you have lived your life completely true to your values, and you now get to celebrate your 100th birthday party. Throughout the party, people who have known you over the course of your life approach you (regardless of whether you believe they would actually be alive at this point). With this image in mind, consider the following questions.

- » What groups of people are in attendance? (e.g., family, work, karate, neighborhood council)

.....

.....

- » In which settings, besides family and work, has your presence been most felt?

.....

.....

- » What are your lasting contributions to the communities where you have been a member?

.....

.....

- » What do people say to you about the role you have played in their lives?

.....

.....

- » In what groups or settings have you played a leadership role?

.....

.....



Now take a moment to reflect on how close or far away you believe you are from building this vision into reality. Which are the communities where you can increase your presence and connection?



Our prehistoric predecessors lived in cohesive social groups that were dependent on everyone playing a part. Every member of the group was expected to make a contribution and pull their weight. Whether a person provided food, built structures, or cared for children, all their actions were done in the name of the greater whole. Securing your place in your group meant access to nourishment, shelter from the elements, and protection from danger.

Humans evolved to be a part of a group—it's what we're built for. We are social creatures. Although it's no longer necessary to be part of a group to ensure survival, being a member of a supportive community is imperative for our emotional needs. It is important to feel connected to a group, beyond our family, of like-minded people who can offer support, share views, and hold us responsible.

One factor that may play a role in how connected we feel to the people we spend our time with is whether we share the same or similar values. Having a group of people with the same values helps push us to continue to move closer toward our own. Communities offer us a sense of identity and a sense of shared purpose. Belonging to something larger means being both counted on by others and protected by them. Communities can also offer the chance to participate in religious rituals, the telling of stories, and the passing on of culture.

All communities have inherent values that define them. This definition is different from the official laws and regulations that keep people in line. Laws tend to come from a place of “what not to do” and are often shared across cultures (e.g., “Don't kill others”). The principles of a community speak to what makes it unique. For example, one group may value deference to older generations, whereas another group may value focusing attention and resources on children. These principles are not right or wrong. Like our personal values, shared community values just *are*.



EXERCISE

Community Matters

For each community group in your life, jot down in the table what is most important to you. Then rate on a scale from 1 to 3 (with 1 being *not at all* and 3 being *very*) how active you are in each community. If there is a community missing from the table, write it in the last row.

COMMUNITY	WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU	HOW ACTIVE YOU ARE (1-3)
Neighborhood	Green spaces for children to play	2
Professional		
Faith-based		
Political		
Leisure		
Family		
Health/wellness		

Use your answers from this exercise to create a list of three to five core values for this domain.

CORE VALUE 1

CORE VALUE 2

CORE VALUE 3

CORE VALUE 4

CORE VALUE 5



Finding groups of people who share our specific values helps us move closer to our best self across the board. For example, let's say spirituality is an important value to you, but it can be challenging to find spirituality in areas like work or health. Finding a setting where you can explore, discuss, and express your spiritual beliefs with like-minded people is important in order to bring balance and fulfillment to all areas of your life.

GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

As we've learned, committed action means observing all the reasons our mind gives about why we shouldn't take a risk, and then doing it anyway when it's in service of something great—our values. It means feeling anxiety and self-doubt but not letting those feelings stop us from taking action to move forward.

Any time we gear up to try something new, we eventually hit the limits of our comfort zone and are faced with a choice: Do we expand beyond what feels safe or stay on our home base? How willing are we to experience uncomfortable thoughts and feelings in order to get closer to a value that is important to us?

A client, Mike, enjoyed playing a science fiction video game that required significant time and strategy. In fact, the game consumed much of his time outside of work. And although it provided an opportunity to pursue entertainment, it also kept him somewhat isolated. One day, he was standing behind two people at a coffee shop who were discussing his game. Their conversation made it clear they were just as enthusiastic as he was, and they were talking about inviting people over for a weekly get-together to discuss strategies and secret codes. Every ounce of Mike wanted to wave his arms in the air and say, "Me! Me! I want to join that!"

The bad news is that he stayed quiet. The good news is that this encounter highlighted to Mike that he needed to take a step or two beyond his comfort zone.

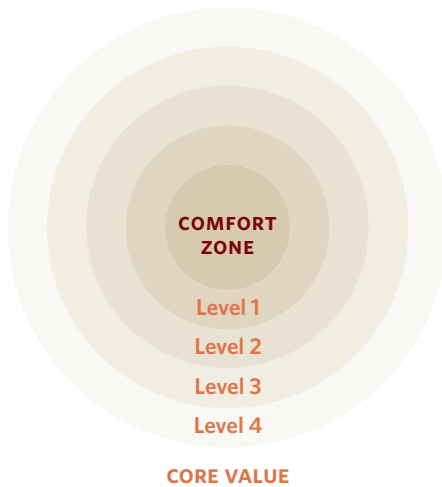
Perhaps you can think of an instance when you learned about an opportunity to connect with other people and didn't pursue it, even though you wanted to. This refusal occurs often because our mind gives us reasons it's not a good idea: *You'll look stupid. You won't connect with the people there. You're too tired and stressed from work.* Our heart rate starts to increase, our face gets warm and flushed, and maybe we start sweating. The experience becomes too distressing. And just like that, we retreat. The thoughts go away, our heart starts to slow down, and we return to home base.



Taking committed action means not waiting for our thoughts and feelings to be perfectly ready before changing our behavior. In order to live better, we need to make some bold moves *now*.

In the next exercise you can consider exploring beyond your comfort zone.

EXERCISE Bull's-Eye



The center circle of the bull's-eye represents our comfort zone, where we feel little to no emotional discomfort. Each larger circle represents another level of challenge to take bigger steps out of our comfort zone. Bring to mind each of the core values you identified for the domain of community and consider what it means to keep yourself feeling safe. If you're willing to step outside your comfort zone, consider the following questions for each level of challenge:

Value:

Level 1

» What action would represent one step outside your comfort zone?

.....

» What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....

» Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

.....



Level 2

- » What action would represent another step outside your comfort zone?

.....

- » What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....

- » Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

.....

Level 3

- » What action would represent another step outside your comfort zone?

.....

- » What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....

- » Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

.....

Level 4

- » What action would represent another step outside your comfort zone?

.....

- » What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....



» Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

As you were moving through this exercise, did you hit points where you decided you were not willing to keep moving forward? That feeling is absolutely okay, and it highlights an important point.

Willingness is a choice. You get to decide when, where, and under what circumstances you take action. It is important to remember that you are in control. Sometimes our thoughts are so convincing that it feels like our feet are stuck in cement, but the truth is, we are still totally capable of picking them up and moving forward.

If we're not going to let our thoughts and feelings dictate our actions, what should we consider when deciding whether we're willing to commit to an action? Our values: They are our perpetual compass.

Committed action is also all-or-nothing. Either you take action or you don't. Imagine standing on a diving board deciding whether you're willing to jump. You can't start to jump and then change your mind and turn around. However, you don't have to go straight to the highest diving board. Starting with a lower board helps build tolerance for anxiety. The next exercise will help you face your fears by starting on a lower board.



EXERCISE Face Your Fears

Brainstorm all the various things you've thought about doing but haven't in terms of branching out socially or getting more involved in your community. These things can range from asking a work friend to go out to lunch to taking a ballroom dancing class to running for your neighborhood council. Next, assign each of those acts a number from 1 to 10, where 1 represents something you feel you could do today and 10 means the thought of doing it brings you the most distress.

Emotional Discomfort

*something you
could do today*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

*the thought of doing this
brings you the most distress*

CHALLENGING ACTION	EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT RATING (1-10)	DATE



CHALLENGING ACTION	EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT RATING (1-10)	DATE

Now take out your calendar and create a plan to work your way through the list in the coming year. Start with an action you rated as 1. Mark a day when you are willing to commit to making it happen, and write down that date in the last column of the table. Do the same for the actions you rated from 2 to 10. By following this plan throughout the year, you will gradually expose yourself to more anxiety and be able to build new patterns of behavior.



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is another building block of the ACT model—and the way we use the word here means something a little different than the definition that may come to mind. In the ACT framework, acceptance is a process of dropping the fight with your reality and making peace with all your internal experiences—even the ones you don't like.

By “dropping the fight,” I mean letting go of what for many is an automatic impulse to suppress or avoid feelings such as anxiety or anger. How many times have you experienced an emotion—for example, embarrassment after getting feedback at work—and then tried to talk yourself out of it? You may have thought, *Don't be a baby; there's nothing to feel bad about.* That moment of denying your reality, of trying to make your feeling go away, is the fight I mean.

Acceptance means letting go of the struggle with your thoughts and feelings and making space for all emotions to come and go. The truth is, emotions aren't controllable. They can't be tamed. The more we try to control them, the more powerful they become.

As we move closer to acceptance, our relationship with our feelings will become more objective. We'll no longer judge emotions as “good” or “bad,” “negative” or “positive.” Feelings simply *are*, and if we let them be, even the most intense eventually subside.

The road to acceptance begins with taking stock of the ways you have tried to distance yourself from the emotions you find most challenging. Have any of your attempts actually worked? If you're like the rest of humanity, the answer is probably no.

Fighting with our emotions is like holding a beach ball under water. We're unable to play, swim, or enjoy the water because all our efforts are on keeping that beach ball down. What would it be like to let the ball go? Could you better enjoy your time with your hands free? Maybe you would chat with friends or family, swim some laps, or do a cannonball. So much more is available to you when you let go of the ball.

Allowing the beach ball to float on the surface near us represents acceptance. Acceptance means letting all our thoughts and feelings just be, acknowledging that they are there and not messing with them.

Acceptance is never “giving up” or “giving in.” In practice, acceptance is empowering. Not fighting with our experiences frees up energy and allows you to focus on the things you care about.



MAKING CONTACT

Making contact with the present moment gives us the potential to experience the world more directly. Focusing our attention on the here and now allows us to catch the opportunities we might have otherwise missed to build a community based on what's most important to us. When we're checked out or caught up in our thoughts, it is more difficult to appreciate and connect with people around us or make a contribution where there is a need.

Ever consider the expression "Stop and smell the roses"? It's not "Spot roses out of the corner of your eye and keep walking." It's also not "Find the best lighting to take a picture of the roses to put on social media." The instructions are very clear: Stop. Smell those roses.

"Stop and smell the roses" could be the slogan for making contact with the present moment. We are surrounded by opportunities with the potential to give us a taste of gratification or tranquility, if we only take the time to pause. It may sound obvious, yet if you're like me, it's something you may struggle to accomplish.

What are the metaphorical roses in your community? What are the sights, sounds, smells, and textures you haven't appreciated recently or maybe never noticed?

How would your day-to-day life be different if you incorporated more stopping and smelling of the metaphorical roses? The objective of this next exercise is to enhance your awareness of your surroundings.

EXERCISE A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Complete this exercise somewhere outside in your community that's familiar to you, like a block in your neighborhood that you've passed hundreds of times or the strip of sidewalk outside your office building.

- 5: Describe five things that you see.
- 4: Note four things that you hear.
- 3: Label three things that you feel via touch.
- 2: Identify two things that you smell.
- 1: Name one thing you can taste.

Did you notice a difference in your state of mind after doing this exercise?



MEET LAILAH

Lailah was taught that school came first, above friends or hobbies.

Lailah went through grade school, high school, and college with laser focus on her goals. She poured herself into her coursework and filled her extra time with activities she believed would make her applications to law school more appealing.

Once in law school, Lailah went into overdrive, going above and beyond to make sure she got nothing less than an A.

After graduation, Lailah got a job at a prestigious law firm that required her to spend 60 to 70 hours a week at the office. Lailah spent several years living this way. Although she was stressed, this feeling wasn't particularly unusual for her. Otherwise, she didn't feel strikingly happy, sad, or anything in between.

One afternoon, she was asked to interview a candidate for a summer internship. During the interview, the candidate asked, "What excites you most about your job?"

This question stuck with Lailah. She spent a few days thinking about it and concluded that she wasn't really sure what it meant to feel excited. In fact, she wasn't sure how she felt about her job, much less the movie she saw last weekend or what she ate for breakfast. Everything in her life was more or less fine, but she had trouble pinpointing one concrete emotion about anything. Lailah realized that her focus was always one step ahead.

Lailah decided to start slowing down. She downloaded a mindfulness app and began each day sitting and noticing her breath for a few minutes. She had her first sip of coffee in silence and tried to take in the experience of her body waking up with the caffeine. She made efforts to continually direct her attention to the present moment throughout her workday.

On the surface, Lailah's life didn't change in radical ways. However, she did notice major shifts in her internal experience. For the first time, she was receptive to a whole new line of awareness. It was as if a switch had been turned on.

Bringing more contact to the present moment allowed Lailah to make more values-based decisions. She also became a more attentive listener and more thoughtful in her discussions. Lailah found that by taking the time to appreciate the here and now, her natural pace slowed down, bringing more balance to her life.



This next exercise is meant to draw your awareness to the experience of moving.

EXERCISE **Heel to Toe**

Read the instructions through first before giving this exercise a try. Do the exercise inside the first time, with minimal distractions, then once you get the hang of it, try it outdoors. It takes about 10 minutes.

First, take in what's around you. What do you see and hear? How would you describe the temperature? What is the weather like? Notice what it feels like to have your feet firmly planted on the ground. Try to identify the different points on your feet where you feel pressure.

Next, lift up your right foot slightly. Notice what it feels like to have your weight shift to your left leg and any sensations in your toes, ankles, or calves. Then take a step forward and feel your right foot as it touches the ground. Pay attention to the sensation of having your weight shift from your left to your right foot, from the heel of your foot to your toes. Then take a step with your left foot and do the same thing. Take a few steps, keeping your focus on the experience of shifting weight, the muscles moving in tandem, and the different areas of your feet touching the ground.

Now begin walking at a slow but more natural pace. Zoom your attention out to your whole body and observe what it feels like to be in motion. If you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts or distracted by what's around you, return your attention to your feet lifting and falling. Continue this slow, mindful walking for another five minutes or so before coming to a gentle stop.

LET YOURSELF BE

What difficult thoughts and feelings show up when it comes to building a community for yourself? It can be daunting to take social risks. Maybe you feel bored or lonely when it comes to your social life, or sad and embarrassed. Maybe your mind tells you all sorts of things about what this feeling says about you, like, "You're a loser" or, "You have no friends." Maybe you compare yourself to others and use what you see as a reason to put yourself down.



How do you respond to these thoughts and feelings? Do you try to compartmentalize them or pretend they're not there? Or maybe you react by trying to numb them away. We feel something uncomfortable, we don't like it and want it to go away, so we scramble to do something to get a little relief. The problem is that the feelings don't go away, and the things we do to get rid of them usually make them worse.

What emotions may you be particularly likely to avoid when it comes to the challenge of building a community network? Use the next exercise to find out.

EXERCISE To Control or Not to Control?

Fill out the table to explore the strategies you use to keep yourself checked out when these emotions arise.

BOREDOM	What situations tend to bring up this emotion?
----------------	--

.....
How have you attempted to control this emotion?

.....
Has it worked short term?

.....
Has it worked long term?

.....
What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

STRESS	What situations tend to bring up this emotion?
---------------	--

.....
How have you attempted to control this emotion?

.....
Has it worked short term?

.....
Has it worked long term?

.....
What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?



ANXIETY

What situations tend to bring up this emotion?

.....
How have you attempted to control this emotion?

.....
Has it worked short term?

.....
Has it worked long term?

.....
What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

SADNESS

What situations tend to bring up this emotion?

.....
How have you attempted to control this emotion?

.....
Has it worked short term?

.....
Has it worked long term?

.....
What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

LONELINESS

What situations tend to bring up this emotion?

.....
How have you attempted to control this emotion?

.....
Has it worked short term?

.....
Has it worked long term?

.....
What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?



APATHY	What situations tend to bring up this emotion?
	How have you attempted to control this emotion?
	Has it worked short term?
	Has it worked long term?
	What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

ANGER	What situations tend to bring up this emotion?
	How have you attempted to control this emotion?
	Has it worked short term?
	Has it worked long term?
	What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

SHAME	What situations tend to bring up this emotion?
	How have you attempted to control this emotion?
	Has it worked short term?
	Has it worked long term?
	What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

OTHER

What situations tend to bring up this emotion?

.....
How have you attempted to control this emotion?

.....
Has it worked short term?

.....
Has it worked long term?

.....
What have been the costs of trying to control this emotion?

.....

It's likely that you came to the conclusion pretty much across the board that attempts to control challenging emotions are ineffective at minimum but at their worst have the potential to limit your life in big ways.

These strategies work in the short term, which is why we keep turning to them. If they didn't give us a taste of the relief or sense of control we crave, we wouldn't use them. The problem is that we've bet all our money on control being the solution, when it actually makes things worse in the long run.

The next exercise will help you explore the concept of giving up trying to control challenging feelings.

EXERCISE **Pesky Neighbor**

Imagine that you finally move into your dream house. You're unpacking boxes when there is a knock at the door. You see a little old lady, who introduces herself as your next-door neighbor and welcomes you to the neighborhood. You invite her in. After 30 minutes of small talk, you feel that the conversation has run its course, but she doesn't leave. Eventually you make up an excuse to get her out the door.

The next day, you're getting the mail and there's your neighbor. She starts to talk to you and follows you inside. Every day it's the same thing. She's waiting for you when you leave for work, sitting on your stoop when you come home.



You begin to think she's a problem. You try playing nice, but she doesn't get the message. You start being more direct about her poor boundaries, and it's like she doesn't hear you. You raise your voice and even get a little aggressive. You install a tall fence around the property, and by some force of nature, she is able to jump it. You disconnect the doorbell. You board up your windows and she knocks on them for hours.

After months of frustration and angst, you decide to do something different. You decide to stop fighting and let the pesky neighbor just be. You take down the fence and the boards off the windows.

You don't ignore her or pretend she's not there. That would be impossible. Instead, you let her come and go while you get on with your life. If you could snap your fingers and have her disappear, you would. But since that's not an option, you find a way to live with her there. Some days, she is really annoying. Other days, you're so engaged in other aspects of your life you don't even notice her. After a few months, you find that she has become less persistent. Since you're not making a big effort to keep her out, she's not pushing back with the same effort to get in.

Now, consider these questions:

- » How has trying to control your emotions around putting yourself out there ended up backfiring?

- » How has trying to control your emotions kept you from engaging with others and building a community for yourself?

- » How willing are you to let those emotions be, as difficult as they may feel, so you can continue to move closer to your core values in this area?



DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

Getting hooked by our thoughts is a natural part of being human. Our mind gives us a thought, and we decide to reel it in and listen to it. Sometimes this is helpful; for example, when we're doing our taxes or remembering to pick up dog food on the way home. Unfortunately, there are many other thoughts that are totally unhelpful and have the potential to really hold us back when we listen to them.

Using the passengers-on-the-bus analogy again, remember how our thought passengers tend to get louder when we take risks or are vulnerable, such as when we're stepping out of our comfort zone to build a community or reaching out to new people. How we respond can make the difference between taking committed action in line with our values and staying safe.

The first step in defusing from unhelpful thinking is to understand our particular roster of passengers and the ways they can keep us stuck. Developing that awareness makes it less likely that they'll hook us without our knowledge. Although each person's mind is different, there are several types of thoughts likely to appear when we're hitting the edge of our comfort zone.

RULE-BASED THOUGHTS usually have words like *should*, *always*, or *never* and often are based on "if . . . then" logic. *If I don't get to my boxing class four times a week, then there's no point in going at all. Even though I don't feel connected to its values, I should be more involved in my church. I'll never be interesting enough to make friends in my neighborhood.* Buying into rules tends to keep us in rigid patterns of behavior and makes it difficult to respond flexibly.

Another type of thought that can hold us back is **REASONS**. Reasons are the typical explanations of why we can't do something. One of my clients, Matt, read in his local paper about auditions at the community theater. He felt excited as he imagined himself on stage in front of an audience, being part of the cast, and potentially making some new friends. But then his mind started to serve him all the reasons it was a bad idea. *I don't have enough time to commit to a play. I won't get a part anyway. I wouldn't want my coworkers to know I was acting; that could jeopardize my professional image.* As you can imagine, if he were to take those thoughts as fact, he would likely stop in his tracks and turn in the opposite direction.

JUDGMENTS are evaluative thoughts about ourselves or others. Fusing with judgments can be problematic regardless of whether the judgments are negative—I'm the dumbest person in this writing class—or positive—I have the best-kept lawn on my street. When we buy into the negative judgments, we are chronically putting



ourselves down. You may think that buying into positive judgments would lead to positive self-image or greater self-esteem. However, when we hold on tightly to a positive self-evaluation, we're that much more disappointed when our mind gives us a negative judgment. *I can't believe I thought I had the best lawn on the street—what an idiot.*

Last, there are the thoughts that come from the **STORIES** we tell about ourselves and who we are as a person. We've talked a little bit about stories in previous chapters. These thoughts typically begin with "I am . . ." *I am someone who just doesn't belong. I am never going to fit in. I am incapable of making strong connections.* Buying into these stories can be really painful. Furthermore, when we believe them to be true, our life becomes a movie where we already know the ending.

The good news is that all these patterns of thinking are just that: thoughts. They are only as powerful as we let them be by buying into them.

Fusing with these thoughts means taking them as fact or literal truth. Defusing from them means seeing them as a collection of words, bits of language that happen to be passing through our mind. Defusing from the thoughts that have the potential to keep us stuck means we can listen to what's really important and base our actions on our values.

Chapter Highlights

- » Developing a community is an important way to create life balance and enhance our relationship with our values.
- » A consistent practice of grounding in the current moment allows us to appreciate the community around us and pick up on opportunities to connect with others.
- » Reaching out to other people can be scary and challenging. Accepting without judgment the thoughts and feelings that arise makes it easier to step out of our comfort zone.
- » Understanding that our thoughts are only thoughts is an important step in not letting them impact our behavior.



Work, Hobbies, and Vocation



START HERE IF YOU . . .

- » are feeling unsatisfied in your current profession and are ready to make a change.
- » are looking for a sense of purpose or vocation in your life outside of work.
- » find that listening to an inner critic holds you back from moving forward in your professional identity.
- » would like to find ways to gain a sense of contribution but aren't sure where to start.

PICTURE YOUR BEST LIFE

The word *vocation* comes from the Latin verb *vocare*, which means “to call.” How connected do you feel to your calling? Regardless of whether you work in an office or from home, in a job that is highly compensated or totally unpaid, is your profession a reflection of your deepest self? Do you spend your workdays doing something that mirrors what’s important to you and gives you a place to shine?

Understanding what is truly most important to you allows you to reap the most out of your professional identity—in or out of a workplace. Illuminating your values means you’re in touch with your deepest sense of purpose and how you want to contribute to the world.

There are many reasons we can become disconnected from what’s most meaningful to us when it comes to work. For starters, our society tends to value paycheck and prestige over meaning when choosing a profession.

Reflecting on how connected we are with our vocation may also feel like a luxury. You may think, *I don’t have time to find my calling; I need to make money.* Working at a job for financial security, even if you really don’t like the job, doesn’t mean there aren’t ways to make it meaningful to you.

For many of us, our work life and personal life are out of balance. They may feel like opposite ends of a spectrum that we flip-flop between: work mode versus home mode. We may throw ourselves into the stress of the workweek and then spend the weekend recuperating. Clarifying your values can help you feel less like you have to put on a suit of armor when you go to work.

Use the following exercise to develop a list of core values in the area of vocation.



EXERCISE When I Grow Up...

Reflect on a memory of yourself as a kid. Specifically, develop an image of yourself at a time when you first started thinking about what life would be like when you grew up. Try to connect with the experience of being a child and thinking anything was imaginable and everything was exciting. Create a mind-set where there are no judgments about what is possible, realistic, or “right.” Stay in this headspace as you answer these questions.

» What was your first dream job?

» Who were your heroes?

» What adjectives were used to describe you as a kid?

» What were your favorite games to play?

» Did you ever play “pretend”? What did you come up with?



» What did you imagine your life would be like as an adult?

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» What careers do you remember learning about that intrigued you the most?

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What do these answers tell you about what might be inherently important to you? For example, if you dreamed of being an astronaut, it may reflect that nature, exploration, or adventure is important to you.

Use your answers from this exercise to create a list of three to five core values for this domain.

CORE VALUE 1

CORE VALUE 2

CORE VALUE 3

CORE VALUE 4

CORE VALUE 5



How closely does your daily work, whether in a workplace or in your home, reflect these values? If you don't have a professional life that is currently satisfying to you, this exercise is where your values come in handy.

All too often, our job can feel like a chore or worse. The next exercise will help you develop an understanding of what makes you tick when it comes to work, so you can feel more empowered when that alarm goes off on Monday morning.



EXERCISE User Manual

When you purchase a car or a new electronic gadget, it comes with a user manual that details how the product works and what to do if something goes wrong. Use the following questions to create your own user manual. It may be helpful to ask your current coworkers, spouse, or others who know you well to provide input if you get stumped.

» What are my core values when it comes to work?

» What allows me to exercise my strengths?

» What brings out my weaknesses?

» How do I respond to setbacks?

» What should others know on day one of working with me?

» What are my blind spots?



» What balance of work and life do I want to achieve?

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How did this exercise clarify what is most important to you when it comes to your professional identity? Is your current work setting a good match when it comes to how you work best? For example, if one of your strengths and values is leadership, working remotely or from home may not be a good fit.

If your strengths and preferences are not perfectly matched to your work setting, there is good news. Values are not bound by job descriptions or work responsibilities. You can think outside the box to find avenues to move closer toward them.

One of the brilliant differences between values and goals is that values are always available to you, whereas goals are never guaranteed. For example, you can start connecting with creativity when you're assigned a new project. You can move closer to patience while you're waiting for a coworker to respond to an e-mail. You can practice adventure when you start a side business selling the artwork you previously made as a hobby.

GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

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If someone were to observe you over the course of a workweek, would they be able to make a good guess about your core values? Does the way that you engage with your work, interact with peers, and balance priorities reflect what is most important to you? These areas are where committed action can come in.

Committed action requires setting very deliberate and intentional goals that are, first and foremost, connected to your values. This principle is especially important when it comes to vocation, where you may spend the biggest chunk of your waking hours.

What is your process for setting goals? If you're like most people, you may not put consistent time and thought into what you want to accomplish and why. Often, our goal is simply the next step: better compensation, increased



responsibility, or a loftier title. These goals may be fine, but sometimes we're just putting one foot in front of the other without much intention.

One of my clients, Min, worked as a clinician in a treatment facility. One of her stated values was collaboration, and she loved working as part of a team. When a director position became available, she worked extra hard to put herself in a position to be promoted. She received the promotion, but she quickly realized she was no longer part of the team-based environment she found so fulfilling. Upon reflection, Min wasn't sure whether she had really even wanted the promotion or whether it had simply seemed like something she *should* want. Even though the position pulled her further from a values-matched environment, Min's awareness of what was important to her allowed her to get creative about ways she could move closer to collaboration in her new role.

In addition to being values based, goals need to be concrete and detailed. A common pitfall is setting ambiguous or intangible goals. "I want to be able to work from home" or "I want to lead this team" are visions rather than goals. Keeping them in our mind's eye is important, but getting down to the nuts and bolts increases our ability to impact our behavior in a tangible way.

The acronym SMART helps us set goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound.

SPECIFIC goals are specific and precise. *I want to reach out to 10 potential clients by the end of the week, so I will need to call 2 each day.*

MEASURABLE speaks to the need to set goals that can be objectively assessed. *E-mail one person a week to set up informational interviews.*

ATTAINABLE means setting realistic goals that won't set us up for discouragement. *Integrate green vegetables into two meals a week.*

RELEVANT goals are important and meaningful because they are connected to our values. *Play with my kids for 20 minutes each day before I leave for work.*

TIME BOUND means having a concrete framework for completing the goal. *I will read two fiction books by the end of the month.*

By setting specific, values-based goals, we are able to bring our values to life on a monthly, weekly, and daily basis. The next exercise will help you create SMART goals.



EXERCISE

Get SMART

Write down the core values you came up with for the domain of vocation.

For each value, first set a vague goal. Without thinking about it too hard, notice what it's like to write down an abstract, ambiguous goal. Next, write down a concrete, specific goal that is feasible to accomplish in the next month.

EXAMPLE:

VOCATION: *Nurse*

VALUE: *Contribution*

Vague goal: *Improve quality of care for patients on ward*

SMART goal: *Get to work 15 minutes earlier so I can check in on one patient before shift begins*

VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

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SMART goal:

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VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

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SMART goal:

.....



VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

.....

SMART goal:

.....

VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

.....

SMART goal:

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Notice the difference between the vague and SMART goals. How do they differ in terms of how motivated you feel as you read them? Using your values to create SMART goals is a way to keep you moving in the right direction and with the scaffolding you need to keep up momentum.

Now it's time to put some thought into the process of achieving your SMART goals, which means anticipating barriers that may present themselves as you're moving forward and what resources you'll need to ensure your success. When considering both barriers and resources, it is important to keep in mind both internal experiences—thoughts and feelings—and external factors—time and accessibility.



EXERCISE

Barriers and Resources

EXAMPLE:

SMART GOAL: Schedule check-in meetings with each staff member once every quarter

Barriers: Getting distracted by day-to-day tasks, avoidance of giving feedback, finding enough time

Resources: Two to three hours per person for meeting and preparation time, willingness to sometimes have difficult conversations

SMART GOAL:

Barriers:

Resources:

SMART GOAL:

Barriers:

Resources:

SMART GOAL:

Barriers:



Resources:
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SMART GOAL:
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Barriers:
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Resources:
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SMART GOAL:
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Barriers:
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Resources:
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We need goals to move us forward; we can't exist solely on our values. For this reason, it's important to put time and thought into the process of setting goals. A good place to start is to put aside 10 to 20 minutes each week to reflect on and set goals. Try scheduling the same time each week for a month and observe how doing so leads to changes, both internal and external.



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

DEFUSION

In ACT, defusion is the process of getting unstuck from our thoughts. That concept might sound odd, especially if you didn't know you were "stuck" to your thoughts in the first place! Let me explain. When we get so entangled with our thoughts and stories about things that we believe them and do what they tell us—more so than we believe and follow our actual lived experience—we are in a state of mind called *cognitive fusion*. We are fused with—stuck to—our cognitions, or thoughts.

The problem with getting fused in this way is that our thoughts aren't always very reliable. They show up as though they are reflecting and describing reality, when in fact our minds are busy passing judgments and creating interpretations that can be far from accurate. How many times have you made a simple mistake, like forgetting your keys, and thought, *God, I'm an idiot!* Whether you remember your keys has no actual bearing on your intelligence, but if you have that thought often enough, eventually you may start to believe—you may get *fused* with the idea—that you aren't that smart.

The key to defusion, to getting unstuck, is learning to see thoughts for what they are: by-products of having a brain. Our brains produce thoughts the same way our lungs breathe air—it's what they're built for. And don't get me wrong—our capacity to think serves us very well in many instances. But it's important to not confuse thoughts for reality or truth. They are only what they are: just thoughts.

Thoughts in and of themselves don't have to mean anything, and we don't have to do anything in response to them. It's when we believe them as fact and allow them to direct our behavior that we give them way more power than they should have, which usually causes problems.

Over time, as you notice your thoughts coming and going, you will see that they are simply a combination of words and images that your mind produces over the course of the day. Some thoughts are helpful, and others are very unhelpful. Without our thoughts getting in the way of decision making, we can listen to what's really most important.



MAKING CONTACT

Being in touch with the here and now in the context of work allows you to respond with flexibility to the curveballs the day may bring. Many of us experience anxiety at work. Whether it's worry about a deadline or anxiety over how we're performing, catastrophic thoughts can flood our mind and keep us thinking about worst-case scenarios.

Staying grounded in the present moment allows us to listen more attentively and focus on the task at hand. When we're completely engaged in the present, we can direct all our attention to what we're working on without the interfering noise of negative self-talk and worry, which also allows us to prioritize in a thoughtful and values-based way.

Being intentional about returning to the present moment is empowering. You get to choose where to direct your attention. Even in the most stressful or boring of work settings, you have the ability to pull yourself out of your head and ground yourself in something of your choosing, such as a picture of your kids, the work in front of you, or simply your breath.

Unfortunately, it's not uncommon to spend a full workday totally in our head. Have you ever walked through the door and when your partner asked, "How was your day?" you responded, "Eh," "Blah," or "Long"? It can feel like our workdays happen to us, rather than us being in control. A fast-paced environment, doing the same thing day after day, long hours, or a heavy workload can make it difficult to feel present.

The exercises in this section are geared to help develop awareness of how present you are during your workdays.



EXERCISE

Checking In or Checking Out?

Use this tool to track your engagement with the present moment throughout a typical workday, each hour on the hour. Setting alarms on your phone to remind you to check in with yourself can be helpful. At each time point, note how connected you feel to what you are doing on a scale from 1 to 10 by marking an X in the appropriate box, where 1 represents being completely caught up in your head without any connection to the here and now and 10 represents being fully in contact with the present moment, totally engaged with what's happening in front of you, and all five senses firing on all cylinders.

After spending a day tracking your engagement, respond to the questions.

	SCALE									
Fully in contact with present moment	10									
	9									
	8									
	7									
	6									
	5									
	4									
	3									
	2									
	1									
Completely out of touch with present moment										
		9 a.m.	10 a.m.	11 a.m.	12 p.m.	1 p.m.	2 p.m.	3 p.m.	4 p.m.	5 p.m.

» What times of day were you most present?

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- » When were you most checked out; that is, most in your head?

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- » Take a look at the three lowest points of the day and describe how you were spending your time.

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What seems to be going on when you are most checked out? Perhaps you had spent the past hour working on the same project and were feeling bored. Maybe you had had a meeting with your boss that left you stewing. Or, you had several documents open on your desktop at once, each three-quarters completed. Or maybe you picked up your phone to respond to a text and got caught up in social media. Understanding which behaviors, feelings, or situations can lead you to get tangled up in your head is a good place to start.

Now it's time to put this data collection to good use. In the next exercise, you will be implementing basic mindfulness techniques that take less than five minutes. All it takes to get out of your head is a concerted effort to pay attention to a point of focus in the present moment. Emphasizing one of your senses helps.

EXERCISE **Make It Count**

Use the chart to track how integrating mindfulness makes a difference over the course of your workday. Try to take eight mindfulness breaks, about one an hour (if you work an eight-hour workday). If that feels too daunting, start with five, three, or even one. Feel free to use one of the techniques listed or create your own.

- » Take 10 deep breaths, noticing where on your body you perceive each inhalation and exhalation.
- » Rub lotion slowly into your hands, paying attention to the sensation of it soaking into your skin.
- » Make a cup of coffee and inhale the scent with your eyes closed.



- » Look through a window and label 10 different things you see.
- » Eat a bite of food, chewing it slowly and trying to name as many flavors as you can.

[illegible]

How did taking a few moments to make contact with the here and now impact your engagement with what you were doing? Consider how your productivity and satisfaction with work would change over time if you made a consistent effort to remain engaged.

LET YOURSELF BE

Work can be a place where we experience high levels of self-doubt, pressure to succeed, or even feelings of shame about what we have not yet accomplished. These thoughts and feelings can be deeply uncomfortable, but the truth is, no thought or feeling lasts forever. By fighting them or hiding from them, we actually give them power to impact us in unhelpful ways. It's the way we relate to our thoughts and

feelings, not our actual thoughts and feelings themselves, that has the potential to bring us more suffering.

A client, Sasha, was fired from her dream job, a prestigious position in a fast-paced, high-stress environment. She'd had difficulty keeping up. The first time she received feedback that she wasn't doing well, she felt embarrassed; the second time, humiliated. When she was fired, she felt utterly ashamed of herself. Sasha found another job quickly, but the trauma stayed with her. Rather than feeling the emotions that were connected to being fired, she tried to get rid of them by thinking through all the ways she had screwed up and how she could avoid it happening again.

When she got to her new job, she often put off opening e-mails from her boss, because her heart rate would spike once she saw it in her inbox. She didn't make an effort to get to know her coworkers because she didn't want to answer questions about her last job. She focused on staying under the radar and making sure she didn't cause any waves. Her entire workday revolved around doing whatever she could to avoid feeling any of the embarrassment and shame that had come from being fired.

Whether or not you've been in a similar position, work is often a place that generates uncomfortable emotional experiences. There's the pressure of deadlines and workload, the scrutiny of being evaluated, and the constant comparison of ourselves to those around us. We can experience feelings of fear, shame, or anger when we receive critical feedback, get an e-mail from our boss asking to meet later, observe a peer receiving praise, and dwell on our own thoughts: *I'm about to be fired. Everyone knows I'm not cut out for this. People are talking about me behind my back.*

Rather than letting these unhelpful thoughts or difficult feelings come and go, we try to "anxiety-proof" our life and protect ourselves from any discomfort. Sasha did this by attempting to minimize situations that made her vulnerable to being fired, because the prospect of feeling that level of shame again seemed unfathomable. Not surprisingly, this approach totally backfired.

We've learned that attempts to shield ourselves from natural emotions don't work in the long term. In the short term, we may feel safe, but we are not really living. We'll certainly never be able to thrive if we're devoting our energy and internal resources to keeping a lid on our own feelings. The more time we spend in our safe space, the scarier the world outside starts to seem. With each moment that we remain holed up after the threat has passed, we reinforce that we can't do it on our own and need to stay in our comfort zone.



What are the ways you try to “anxiety-proof” your life? How do you keep yourself in your comfort zone long after the threat is gone? In the workplace, an example could be not promoting yourself: When an opportunity comes up to take on more responsibility, you sit on your hands, or perhaps you have a great idea that never leaves your head. We also stay in our comfort zone by putting down others. Maybe you gossip about people in your office or find ways to make them look worse than you. Or sometimes we deal with anxiety through throwing ourselves into work to the point that we lose balance with other domains of our life. And some of us may be paralyzed by anxiety and procrastinate doing our work.

The path out of our comfort zone is ceasing to fight the emotional experiences and instead using them to guide us forward. Feelings such as anxiety, jealousy, and anger are normal and innate. Because they tend to show up during times of distress, we label them as “negative” or “bad.” However, using these labels just reinforces the idea that our emotions are a problem to be solved.

Practicing acceptance of our emotions has the potential to help us grow in our vocational domains. Greeting thoughts and feelings with open arms (or at least not with balled fists) enhances our ability to behave flexibly.

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

Given the pressure we often put on ourselves when it comes to work, it's no surprise that our mind sends us messages that are critical, mean, or just unhelpful. For example, say you have this thought: *Volunteering to lead that project is a dumb idea. Having to lead a team is too overwhelming and everyone will see that I'm a fraud.* It's easy to see how buying into it could result in missing out on chances for growth. Not volunteering may give you a temporary break from anxiety, but in the long term, it has the potential to really keep you stuck.

Confidence is often built up to be the magic bullet that will lead us to be successful. *I'd be better at my job if only I had more confidence. I can't speak in front of others until I feel more confident. I'm not confident enough to try for a leadership role.*

Do any of these thoughts sound familiar? If so, what have been some of the consequences of believing them as fact? How many times have you kept your mouth shut when you had a helpful suggestion or not raised your hand to volunteer? Have you ever decided not to apply for an advanced position because you didn't believe you had anything worthwhile to give?



How would the outcome have been different if you didn't believe you needed self-confidence in order to put yourself out there? Try it out with the next exercise.

EXERCISE You Can Dance If You Want To

For this exercise you will need a 3-by-5-inch index card or a similar-size piece of paper.

On the front side of the card, write, “I’m not confident enough to” 10 times, line after line. Now complete each line with something you believe you just can’t do; for example, “I’m not confident enough to speak in public” or “I’m not confident enough to write fiction” or “I’m not confident enough to salsa dance.” Notice how quickly your mind produces 10 things you need to wait to do until you have the confidence.

Now turn the card over and write down “I can” 10 times. Complete the sentences with the same phrases you wrote on the first side, with the word *anyway* after each. “I can speak in public anyway.” “I can write fiction anyway.” “I can salsa dance anyway.”

Does that feel weird, unnatural, or even wrong? Or maybe it is intriguing and a bit exciting.

The reality is that each side of the card represents different messages our mind can give us. They’re both just thoughts. Neither one means anything about your actual ability to do something. The idea that we need to wait until we have confidence to do something is a rule most of us picked up over time, and it has the potential to really keep us stuck. What opportunities, promotions, and chances to network have you held yourself back from because you bought into the idea that you lack enough confidence?

The second side of the card represents the spirit of committed action, and taking action, even if the confidence isn’t there.



MEET MARCO

The son of immigrants from Central America, Marco grew up with the pressure to be successful. His parents pushed him from an early age to be a good student. He lived in a community with people from the same country as his parents and went to school with kids who shared the same culture and story. He worked hard throughout high school and received a full scholarship to a prestigious university. When he graduated as valedictorian of his class, he felt the pride of his parents, his community, and his school.

But the transition to college was difficult. Marco immediately sensed that he was different. He watched his peers move into their dorms with parents, siblings, and big bags of belongings. Marco had come by himself since his family could not afford to go with him.

In his very first class, he watched his fellow students navigate the lecture-style lesson with ease, eager to participate and share their ideas.

I can't do this.

All of a sudden Marco was flooded with anxiety and dread. His mind started inundating him with reasons he should pack his bags and go home. *I only got in because of my ethnic background. I'm not smart enough to be here. Everyone knows I don't deserve this.*

These thoughts were loudest when Marco was in class, particularly the small classes that relied on student participation. He never voluntarily raised his hand, and when he was called upon, he kept his eyes down and mumbled short answers. The few times Marco did speak up were followed by brutal self-criticism: *I sounded so stupid. Everyone is judging me.*

Marco became despondent. The one thing he loved most, school, was suddenly the biggest source of self-doubt and humiliation. He woke up filled with dread and often skipped classes. His grades began to suffer, and he was informed he might lose his scholarship.

Eventually, Marco began to consider that his thoughts, as powerful and convincing as they were, might not be completely accurate. He realized that buying into those thoughts could potentially cost him his education. Marco had little choice but to do things differently. The biggest challenge was to participate in class. Marco found a way to raise his hand and share his perspective even though the thoughts raged on. Initially, he experienced so much internal criticism →



← after sharing that he could barely hear anything else. One day, though, he realized that his classmates had used his answer as a starting point for a new discussion, which was evidence that his perspective was valuable and worthwhile.

Over time, the more Marco shared in class, the quieter the thoughts became. Occasionally, he spoke spontaneously and without inhibition. Other times, the thoughts became loud again. When they did, he reminded himself to push through the discomfort and savor the feeling of accomplishment it brought him. Whether or not the critical thoughts were there, Marco remained committed to sticking with what he knew to be true—he loved learning, and an education was something of highest importance to him.

.....

Our thoughts can feel as if they are written in stone. The problem is that when we take them as fact, they have the potential to direct our behavior away from our values. Take, for example, *I'm too old to change careers* or *I'm not smart enough to apply for that job*. Buying into such thoughts could very well hold you back from doing something that would bring your life meaning. The next exercise will demonstrate how your thoughts don't have to dictate your actions.

EXERCISE **Mad Libs**

Fill in the blanks with thoughts that go through your head around your professional identity.

I couldn't possibly, because I am

I'd love to, but I'm too

I'm too; otherwise, I would

Because I'm, I just can't

I'm not enough to



Now we're going to do a little experiment.

As you're reading this, raise your right arm in the air as though to answer a question. Keep holding your arm in the air as you read the following prompt out loud: "I am unable to lift my right arm. My arm is physically paralyzed and cannot move. I am incapable of keeping my arm in the air." And then say, "Holding my arm in the air makes me look stupid. If I keep my arm raised for another second it will literally fall off."



Although this exercise is a bit silly, it illustrates how buying into our thoughts can really keep us stuck. You can have the entire sentence you just filled in blasting in your head and still choose to act in an opposite way. Fusing with these thoughts makes it more difficult to respond flexibly and engage in behavior that is in line with your core values.

Chapter Highlights

- » Our professional identity extends beyond the job we do in a workday. It can also encompass our true calling or larger sense of purpose in life.
- » Making bold moves in the area of work means sitting with uncomfortable feelings.
- » In order to get closer to our values, we need to set specific, concrete goals that can keep us oriented from day to day.
- » Behaving in a flexible way means being able to observe the thoughts in our head and discern which are helpful and unhelpful.



Personal Growth



START HERE IF YOU . . .

- » are feeling intellectually stagnant or understimulated and you're craving new information or learning experiences.
- » have thought about exploring different interests or activities but haven't been able to take the first step.
- » are ready to make some big changes to your emotional or physical well-being, like pursuing health, recovering from addiction, or quitting smoking.
- » would like to express your beliefs and options by volunteering or joining a group or cause.

PICTURE YOUR BEST LIFE

Personal growth comes when we commit to emotional, intellectual, and behavioral exploration and expansion. This endeavor results in a stronger sense of self and a deeper understanding of what's most important to us.

The process of growing as a person often starts with learning new things. You receive an education in school, but unlimited learning and growth can take place outside of the classroom. For example, you may have seen how traveling to new places has opened your mind to new ways of thinking and relating to the world. Or maybe you have joined a recovery-oriented community and have started learning how to best sustain your mental well-being.

We can develop a path to personal growth by letting our curiosity lead the way. Use your answers to the questions in the next exercise as a guide to what may be most important to you in the area of personal growth.



EXERCISE School's In

- » What three skills do you already have that you would like to improve?
- » What three new skills would you love to develop if you had unlimited time and resources?
- » What three topics would you like to learn more about?
- » What is your favorite way to learn new things; for example, reading, listening to podcasts, or acquiring information experientially?
- » What is most important to you about learning?

Reflect on your responses and what they tell you about what is most important to you in the area of personal growth, then use your answers to create a list of three to five core values for this domain.

CORE VALUE 1

CORE VALUE 2

CORE VALUE 3

CORE VALUE 4

CORE VALUE 5

MEET SHONDRA

Shondra, a married mother of two, spent 20 years working in sales for a major software corporation. It was her first big job after graduation, and she stuck with it for many years because it provided her the compensation and perks of a big company. Shondra wasn't thrilled with her job, but she wasn't miserable, and she assumed she'd never leave because it gave her family stability and security.

One day, Shondra heard a rumor about massive layoffs. A few weeks later, she found herself packing up her office and going home. She had trouble finding a new job. Her skills were narrow and there weren't many settings where she could →



← practice the same role. Within a few months, her family's savings had dwindled, and the financial strain became terribly stressful.

Eventually, one of Shondra's friends found her a job as a receptionist for a busy dental practice. It paid less, appeared on the surface to be pretty boring, and required longer hours. Shondra could have easily viewed this job as a step down, a waste of time, or simply somewhere to get a paycheck until she found another job, but she knew that with that attitude, she likely would spend her days bored and dejected. She decided instead to make the most of her new position.

Shondra had always valued team building and collaboration. In the office there was a cliquey environment, so Shondra started bringing in treats for her coworkers and asking them, regardless of their role, to join her for lunch. She suggested starting a staff recognition program for all employees and was told that she could run with it. During Friday lunchtimes, everybody gathered and cast their votes for the week's best team player. This person then got to keep a homemade crown on their desk. It became a fun tradition.

None of these acts were included in Shondra's job description, and she was not paid any more for doing them. Yet she kept thinking of new ways to enhance office cohesion because it made her days feel richer, despite her mundane work tasks. She felt proud of her contribution and fulfilled at the end of her workdays.

Looking back, Shondra wished she had been let go sooner, as starting from scratch forced her to examine how she really wanted to spend her time.

We need our values the most when life gets tough. Connecting with what is most important allows us to find meaning and satisfaction even in seemingly hopeless situations. Often, though, rather than trying to listen to what our values are trying to tell us, we turn to our trusty avoidance strategies to get us through rough spots with the least discomfort.

The parts of your life that bring you the most pain or make you want to run in the other direction usually indicate that they are important to you. If you didn't care about them, they wouldn't hurt. Here, pain can be a teacher and guide you to your values.

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EXERCISE Two Sides of the Coin

Pain and value are two sides of the same coin. Someone scared of being embarrassed or rejected actually greatly values human connection. On one side of the coin is connection and on the other is fear of rejection.

We can avoid social anxiety by throwing away the coin; for example, by avoiding social situations, not asking for support when we need it, and isolating ourselves. However, the cost is losing the potential for deep connections and strong relationships.

Use this example to complete the exercise for yourself using your five core values in this area.

SIDE 1: PAIN BEING AVOIDED	AVOIDANCE MOVE	SIDE 2: COST (VALUE)
Fear Rejection	Declining invitations, not pursuing opportunities	Connection



SIDE 1: PAIN BEING AVOIDED	AVOIDANCE MOVE	SIDE 2: COST (VALUE)
		
		
		



Getting closer to our values and experiencing emotional discomfort is a package deal. We can’t get rid of one without throwing away the whole thing. The good news is that we have the power to decide when we’re going to act in line with our values. We can’t control what will happen when we do, but we get to decide when we’re ready to risk the discomfort—and the payoff—that will result.

GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

Even if we’re fully in tune with our values and aware of what we want most, that knowledge is often not enough to propel us to action. How long have you read about the benefits of meditation? Between books, articles, apps, and free videos,

accessing guided meditations could not be easier. And yet, finding the time to meditate seems hard. It took me seven months to get into a regular meditation practice, and I still struggle to keep it up.

It is important to be aware of what is likely to get in the way of translating your values to committed action. As mentioned, sometimes these barriers are internal, such as thoughts and feelings; other times, they are very tangible, such as lack of time or resources.

A client, Tatiana, spent several years dreaming of being a yoga teacher. She worked as a consultant for a big corporation and had fallen in love with yoga while recuperating from a running injury. For a long time, this dream stayed only in her mind, as she knew that sharing it would make it more real.

Becoming a yoga teacher would require a significant investment of time and money as well as a potential career change. Once Tatiana verbalized that this goal was something she seriously wanted to pursue, we began to tackle the path to making it happen and considered what obstacles would likely stand in her way.

The first step in committed action is to understand the unique barriers your mind erects that may direct you to make a U-turn away from what you care about. For Tatiana, this barrier looked like a stream of thoughts that told her *I'm wasting my time; I'll never be able to finish this and I have a good job; this is a step backward*. Such thoughts, as annoying as they can be, are problematic only if we buy into them, take them as fact, or let them decide our course of action. Seeing them for what they are—annoying thoughts—allows us to keep moving ahead.

Another barrier to following through with committed action is being unwilling to feel certain emotions. If we're not open to discomfort, we're probably going to keep our feet planted right where they are. Committed action means expanding beyond our routines and daily norms and trying new things that will move us closer to what we value. For Tatiana, committed action meant being okay with all the feelings of vulnerability and self-consciousness that come with being new at something.

Tatiana noticed these emotions and accepted them as she moved through her teacher training program to eventually become certified. She was extremely proud of achieving her first goal. Riding this momentum, she shared that she wanted to quit her job and teach yoga full-time.

Committed action doesn't necessarily mean making radical changes. In fact, setting too many goals at once or committing to something that will require more



time, energy, or money than we have can be a big barrier to making changes. Overextending or setting unrealistic goals will leave us feeling burned out.

After some reflection and discussion, Tatiana concluded that quitting her job to become a yoga teacher wasn't the best decision at the time. She didn't have the experience or expertise to ensure her success, and she didn't have a financial backup plan. Plus, she didn't need to be a full-time yoga teacher in order to move closer to the values that led her to set that goal. By teaching one or two classes on the weekend and attending classes during the week, Tatiana felt fulfilled in her commitment to her values of wellness and learning.

In the area of personal growth, it is especially important to differentiate your own values from the values taught by your religion, family, or culture. Sometimes these values overlap, but often they don't. It is important to understand your personal values, because if a life decision—such as how to spend your time or devote your resources—isn't driven by something personally meaningful, it will be hard to sustain satisfaction over the long haul.

Let's say knowledge is a key value for your family. Your education was prioritized from the time you were young, and you were always encouraged to devote most of your attention to school. As an adult, you might find that although gaining knowledge continues to be important, you feel most connected to the learning you do *outside* of a classroom setting.

The process of committing to an action is just as important—sometimes even more important—than achieving a goal, especially when it comes to personal growth. When we direct our focus on the process rather than a specific outcome, we have more opportunity to act flexibly and thereby have more opportunities for learning and development. Let's say you have a goal of reading two books a month in order to bring you closer to your values of wisdom and growth. However, no matter how hard you try to achieve the goal, you don't have total control over the outcome. You could get the flu, for example, or have a crazy week at work. Some days you may only have time to read a few pages, or to just reflect on the book you are reading. Not reaching your goal doesn't really matter if you're engaging in actions that bring you closer to your value each day.

We're more likely to overcome our barriers to committed action if we anticipate them. Knowing how your mind tends to respond to change or risk can help you be more prepared to respond flexibly when anxiety and other roadblocks arise. Predicting and preparing for our psychological barriers will increase our chances of success, which is why it's a key part of goal setting.



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

CONTACT WITH THE PRESENT MOMENT

Contact with the present moment is a

building block of the ACT model that may seem more familiar to you than others. It's very similar to mindfulness in that it focuses awareness on the here and now.

Making contact with the present moment is a process of experiencing our surroundings, thoughts, emotions, and sensations exactly as they are in the moment, without judging them or fighting against them. It is traditionally practiced as a seated meditation, where the breath serves as an anchor to the here and now. My goal for you is to bring mindfulness to *all* your experiences, so you are fully present for the richness of all life's moments, not just when you sit down to meditate.

Like the other building blocks of ACT, contact with the present moment is accessible this instant. You can start practicing right now by taking inventory of your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. You can put down this book and take in the scene before you, observing the sights, sounds, and smells with focused attention. When we're in contact with our full experiences, as opposed to the stories we tell ourselves about what's happening or how things "should" be, we're more likely to make good decisions that move us closer to what we value.

Here's an example. Say you have a rigid rule about dessert, such as "I can have only one dessert a week." At work one day, your coworkers bring in a birthday cake. Eating it would mean breaking your rule, but you value connection with others, and celebrating with your coworkers would give you a chance to move closer to that value.

You have three options:

You can turn down the cake and sit at your desk while your coworkers celebrate together. If you choose that option, you're fusing with your rule and letting it tell you what to do, at the expense of your lived experience. You've moved away from your value of connection with other people.

The second option is to eat the cake but spend the whole time beating yourself up about breaking your rule. In this case, you're still fused with your thoughts, and you're only paying lip service to your value because you're so caught up in your thoughts that you can't connect with the people around you.

The third path is defined by making contact with all elements of the situation. You notice that your thoughts sound particularly compelling, and the idea of breaking your dessert rule makes you feel anxious. You acknowledge this and





ground yourself with a deep breath before taking a bite of cake. You let yourself enjoy the flavors. You let yourself enjoy the celebration. Slowly, as you become more engaged with the conversations, your anxious thoughts recede and you start enjoying yourself.

By making contact with the present moment, we're able to experience the world in a direct way, which gives us access to all the information we need to make values-based choices and respond flexibly to life's highs and lows.

MAKING CONTACT

How many times has someone asked you, "How are you feeling?" and you respond with, "Fine" or "Okay"? It can be surprisingly difficult to answer this question accurately—whether your true emotional state is gloomy, irritated, or hopeful—especially if you're not in the habit of tuning in to your emotions closely.

To make things more complicated, we often confuse emotions with thoughts or use the word *feel* to cover both. *I feel like I'm going to screw up. I feel like I could go to sleep and never wake up.* Making contact with the present moment allows us to distinguish our feelings from our thoughts and respond to each in a direct and flexible way.

Distinguishing between thoughts and emotions can be hard since they can be intertwined. For example, you have a thought—*Something bad is going to happen*—and as a result, you feel scared. Your mind notices you're feeling scared, so it starts looking out for danger. And so the cycle goes.

A quick way to slice through this cycle and untangle our thoughts and emotions is to identify what we are feeling in our body. Here, *feeling* is pretty accurate as a synonym for *emotions*. Emotions are signals that your body is literally feeling something different. Some physical changes associated with emotions include increased heart rate or perspiration, a lump in the throat, tension in the shoulders, or a higher-pitched tone of voice. Each of these physical changes serves an ancient purpose, usually meant to get us ready to take some sort of action.

Because we tend to get stuck in our head, we frequently miss the signals our body is sending us about an emotion that may be present, and we confuse feelings with thoughts. This next exercise will help you recognize how your body signals you about your emotions.



EXERCISE Feeling the Feelings

Read through the list of emotions and reflect on where in your body you feel them. Try to be as detailed as possible, and if there is an area of your body not covered here, write it in the “Other” row.

EXAMPLE	FEAR
Head (<i>headache, dizzy</i>)	Focused
Eyes (<i>narrowed, blurry vision</i>)	Sharp
Jaw (<i>clenched, open</i>)	Clenched
Neck and Shoulders (<i>tight, clenched</i>)	N/A
Chest	Tight
Heart	Pounding
Abdomen/Stomach (<i>butterflies, churning</i>)	Butterflies
Limbs (<i>tingling, numb</i>)	Tense
Other	

	FEAR	JOY	ANGER
Head			
Vision			
Jaw			
Neck and Shoulders			
Chest			
Heart			
Abdomen/Stomach			
Limbs			
Other			



	DISGUST	SHOCK	LOVE
Head			
Vision			
Jaw			
Neck and Shoulders			
Chest			
Heart			
Abdomen/Stomach			
Limbs			
Other			

	SADNESS	GUILT	CURIOSITY
Head			
Vision			
Jaw			
Neck and Shoulders			
Chest			
Heart			
Abdomen/Stomach			
Limbs			
Other			

Understanding the full scope of our emotional experience is important because our feelings can impact our actions. This impact can happen in small ways. One of my clients always looks at the ground when feeling self-conscious. I pick at my fingernails when I'm anxious. We can also react in larger ways that can be scary or destructive; for example, hurting people we care about when we're angry.

Our emotions don't have the capacity to control our behavior, but if we aren't fully present, they can guide our behavior down unhelpful paths.

Sometimes, our internal experiences feel so powerful that it seems we have no *choice* but to act on them. If you have struggled with addiction or dependence on alcohol or cigarettes or with a disordered relationship with food, you can likely relate. Urges can also drive us to reach out to people we know are not good for us, lash out at people we care about, or generally act in ways that are out of sync with our values.

The good news is that urges usually peak and subside within 20 to 30 minutes. The even better news is that we can actually control how quickly an urge passes.

If we take an open and mindful stance, observing the urge rise without fighting it, it will decrease in intensity and ultimately fade. However, if we try to fight it—I *can't take this; I need to get rid of this feeling right this instant*—we end up in a mental battle that prolongs the urge. Making full contact with the feelings and sensations of an urge can feel scary, but taking the stance of a curious observer or data-gathering scientist can help it feel less overwhelming.

The following exercise can be practiced when you notice an urge starting.

EXERCISE Urge Surfing

Read through the instructions fully before you try the exercise, and try to have this book on hand when you practice. If you can, find a quiet place where you can sit by yourself until the urge has passed.

- 1 Start by acknowledging the urge. Say to yourself clearly, “I am having the urge to”
- 2 Next, notice the physical sensations. Close your eyes and label the specific body areas where you feel the urge and what the sensation feels like. For some, the urge might trigger warmth in the abdomen; for others, the mouth may start salivating.
- 3 Once you have identified the body area(s), the next step is directing your attention. Imagine you're looking at your body from above and holding a red marker. Outline the area(s) where you feel the urge the strongest. You can fill



in the outline with a color that seems to match the sensation, if you want. Continue to simply observe and describe what you're feeling with as much objectivity as you can—for example, *I notice a tingling in my arms and legs that's becoming stronger.*

- 4 Now shift your attention to your breath. Don't try to change your breathing; simply observe it as it is. It can be helpful to notice your breath in an area of your body that is not associated with the urge. This attention could mean feeling the air coming in and out of your nostrils or noticing your shoulders rising and falling.
- 5 After a minute or two of observing your breath, return your attention to the outlined areas of your body. Has the intensity, sensation, temperature, or color changed at all? Scan these areas and again describe them in a non-judgmental way.
- 6 Next, merge your awareness of your breath with the awareness of your bodily sensations. Imagine that with each inhalation and exhalation, you're sending your breath to the areas outlined in red. Picture your breath filling up each area where you feel the urge most potently.
- 7 It's important to not try to suppress the urge. If you notice sensations expanding to other areas of your body or becoming stronger, that's okay. Make room for them. Use the red marker to create an outline where the urge resides.
- 8 Notice as the urge picks up energy, crests, and then starts to subside. If it's helpful, you can repeat things to yourself, like, "Nothing can last forever" or, "What goes up must come down." Or you can use a scale to track your urge, using numbers from 1 to 10 to watch it rise and fall.
- 9 When the urge has passed, take a few moments to ground yourself with your breath and acknowledge the work you have done. It's important to appreciate this effort as it will build your confidence that you can do it.

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LET YOURSELF BE

It certainly may not seem this way in the moment, but fighting with our emotions is limiting and restricts our ability to move forward. One big way we hold ourselves back from personal growth is by shutting down, compartmentalizing, or numbing big parts of our emotional experience. When we decide that certain emotions are unacceptable to feel, we cut ourselves off from the information, insight, and understanding that come from our feelings.

We may need to acknowledge that what we’ve been doing isn’t getting us the results we want and that it’s time to switch up our approach. For many of us, this means establishing a neutral and acceptance-based relationship with our emotions. This next exercise will help you explore this possibility.

EXERCISE

Rethinking Labels

Return to the list of emotions you explored earlier in the Feeling the Feelings exercise (page 106), and circle the word you would use to label each feeling.

FEAR	positive	negative
JOY	positive	negative
ANGER	positive	negative
DISGUST	positive	negative
SHOCK	positive	negative
LOVE	positive	negative
SADNESS	positive	negative
GUILT	positive	negative
CURIOSITY	positive	negative

Now respond to these questions:

- » How does it impact you to have certain emotions labeled as positive or negative?

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- » How do you react to a “negative” emotion versus a “positive” one?

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- » If you look back at the chart you filled out earlier, do you notice any common factors among the “negative” or “positive” emotions?

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If you're like most of us, fear, anger, disgust, shock, sadness, and guilt were probably labeled as negative, whereas joy, love, and curiosity were deemed to be positive. Where do these judgments come from?



Our society sends us strong messages about how we “should” be feeling and which emotions are preferable to others. There are likely some stories, too, you learned over time about these emotions, such as “Crying is a sign of weakness” or “Anger is bad for my health.” These messages may have come from family, school, or formative experiences.



Another reason we label certain emotions as negative is because they can be physically uncomfortable. Reflect on the emotions you labeled as negative. What physical sensations did you identify taking place when that emotion is present? When we feel something we don't like, we think of it as "wrong" or "problematic." From there, our problem-solving brain takes over and tries to solve the problem. The thing is, our emotions are not a problem to be solved. They are neither good nor bad; they just *are*. When we try to solve our emotions like a problem, we run the risk of generating more suffering.

Often, our strategies for trying to get rid of internal experiences move us away from our values. Some common attempts include distracting ourselves by watching bad TV, scrolling through social media, or shopping. Sometimes, our strategies can hurt us. We may try to numb ourselves through drinking or drug use, sex, mindless eating, or even self-injury.

Rather than struggling with the emotions you've labeled as negative, what would it be like to pursue self-acceptance instead? Self-acceptance means not fighting the fact that you are human, with a full spectrum of emotions that come and go. Self-acceptance means allowing yourself to be okay just as you are, instead of judging yourself for your emotions. The next exercise lets you explore how you may be hiding some emotions.



EXERCISE

Mask of Two Faces

On the mask, write down everything that you feel comfortable showing the people around you. You could include the emotions that are acceptable to express, personality traits, or versions of yourself that you want others to see.



On the blank face, write down all the thoughts, feelings, and experiences you'd prefer others didn't see.



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Wearing masks for short periods can be the normal result of shifts in roles that we make throughout the day. When I'm at work, I can't necessarily express the frustration that I may still be feeling after an earlier fight with my spouse.

Sometimes, though, we put on masks that stay on for a long time, even when we're alone. We develop split versions of ourselves, where certain aspects are acceptable to show and others are totally unacceptable. Our true experience becomes a source of shame that we want to pretend doesn't exist.

Keeping masks on for too long is draining. We expend energy wearing one face and keeping another face hidden and reinforce the idea that there are facets of ourselves so "bad" they need to stay buried. Wearing a mask feeds unhelpful stories we may tell ourselves. For example, do you ever refer to your "dark side" or "angry twin," having "split personalities," or feeling like "Jekyll and Hyde"?

The more effort we put into keeping a mask on, the more our true feelings will push back. We also start to lose control over the side we don't show, and those thoughts and feelings pop up when we don't want them to. Or the thoughts and memories we try to block out get 10 times louder. Self-acceptance means integrating all aspects of ourselves and taking off the mask that we may be holding on to most tightly.

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

Words seem to have a lot of power. Certain words have the ability to transport us to a vivid memory or strong emotional state. For example, I had a client who would physically cringe when she said or heard the word *fat*. This word connected her to a painful relationship with an abusive parent and a fractured relationship with her body.

It's not the words that have the power, though; it's our personal understanding of what they mean. Consider the word *failure*. This word has the potential to have a big impact on our behavior when it's in a thought that we have become fused with. *Don't be a failure. Failure is the worst possible scenario. You're a failure.* Fusing with words can keep us stuck in our comfort zone or direct our actions away from our values.

Does the word *hiba* (hee-ba) mean anything to you? *Hiba* is the word for "failure" in Hungarian. Say to yourself, "You're a hiba." Does this impact you at all? Likely not. Bottom line: Words are simply a combination of sounds and syllables.



We undoubtedly need language to communicate with others, learn new ideas, and grow as people. The key is recognizing when our relationship with language has become unhelpful.

Think about the word *lemon*. Let the image of a lemon soak into your mind, and repeat the word over and over. As you conjure up the image, what other thoughts, feelings, or sensations come up? Maybe you have memories of working at a lemonade stand or squeezing a lemon into your favorite cocktail. Maybe your face starts to scrunch up as if there is an actual lemon wedge in your mouth. Some people produce more saliva at the thought of a lemon.

This example illustrates the impact language has on us when we are fused. *Lemon* is a five-letter, two-syllable word—nothing more. The word is not what generates those internal experiences; our mental connections to the word are what create our reactions to it. It's the memories and feelings that have become associated with it over time, the ways it has been integrated into our vernacular. If you heard the word *lemon* in a language you were not familiar with, it would be meaningless to you.

Now let's do something that might seem kind of silly. Either set a timer on your phone or sit near a clock with a second hand. For one minute, simply say *lemon* out loud over and over.

At the end of the minute, how does the word sound to you? It's likely lost some of its punch and meaning. It may even sound odd or foreign. At this point it's probably just a collection of sounds.

The following exercise will take some of the power out of “negative” words.

EXERCISE **Sticks and Stones**

Make a list of five words that pack a punch for you. These words might include *loser*, *idiot*, or *fraud*.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



First, spend a minute really connecting with each word by repeating it in your mind.

- » What are the emotions, thoughts, or memories that come up when you are fused with the word?

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- » How might your actions start to change if you remained fused for a few hours or the rest of the day?

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- » Now, repeat each word out loud nonstop for a minute. How does the experience change?

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Often, after repeating the words out loud for a minute or so they begin to sound like gibberish. Untangling the language from the associations that make it meaningful frees us up to act flexibly in response to what is happening in the current moment.

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We become fused with thoughts when we buy into them and take them literally. Over time, we may see the world only through the filters of our limited thinking. For example, if you buy into a belief such as *I'm not good enough* or *Everyone is smarter than me*, you experience life with blinders on. Anything that matches the belief gets reinforced (*See, that proves my point*), and whatever doesn't fit the belief tends to get overlooked or discounted (*I just got lucky that time*).



EXERCISE **Extra, Extra**

Think of a recent event featured in the news that was covered by multiple news outlets. Consider different media outlets that represent a range of perspectives, such as newspapers, magazines, websites, or TV stations. Each of these outlets offered its own coverage of the event. Although different outlets may report about the same thing, no two news stories are exactly the same. They differ in small ways, such as the sources interviewed or the words that describe the event. One outlet may use more alarmist language, whereas another could be very dispassionate. Depending on the audience, the reporters could interpret the event and its impact differently in much larger ways.

Which of these stories is the actual “truth”? This is sort of a trick question. Maybe we have a source we trust more than others or that is more closely aligned with our values. Some outlets we may discount as garbage or unreliable. However, no one story is the actual truth. They’re all just stories. The truth is found in the event that happened in real time. Once it is over, it is gone. Everything else is a representation or interpretation.

» Now write down a recent event in your life that has been on your mind.

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» Come up with three different headlines about the event. How would each story differ from the others? In what ways is each story biased? Is there one you trust more than the others?

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Just as using only one source of information for our knowledge about the world would be limiting, using only our thoughts and stories to understand ourselves is limiting, as well.

There is nothing we can do about the media machine in our head. It will always be producing coverage of our lives and our experiences. The good news is we don't have to let it impact our actions. Acknowledging that stories are just stories allows us to direct our attention to the only source of truth we have: the present moment.

Chapter Highlights

- » Examining areas where we want to develop and build new knowledge can clarify what is most important in the area of personal growth.
- » Anticipating and preparing for our personal barriers to committed action makes it more likely we will follow through with our goals.
- » Making full contact with the physical experience of an emotion and relating to it nonjudgmentally helps foster self-acceptance.
- » Words and language have the potential to impact our actions most when we fuse them with meaning.



Spirituality



START HERE IF YOU . . .

- » would like to find ways to increase meaning and purpose in your daily activities.
- » are seeking a stronger sense of interconnectedness with the people around you.
- » have a fulfilling religious practice but would like to develop a stronger relationship with yourself.
- » find yourself grappling with big questions that leave you feeling scared or out of control.

PICTURE YOUR BEST LIFE

Part of being human means that sometimes we ponder what life is all about, what we're here to do, and what this is all for. We are all spiritual creatures in one way or another, whether through following a formal faith-based practice, meditating, journaling, practicing yoga, praying, or wrestling with existential questions from time to time. Addressing our spiritual needs means being willing to explore what brings us the most meaning and purpose and how we want to make sense of the curveballs and bombshells in life.

Spirituality is used in a broad sense here. If you identify with a particular faith or religious group that provides you with direction, peace, and understanding—fantastic. Exploring your personal relationship to spirituality can enhance your relationship to your higher power and provide depth to your existing religious activities. If you don't have a religious affiliation, spirituality can also apply to your sense of interconnectedness with others, your relationship with nature, or a personal desire to grow and improve.

Answer the questions in the following exercise to explore your values in the domain of spirituality.



EXERCISE Big Questions

Imagine your whole life has been planned in advance.

» What are you here to learn?

» How will you know when you have found your calling?

» What is your lasting contribution or legacy?

» Why are you meant to cross paths with some of the important people in your life?

» What wisdom will you take with you?

» What is of highest importance to you?



» How have your darkest times helped you grow?

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Use your answers from this exercise to create a list of three to five core values for this domain.

CORE VALUE 1

CORE VALUE 2

CORE VALUE 3

CORE VALUE 4

CORE VALUE 5



Sometimes when we think of religion or spirituality, we're reminded of the rules and guidelines we learned from parents, schoolteachers, or religious educators: Don't lie, steal, cheat, kill, or hurt others . . . or else. Do be kind, honest, helpful, virtuous, and dignified, and you will be rewarded. These rules help us learn how to toe the line when we're children and can be important reminders to examine our actions as adults, but they don't always help us develop a deeper sense of meaning. The next exercise will help you focus on what is truly important to you.

EXERCISE Final Countdown

Imagine you go to the doctor for your yearly checkup and receive some unexpected news. Your doctor says, "Unfortunately, you have limited time to live. I can't tell you whether it's going to be years or months, but your days are numbered. You should start getting your affairs in order." Connect with the experience of being told you have limited time left on this planet. Close your eyes if it helps make it feel more real. Notice any thoughts, feelings, sensations, or urges that come up. Stay in this headspace as you answer the following questions.



» What do you feel the most urgency to do?

.....

.....

» Whom do you want to reach out and speak to first?

.....

.....

» How do you want to spend your time?

.....

.....

» Whom do you want to spend your days with?

.....

.....

» What will you do about your current job?

.....

.....

» What are the conversations you will make sure take place?

.....

.....

» What are the top three experiences you want to make sure happen as soon as possible?

.....

.....



This scenario is less hypothetical than we would like to think. Yes, the vague news about our health status is a bit dramatic. But the truth is that we do have limited time left on Earth, and we have no idea if it's going to be years, months, weeks, or days. Tomorrow is not promised to anyone.

We may avoid facing this reality because it brings up feelings of fear, sadness, or panic. These responses are natural. Examining our mortality challenges the sense of stability and security that grounds us from day to day. We like to believe we have more control over the health and safety of ourselves and our loved ones than we actually do. In reality, regardless of the time, energy, and resources we put into ensuring our safety, there are no guarantees.

Coming to terms with the reality of our fragile existence actually gives us more control than sticking our head in the sand. When we're honest with ourselves about how precious life is, the path to our values becomes clearer. When time becomes a finite resource, we focus on what is most important.

Regardless of how complicated your life is, it can instantly be reduced to a handful of priorities when you are forced to make big decisions about your time. If you were able to connect to the experience of impermanence more frequently, how would it change where you direct your time, money, and attention?

GETTING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

Values are meant to be lived. When we're living in line with what's most important to us, it's visible in our everyday actions. Our values are reflected in the way we balance priorities and demands, our interactions with other people, and how we relate to ourselves.

Bring to mind moments when you felt in awe of something larger than yourself or felt deeply connected to people around you. Sometimes these experiences catch us by surprise, but more often than not, they come when we are still, present, and mentally and physically open to appreciate them.

Enriching our spiritual self means developing a consistent practice of behavior that allows us to take in more of these profound moments. This practice can take place in daily rituals, such as praying, writing, or spending time in nature. We can also move closer to these values in the way we relate to others and how we speak to ourselves.

Do you know someone who lives so closely to their values you could probably list them without asking? I have a friend named Karin who is always initiating



communication, never misses a special occasion, and always shares helpful tips or resources as soon as they come to her. Her values—communication, thoughtfulness, and generosity—are so clear in how she treats me.

If someone were to observe you for a day, would they be able to identify your values by your actions?

EXERCISE Actions Speak Louder

Respond to the following prompts with the specific behaviors you engage in when you are moving closer to or further away from the values you identified in the Big Questions exercise (page 122). Try to be as specific as you can, and focus on concrete actions.

When you are moving closer to your core values in the domain of spirituality...

- » How do you treat Earth? (e.g., I recycle, take public transportation, and am conscious about how much paper I print.)

- » How do you relate to all creatures? (e.g., I put food in the birdfeeder and give my dog a big hug when I walk through the door.)

- » How do you communicate with your closest family and friends? (e.g., I reach out to set up get-togethers and express genuine excitement for their successes.)



» How do you treat yourself? (e.g., I get good sleep, take days off, and spend more time outdoors.)

» How do you decide how to spend your time? (e.g., I balance time between family, work, and self-care.)

When you are moving further away from your core values ...

» How do you treat Earth? (e.g., I buy in excess without consideration of waste and neglect the plants in my garden.)

» How do you relate to all creatures? (e.g., I cut my dog's walks short and walk past him when I come home.)

» How do you communicate with your closest family and friends? (e.g., I am passive-aggressive and feel jealous and resentful when others are happy.)



» How do you treat yourself? (e.g., *I stay up too late, don't eat well, and shop online impulsively.*)

.....

.....

» How do you decide how to spend your time? (e.g., *My time is out of balance, usually with a focus on work, with family and self-care falling by the wayside.*)

.....

.....

What do you notice about your two sets of actions? Where do your behaviors tend to fall most of the time? Choose one or two values-based actions that you have not engaged in for some time. Is the action something you can engage in today? If not, make the behavior more specific so you can translate it into real action in the next 24 hours.

.....◆.....

Some values may take real effort to put into action. For example, for many of us, compassion and gratitude do not come naturally. Our baseline headspace may be more characterized by criticism, judgment, and jealousy. This frame of mind is perfectly normal.

As you're reading this, notice any thoughts that might be coming up around how you "should" be more grateful or less critical of others. As we have covered, we don't have to give unhelpful thoughts any power, and they definitely don't have to stop us from acting in line with our values.

As with other values, having an "attitude of gratitude" is not sufficient. Our *actions* are what matter. Expressing gratitude can be an act of vulnerability, which is one reason it's sometimes difficult to do. Acknowledging that we have something we're grateful for also means that we have something to lose. Telling someone we appreciate them for what they do for us can feel like weakness or as if we're "showing our cards." Sometimes we put on emotional armor to avoid feeling this vulnerability. This challenge is where acceptance of tough feelings, committed



action, contact with the present moment, and our values all need to work together. An important first step, though, is committing to action in the here and now. You'll practice gratitude in the following exercise.

EXERCISE

Seven Days of Thanksgiving

For the next week, write down one act of gratitude that you can commit to practicing each day. Examples can include sending an overdue thank-you note, letting a friend know how much they mean to you, or saying grace before each meal.

DAY	ACT OF GRATITUDE
SUNDAY	
MONDAY	
TUESDAY	
WEDNESDAY	
THURSDAY	
FRIDAY	
SATURDAY	

At the end of the week, reflect on how this daily practice of gratitude made a difference in your internal experiences.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

SELF-AS-CONTEXT

Self-as-context is the last of the six building blocks that make up the ACT model. This building block is closely related to contact with the present moment, in that it is a process of developing awareness both of what is happening around you and of your “self”—the self experiencing those things.

Self-as-context is a mental space from which we can observe our thoughts, feelings, and experiences without having reflexive emotional reactions to them or getting too caught up in the stories we tell about them. It's a place in our mind where we can see the comings and goings of our internal experiences without getting tangled up in them. When we are able to inhabit this place of observation, we are aware of our own conscious processes without judging them. Another way to think of self-as-context is as “the observing self,” “the noticing self,” or simply “pure awareness.”

I had a client, Jorge, who struggled in every job he'd had. He hated taking direction, reporting to a superior, and feeling like he couldn't do whatever he wanted. It left him feeling hostile, and he often got into conflicts with his bosses that would eventually result in his being fired.

Through therapy, Jorge was able to take a step back and observe what was happening with more objectivity. He realized that working under a boss evoked feelings of being trapped and restrained. When those feelings got triggered, Jorge's mind produced thoughts such as, *My boss thinks he's better than me and I could do this better than him if he'd just back off.* Not surprisingly, buying into these thoughts led him down a path of anger and resentment. When he reacted from that place of anger, he acted in ways that undermined his professional success.

If I were to tell you that Jorge's difficulties came from a bad experience at his first job or an overly critical father, would it make a difference in getting him unstuck today?

The answer is no. We don't need to *understand* our thoughts and feelings in order to free ourselves from their influence. That statement may sound counter-intuitive, but it's true! To get unstuck from unhelpful thoughts, we simply need to be able to get enough space from them to see them for what they are. Our difficult thoughts and emotions aren't events that happen *to* us, “making” us act in unhelpful ways. Rather, they are events that take place *within* us—we are the context in which all those things take place. Being the context means we are bigger than





any thought or emotion we have, no matter how powerful it feels in the moment. Seeing our thoughts, emotions, and other experiences at their proper size is empowering—they don't have the ability to make us do anything or be any particular way. When we are able to see our thoughts and feelings in this more objective way, we are experiencing self-as-context.

What this meant for Jorge was that even when he had resentful thoughts or feelings of anger, he was able to recognize that those thoughts and emotions didn't have the power to make him act in unhelpful ways. Jorge could notice all the thoughts going through his head *and* act in line with his values. By developing awareness of the thoughts and feelings that held him back professionally, Jorge was able to make deliberate changes to his behavior. This ability is the power of self-as-context.

Sometimes we lose touch with our observing self and spend more time caught up in our thoughts and feelings than is helpful. The good news is we can always return to that place of awareness. The more we practice viewing our inner experiences objectively, the more quickly we'll be able to do it when we need to.

MAKING CONTACT

There's been a lot of emphasis on making contact with challenging or unwanted thoughts, feelings, and sensations. This principle is important since we've been programmed over time to reject, avoid, or try to fix experiences that are deemed negative or problematic.

However, we shouldn't overlook the internal and external experiences that bring us joy, serenity, connection, and love. This next exercise is a meditation on love and kindness.

EXERCISE Heart of the Matter

Come to a comfortable seated position in a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Read through the instructions in full before doing the exercise.

Before you close your eyes, think of someone for whom you have strong feelings of unconditional love, someone who is not a complicated person in your life



and for whom you have only good wishes. Common figures are children, elderly parents or grandparents, or even pets.

Close your eyes and draw up an image of this person. Connect with all the feelings you have for them. Now choose three good wishes you have for this person and their life. These phrases should begin with “May you . . .” and represent your deepest and strongest desire for this individual. Some examples include the following:

- » *May you live with peace.*
- » *May you be free from pain.*
- » *May you be safe and loved.*

Use your breath to first relax your body and clear your mind of any mental chatter. Keeping the image of this person in your mind, repeat the wishes one phrase at a time. Send this person your best intentions and loving energy. Notice any feelings that come up as you see this person before you and direct love and compassion to them. Sit with this experience for a few minutes.

Then, in a nondisruptive way, replace the image of your loved one with an image of you. You can picture yourself as you’re seated in this very moment, or use any image of you that comes to mind. Continue repeating the good wishes, but this time, direct them toward yourself. This is likely to be more difficult than the first part of the exercise. If you notice your feelings becoming less connected, bring back the image of the person you started with. Spend a minute or two sending them good wishes before bringing back the image of you.

Notice what it’s like to send yourself the compassion and kindness you would direct toward the person you love the most, and sit with that experience for a minute or two before opening your eyes and returning to the present moment.



What are the moments in your life when your heart has felt the fullest or you have felt overwhelmed with awe or wonder? Some of mine include the first time my son smiled at me, getting a hug from my dad when he met me at the airport after a long period away, and a glorious sunset after a relaxing day on the beach. None of these moments would be accessible if I had been stuck in my head.

Making contact with the present moment allows us to find abundance in life, cultivate gratitude, and enhance our connection with others. You don’t have to wait for the next beautiful sunset to feel that level of peace and calm. Even



during the most stressful or painful of times, you can appreciate the color of the sky, the beauty of a friend’s smile, or even how good it feels to take a long, deep breath. Making contact with the present moment gives you access to joy and meaning right *now*.

This following exercise entails taking deliberate pauses during the day to enhance feelings of joy.

EXERCISE

Don't Miss the Pleasant Moments

The first step is to pause at five points during a 24-hour period when you are having a pleasant experience.

Take a deliberate pause to inhale and acknowledge that this moment is pleasant. As you exhale, smile. With each inhale, acknowledge, “This is a pleasant moment,” and with each exhale, smile.

Allow any feelings, such as happiness or joy, to arise naturally. Treat them like a surprise visit from a good friend. Enjoy them while they last, and as they start to fade, feel grateful for the visit and let them go.

Note on the table how these deliberate pauses and acknowledgments shift your emotional experience.

	INTERNAL EXPERIENCE BEFORE	PLEASANT MOMENT	INTERNAL EXPERIENCE AFTER
Example	Distracted, focused on work and thinking about deadline.	Got a text from a new friend to meet for coffee.	Calm, grateful.
Pause #1			
Pause #2			
Pause #3			

	INTERNAL EXPERIENCE BEFORE	PLEASANT MOMENT	INTERNAL EXPERIENCE AFTER
Pause #4			
Pause #5			



LET YOURSELF BE

Acknowledging the fragility of life, the depth of our capacity to love others, and some of the other big truths associated with our spiritual identity can come with waves of emotions. Fear, love, sadness, loneliness, and gratitude can be overwhelming and at times uncomfortable. Often, we respond to these emotional experiences by trying to control them or pretending they're not there.

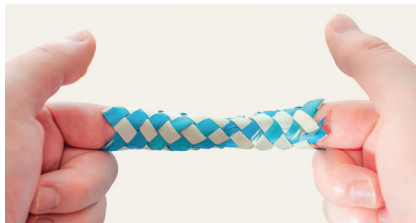
One of my clients, Alice, lost her brother in a scary and unexpected way. Fear of this loss happening again with someone else she loved dominated her life, and Alice responded by doing whatever she could to ensure the safety and health of everyone in her family. She bought exclusively organic food, enforced strict curfews for her kids, and spent nights lying in bed worrying about all the things that could go wrong. She tried to convince herself that these actions were a way to stack the odds in her favor and control an outcome. After digging a bit deeper, she came to terms with the reality that these behaviors were really an attempt to control the deep fear that she could experience a terrible loss again.

In and of themselves, Alice's behaviors were neither good nor bad. Eating organic food isn't necessarily a problem. In fact, people praised and reinforced Alice for it. But once we looked more closely at the function of this behavior in the given context, it became clear to her that in this case, allowing only organic foods was an attempt to feel less scared and more in control.

The next exercise will help you determine what traps you may have set for yourself.



EXERCISE Trapped



Remember those bamboo finger traps you used to get as party favors?

You stick one finger from each hand into each end of the trap. When you try to pull your fingers out, the bamboo tightens and you find yourself stuck. The more you pull, the

tighter the trap becomes. Try to visualize this experience as you do this exercise.

What is a current “trap” you find yourself in? What situation that is causing you emotional distress can’t you seem to get out of? Think of a situation that doesn’t seem to go away, even though you keep trying to free yourself. Maybe you find moments of relief, but ultimately the same dynamic reemerges unchanged.

Situation you’re currently trapped in:

- » What are the emotional experiences associated with this situation that you most want to escape?

.....

- » What are the ways you have tried to pull out of the trap? What are the specific behaviors you have used to try to free yourself from emotional distress?

.....

- » Have any of them worked in the short term in providing relief from your emotional experiences?

.....

- » What about the long term? Did any of your control strategies get rid of these experiences once and for all?

.....



- » If not, what did they cost you in terms of time, resources, missed experiences, or more emotional pain?
-

By now you may have noticed that metaphors are a popular way of sharing ACT concepts. In this book, we've referred to critical thoughts as passengers on a bus, unwanted feelings as a pesky next-door neighbor, and the present moment as a fragrant rose to be enjoyed. This is no accident. Metaphors are a powerful way to cut through our analytic mind and connect with an idea in a more experiential way.

Sometimes when my clients vocalize a belief they have that is keeping them stuck, like, "I'll never be able to find someone," I may encourage them to hold the belief lightly, as if they are cupping a butterfly between their two hands. If I were to communicate that idea literally, I would have to say something like, "Observe that cognition objectively from a distanced and compassionate stance." In this case, literal language has the potential to get us more tangled and removed from the experience.

One of my clients, Katie, described fighting with her worry thoughts as a category 5 hurricane, Hurricane Katie, and acceptance as the moment when the winds start dying down and the sun comes out. Another client shared that struggling with depression felt like wading through wet cement. When he was able to be present and observe his emotions mindfully, he said it felt like he was back on solid ground and able to walk freely.

In the following exercise, you will be creating your own metaphor to convey what acceptance feels like when you find yourself struggling with the thoughts and feelings that most distress you.



EXERCISE

Create Your Own Metaphor

Reflect on the following prompts.

- » Write a few adjectives to describe what it is like for you when you are “in it.” That is, when you are in the thick of those thoughts or feelings that you would give your arm and leg to get out of, is it stormy or sluggish, scary or dark? Try to come up with at least five words.

- » Now jot down what types of imagery come to mind if you could illustrate what it is like in your head when you are fighting with your thoughts and feelings.

- » Last, using the same imagery, describe what it looks like when you are able to drop the fight with your thoughts and feelings and find a place of acceptance.



You can use this metaphor to help defuse from your thoughts when they try to reel you in and to develop some space from the emotions that you struggle with the most.

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

One of life's big questions to ourselves is, “Who am I?” Sometimes our religion offers us an understanding of who we are, and sometimes we grapple with this question on our own. We usually compose our sense of ourselves with a few parts. These components typically include, at minimum, our physical body and our



thinking self. Depending on our personal beliefs or faith, we may also include a soul or spirit.

Our society tends to put the most emphasis on our thinking self and thinking abilities. Remember the philosophical phrase from Descartes, “I think; therefore I am”? Although thinking is certainly important and critical to the success of the human race, it’s not all we are.

The aspect of us that simply observes doesn’t really receive too much attention. In fact, you may not have even been aware of it until you started reading this book. However, connecting with the powerful space in our identity that is not attached to either our mind or our body is important for the development of self-awareness and understanding.

The following exercise illustrates the power of observing.

EXERCISE Observing Observing

- » Observe your breath for about 10 seconds.
- » There is your breath, and there is you noticing your breath.
- » If you can notice breath, you cannot be your breath.
- » Your breath changes continually, but the you who is noticing your breath does not change.

- » Observe your thoughts for about 10 seconds.
- » There are your thoughts, and there is you noticing your thoughts.
- » If you can notice thoughts, you cannot be your thoughts.
- » Your thoughts change continually, but the you who is noticing your thoughts does not change.

- » Observe a role that you play (e.g., teacher, father, caregiver) for about 10 seconds.
- » There is the role, and there is you playing the role.
- » If you can notice yourself playing the role, you cannot be the role.
- » The roles that you play change continually, but the you who is noticing these roles does not change.

Take a moment to consider how you feel after completing this exercise.



MEET JAKOB

Jakob always perceived himself to be more sensitive than others he knew. Jakob felt hurt easily and was constantly on the lookout for ways he was being rejected or discounted. When he heard news of tragedy around the world, Jakob felt deep sadness that would stick with him for hours. He believed this sadness made him weird or weak.

As an adult, some of his thoughts and judgments about himself became more difficult to question. *I am depressed. I am alone. I am someone who will never be able to be happy. I am always overlooked.* In his mind, these beliefs felt like facts. It was almost as if he were living in a movie and the script had already been written. Jakob titled his movie *The Death of Happiness*.

When he was following the script to a tee, his behavior felt out of his control. Jakob would go straight home after work, watch some TV, then lie in bed thinking about all the ways that he was unlucky and would never have the life he wanted. During the day, he kept to himself. Whenever he felt excluded or left out, a voice in his head told him, “See, you’re always going to be on the outside.”

One day, Jakob confided in his mother that he didn’t have any friends. She shared that as a child, he had been very social. Jakob was confused. Jakob’s mother pulled out some photo albums and showed Jakob pictures of him smiling and surrounded by other kids. A picture of him at his senior prom showed him excited and handsome, flanked by a group of friends who all had their arms around him. As he looked through the pictures, he was struck with memories of feeling happy and connected.

Jakob realized that maybe his movie script wasn’t so accurate. He had experienced times of loneliness and sadness, but there had been times of joy and lightness, as well. Buying into the “I am” thoughts in his head had made it more difficult to see the bigger picture. Even at his current job, a coworker had asked him a few times if he wanted to get a coffee. This invitation was in direct contradiction with his beliefs, but because it didn’t fit the script, he didn’t really notice it.

Jakob started to notice when the thoughts and feelings associated with *The Death of Happiness* became louder. He used them as a sign that he needed to push harder than usual to seek support, connect with others, and step out of his comfort zone. He also realized that much of the life he was living wasn’t a part of the script in his head. The more Jakob noticed the presence of these thoughts and stories, the less intrusive they became. As Jakob’s life became fuller, *The Death of Happiness* felt more remote.



In the following exercise, explore some of the beliefs you hold about yourself.

EXERCISE Who Am I?

Complete the following five statements that begin with “I am . . .” Choose responses that fit with each category.

- » Physical state (e.g., I am sleepy)

I am

- » Emotion (e.g., I am jealous)

I am

- » Critical judgment (e.g., I am a bad friend)

I am

- » Positive judgment (e.g., I am a hardworking employee)

I am

- » Future belief (e.g., I am going to end up alone)

I am

Now take a look at your first statement. Does this sentence represent who you are in your entirety? No. Physical states change consistently throughout the day. Even if we live with chronic pain, it fluctuates in intensity and severity. If you are able to acknowledge that this statement does not truly capture who you are, cross out the word you wrote down.



Now move to the second statement. Does this sentence represent who you are in your entirety? Nope. Emotions also come and go frequently. There is no such thing as a permanent emotional state. If you acknowledge that this emotion doesn't represent who you are, go ahead and cross out your response.

Now, things may get trickier. Our beliefs and judgments about ourselves feel very real. And yet, they are still just thoughts. The stories, prophecies, and statements we make about ourselves are not definitive truths. No one thought captures who we are all the time. They are constructions based on memories, messages, and random cognitions. If you are willing to acknowledge that you are not your thoughts, cross out your final three responses.

What are you left with? *I am*. This is the one truth. Our existence. What we witness in the present moment. *I am* is the only thing that remains consistent. The thoughts in our head and feelings in our body will continue to change, guaranteed.

Who are you? In short, you are a combination of your physical body, which produces sensations and feelings; your thinking self, which gives you thoughts, memories, and stories; and the part of you that simply observes it all.

Chapter Highlights

- » Coming to terms with the reality of our mortality allows us to clarify what's most important and how we want to make the most of our time.
- » The practice of openness and acceptance is just as important with pleasant feelings as it is with challenging ones.
- » Connecting with a place of pure observation allows us to live in a more insightful and flexible way.
- » We are more than our thoughts, beliefs, and stories.



CHAPTER

8

Building the Life You Want

YOUR TRUE NORTH

Give yourself a pat on the back for making your way through this book. By now you should understand that there was never anything wrong, broken, or problematic with you, the way your mind works, or your experience of emotional pain. Hopefully any judgment or shame is now being replaced with validation and compassion.

Not wanting to feel pain is totally natural. The paradox we all face, however, is that trying to get rid of pain actually breeds more suffering. Ideally, you now realize your capacity to feel and tolerate distress as well as understand some of the benefits of giving up the fight against your feelings.

You (yes, you!) can live a rich, full, authentic life with all the internal experiences that come with being human, not in spite of them. Living a truly authentic life doesn't look like a magical universe where everyone lives in bliss and there isn't any stress, conflict, or struggle. Quite the contrary. A rich and rewarding existence comes from being willing to show up to life whether it's hard, easy, peaceful, or scary. In fact, it's often in those tough moments that we're able to connect with others, find meaning, or tap into our spiritual self. The truth is, those opportunities are available to us only if we're willing to show up fully in our life.

We don't have to continually chase our tail to try to feel better; ACT offers us the path to *live better*—to live a life guided by what is most meaningful to us. Living better means actively committing to actions that match our values, regardless of how much we may want to stay in our comfort zones. Our internal experiences are going to shift and change with time. The beauty of the ACT approach is that the skills are always accessible, no matter what we think or feel.

The rocky parts of life are guaranteed. There will be moments of vulnerability or stress in your future. It's in those challenging times that all our old stories and fears get churned up. When they do, your mind may throw you thoughts like,

See, I told you this wouldn't work or, You were kidding yourself. Maybe some of those old scripts will get noisier, like the one about you always being a failure or never being accepted by others.

Before you grab on to one of those thoughts and follow it wherever it wants to take you, remember that you know *exactly* what to do here. In fact, you've been training for this very scenario each time you worked through an exercise in this book or practiced a skill. You've got this.

Your thoughts are still only thoughts. At times they may be louder, more intense, or harder to ignore. Even so, thoughts they remain—not facts, proclamations, predictions, or commandments written in stone. Once we really connect with that truth, we get to make the choice about how much attention we want to give our thoughts. The more we step back from our thoughts and give them space to come and go, the quieter they will become. Eventually, those scripts and stories will seem a million miles away.

Similarly, we can always choose to drop the rope in the tug-of-war we play with our emotions. Remember, emotional pain is part of life; there's no getting out of it. But if we open up to it, sometimes pain has the potential to connect us with others, help us find meaning, and get us closer to our values. Other times, it is nothing more than a time-bound experience. The less resistance we give it, the more quickly and organically it is likely to pass. The more you practice dropping the rope, the less bothersome these feelings will become.

And the most important tools of all, your values, are always there to guide you through whatever life brings. They are your true north. Through this book, you've learned how to listen to your deepest self and move toward the things that matter to you most. When you feel lost, in the dark, or at rock bottom, your values will never steer you wrong. One step at a time, they will guide you forward.

FINDING WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

In order to reap the full benefits of these skills, you need to practice, practice, practice. Practice when life is chaotic and when life is boring. Practice when it feels like you've got the hang of it and when you feel like you're failing. Practice during the highs and during the lows. Working your way through this book has given you the skills. Now it's up to you. It will take commitment and diligence to develop a new pattern of living that sticks, but your mind will get the hang of it, and using the skills will become second nature.

As you know, committed action means acting in ways true to our values, without attachment to the outcome. The same goes for this process of living better. Although it's important to keep your eye on the prize, the true richness will come from being present for each step in your journey.

Let's take a look back at your experience of working through this book to help clarify what clicked, what didn't, and what areas need some more TLC.

EXERCISE Putting It All Together

Life Domains

- » Which areas of your life felt the biggest impact of this workbook?

.....

- » Were these the areas where you anticipated the most change when you first picked up the book?

.....

- » Were the impacts you observed different from what you expected?

.....

- » Which were the areas of your life where you didn't see as much change?

.....

Building Blocks

- » Which core skills did you connect with the most?

.....

- » Was there one that struck you as a real game changer?

.....

» What does this skill reflect about what may have been missing for you?

.....

» Which core skills need some more practice?

.....

Exercises

» Which exercises led to an aha moment?

.....

» Were any exercises so meaningful you know you'll hold on to your responses in the future?

.....

» Did any exercises just fall flat?

.....

» Which exercises would you like to do regularly?

.....

Process

» How often did you use this book, and how did that pace work for you?

.....

» Did you ever feel bored or overwhelmed?

.....

» What thoughts or feelings came up if you hit sections you didn't connect with?

.....

» When you hit roadblocks, how did it impact your process?

Now that you have a sense of what worked for you and what didn't, as well as your ideal rhythm for learning and practicing, let's put it into action. With time, intention, and daily practice, the skills in this workbook will become ingrained.

EXERCISE Lights, Camera, Action

Create an action plan for keeping up your skills. Start by ranking which areas of your life have the highest priority for change right now and which top value you want to move closer to in each domain. Then note a goal in line with this value and how willing you are to make the change on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents being completely unwilling to change and 5 represents being completely willing. Next, consider the thoughts and feelings that are likely to be barriers to moving forward as well as the top strategies you will need to overcome these experiences. Last, make some notes about the main setting for, and frequency of, your skills practice.

LIFE DOMAIN: Health and Wellness		RANK (1-5): 1
Top Value	Adventure	
Bold Move Goal	Take rock climbing class	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	4	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	I don't have time for this. I won't be able to keep it up. I'm too old.	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	Fear, embarrassment	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	Mindfulness of surroundings, defusion from thoughts	
Primary Setting for Practice	On my way to class, during class	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	Weekly	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

LIVING A VALUED LIFE

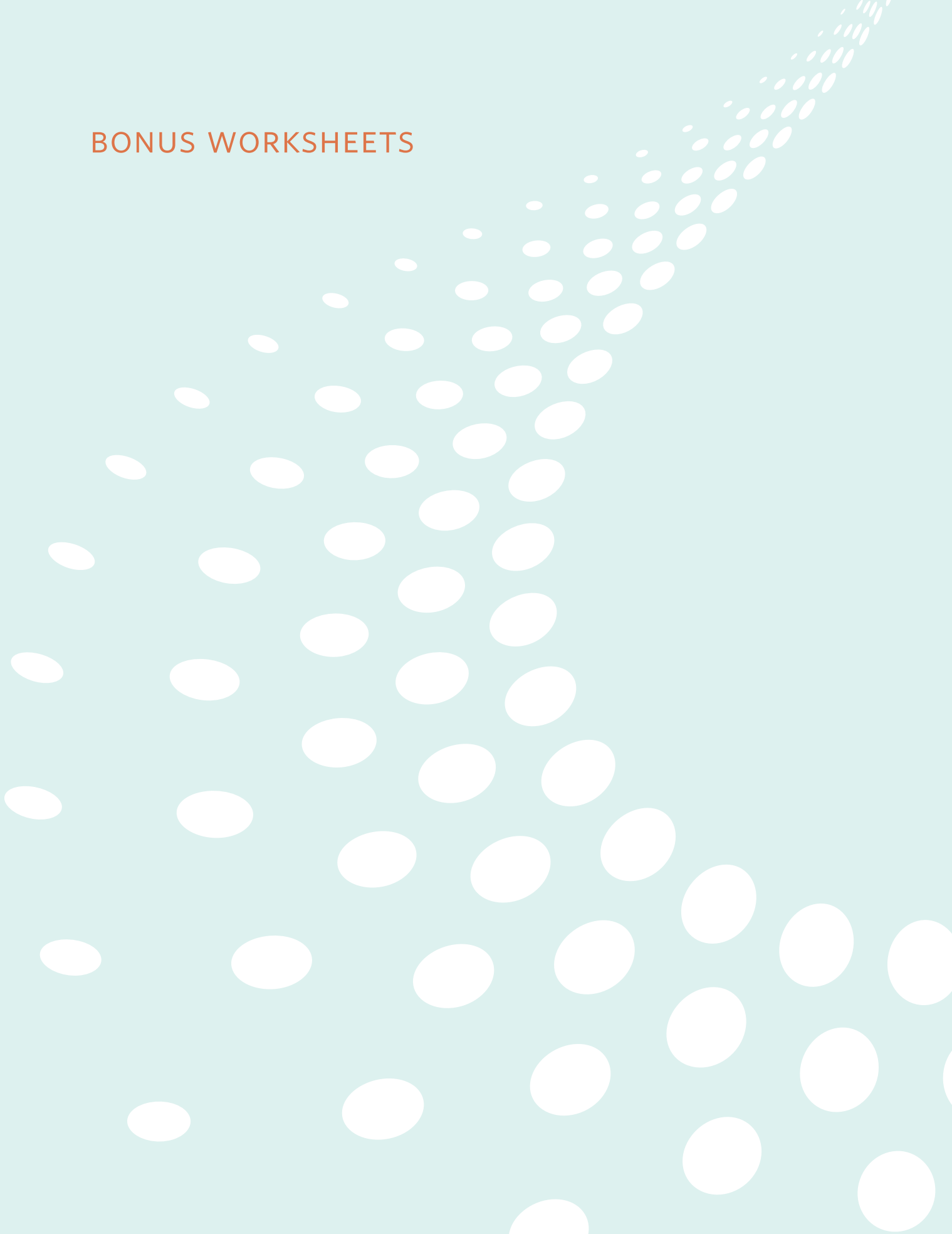
Remember, whenever everything else seems hard to reach, you can't go wrong by making sure your very next step brings you closer to one of your values. In the darkest of times, in the brightest of times, we owe it to ourselves to be authentic to what makes our heart tick and allows us to feel whole.

From time to time, you will get caught up in your thoughts, lose touch with the present moment, act out of anxiety, or get stuck in depression. This fact doesn't make you broken, bad, or incapable. It makes you human. When things get dark, our values become a flashlight to illuminate our way. They show us what matters and how to act in a way that is honest and true to who we are and what we believe in. We decide when we want to turn the light on or off, but it is always accessible because our values never leave us.

Take a minute to acknowledge the privilege of being human and your capacity to feel connected to other humans. What are some of the moments in your life that you will hold on to as you get older? Think about the contribution you can give your community and what you have to offer to make this world a better place. Think about the reasons you picked up this book.

What will your next act be after putting down this book? Now is the time to commit to getting out of your comfort zone and living your most authentic, meaningful life. There is no other moment but now to start living better. So why waste another second?

BONUS WORKSHEETS



CHAPTER 2 Wheels on the Bus

Take a moment to consider a family dynamic that really tends to wake up your passengers and get your thoughts cranking. Maybe it's feeling like you're unappreciated by your spouse or there's an ongoing power struggle with your child.

- 1 With this situation in mind, make a list in the table of the primary passengers who will likely have something to say about it. If there is a name you can assign to them or way you can describe them, even better. Write down the primary automatic thoughts likely to arise in response to this situation.
- 2 Next, write down how these passengers can impact your behavior if they get hold of the steering wheel.

SITUATION:

PASSENGER	THOUGHTS	ACTION

BEFORE THE MEAL

Rate your hunger by circling which number on a scale from 1 to 10 best represents your hunger.

extreme
hunger 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 *uncomfortably*
full

- » What thoughts, feelings, or expectations do you have about the meal before you eat it?

.....

.....

AFTER THE MEAL

Rate your fullness by circling which number on a scale from 1 to 10 best represents your fullness after eating your meal.

extreme
hunger 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 *uncomfortably*
full

- » What thoughts or feelings do you have about the meal you have just eaten?

.....

.....

Last, rate your satiation on the following scale by marking which number on the scale best represents your level of satisfaction.

completely
unsatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 *perfectly*
satiated

- » Is there anything you can think of that would help you feel more satiated?

.....

.....

Start with an “I can’t” thought that tends to be really disruptive. Then ask yourself a series of questions about what this thought would mean to you should it be true. Keep going until you land on a belief that seems like it may be at the core of your chain of thoughts.

I can't

because



If this were true, it would mean



If this were true, it would mean



If this were true, it would mean



If this were true, it would mean

Value:

Level 1 » What action would represent one step outside your comfort zone?

.....
» What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....
» Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

Level 2 » What action would represent another step outside your comfort zone?

.....
» What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....
» Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

Level 3 » What action would represent another step outside your comfort zone?

.....
» What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....
» Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

Level 4 » What action would represent another step outside your comfort zone?

.....
» What thoughts and feelings do you anticipate as you make this move?

.....
» Are you willing to experience these feelings in order to get closer to your value?

CHAPTER 4 Face Your Fears

Emotional Discomfort

something you
could do today

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

br

thought of doing this
you the most distress

[illegible]

Write down the core values you came up with for the domain of vocation.

For each value, first set a vague goal. Without thinking about it too hard, notice what it's like to write down an abstract, ambiguous goal. Next, write down a concrete, specific goal that is feasible to accomplish in the next month.

VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

.....

SMART goal:

.....

VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

.....

SMART goal:

.....

VOCATION:

VALUE:

Vague goal:

.....

SMART goal:

.....

SMART GOAL:

.....

Barriers:

.....

Resources:

.....

SMART GOAL:

.....

Barriers:

.....

Resources:

.....

SMART GOAL:

.....

Barriers:

.....

Resources:

.....

CHAPTER 6 Two Sides of the Coin

SIDE 1: PAIN BEING AVOIDED	AVOIDANCE MOVE	SIDE 2: COST (VALUE)
		
		
		
		
		

CHAPTER 7 Seven Days of Thanksgiving

For the next week, write down one act of gratitude that you can commit to practicing each day. Examples can include sending an overdue thank-you note, letting a friend know how much they mean to you, or saying grace before each meal.

DAY	ACT OF GRATITUDE
SUNDAY	
MONDAY	
TUESDAY	
WEDNESDAY	
THURSDAY	
FRIDAY	
SATURDAY	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

LIFE DOMAIN:	RANK (1-5):
Top Value	
Bold Move Goal	
Willingness to Change (1-5)	
Thoughts That Get in the Way	
Emotions You Tend to Avoid	
Top Strategies for Staying Present	
Primary Setting for Practice	
Frequency of Practice (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)	

VALUES LIST

Accomplishment	Gentleness	Progress
Accountability	Goodness	Prosperity
Accuracy	Goodwill	Punctuality
Adventure	Gratitude	Quality of work
Beauty	Happiness	Regularity
Calm	Hard work	Reliability
Challenge	Harmony	Resourcefulness
Change	Health	Respect for others
Charity	Honor	Responsiveness
Cleanliness	Improvement	Results orientation
Collaboration	Independence	Safety
Commitment	Individuality	Satisfying others
Communication	Inner peace	Security
Community	Innovation	Self-reliance
Competence	Integrity	Sensitivity
Competition	Intelligence	Service
Concern	Intensity	Simplicity
Connection	Joy	Skill
Cooperation	Justice	Solving problems
Coordination	Kindness	Speed
Creativity	Knowledge	Spirit
Decisiveness	Leadership	Spirituality
Democracy	Love	Stability
Determination	Loyalty	Standardization
Discipline	Meaning	Status
Discovery	Merit	Strength
Diversity	Money	Success
Dynamism	Oneness	Systemization
Ease	Openness	Teamwork
Efficiency	Order	Timeliness
Enjoyment	Patriotism	Tolerance
Equality	Peace	Tradition
Excellence	Perfection	Tranquility
Fairness	Perseverance	Trust
Faith	Personal growth	Truth
Flair	Pleasure	Unity
Freedom	Power	Variety
Friendship	Practicality	Wealth
Fun	Preservation	Well-being
Generosity	Privacy	Wisdom

MORE RESOURCES

To learn more about ACT, check out some of these resources.

If this book is leaving you with questions about the intricacies of the ACT model and a desire to go further with your skills, a great next stop is to read *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*. Written by the founder of ACT, Steven Hayes, PhD, this workbook gives you a deep dive into the six core building blocks of the model with comprehensive explanations of the processes at play and dozens of exercises to continue your practice.

The Happiness Trap, by Russ Harris is a really easy-to-read ACT text that spells out in a digestible and humorous way how our pursuit of happiness ends up causing us more suffering. This is a great book for anyone who struggles with emotions and judges themselves for not feeling as positive as they think they “should.”

If you struggle with anxiety (as many of us do), *Things Might Go Terribly, Horribly Wrong*, by Kelly Wilson, PhD, and Troy DuFrene, is a brilliant book that provides a framework for understanding our anxiety and why our mind loves to solve problems. It also has concrete ACT techniques to target worry and anxiety specifically.

The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety: A Guide to Breaking Free from Anxiety, Phobias and Worry Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, written by John Forsyth, PhD, and Georg Eifert, PhD, is another excellent tool for anxiety. This one is more hands-on and offers many different exercises that home in on mindfulness skills.

If you’re looking for shorter, more digestible reads on specific ACT topics, head to www.actmindfully.com.au. This website, created by Russ Harris (author of *The Happiness Trap*), has tons of free articles, worksheets, and videos organized by topic from “ACT and Substance Use” to “Mindfulness in Practice.”

If you have only a few minutes, check out Joe Oliver’s ACT Videos channel on YouTube. Joe Oliver, PhD, is an ACT therapist and writer who has curated a list of funny and illustrative short videos to explain some of the more complex ACT concepts. Be sure to watch “Passengers on the Bus,” which is one of his creations.

If you’re interested in taking online courses, live webinars, or learning about in-person ACT trainings, head to Praxis Continuing Education and Training (www.praxiscet.com). Many of the resources are geared toward behavioral health professionals or providers interested in learning ACT to share with others.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GIULIA SURO, PhD, is a psychologist living and working in Washington, DC. She is a perpetual student of ACT and loves nothing more than sharing it with colleagues and clients alike. She enjoys helping her clients clarify what is most important and meaningful to them and using that knowledge to help them get unstuck and create lasting change.

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GIULIA SURO, PhD, is a psychologist living and working in Washington, DC. A perpetual student of ACT, she loves sharing it with the people around her. Giulia works to help her clients clarify what is most important and meaningful to them, helping them create lasting change.

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