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What Is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy?

> The beginning is the most important part of the work.
>
> —PLATO

One of our most difficult experiences as clinicians working with trauma is knowing there are millions of men, women, and children who are suffering from the effects of trauma and not receiving treatment. This is especially frustrating when we know there are interventions that help. We have witnessed this firsthand, having used ACT as a treatment for PTSD and trauma-related difficulties for over two decades. We have seen how the concepts and skills offered in ACT can help people who have experienced trauma reclaim their lives. We will work through those concepts and skills in the following chapters. In this chapter, we will help you understand what ACT is all about, teach you some foundational ACT techniques as part of the Stage 1 process, and invite you to reflect on strategies that have and have not worked for you in the past.

ACT AND TRAUMA

Acceptance and commitment therapy has been around for nearly four decades and arose from the study of how humans acquire language. When referring to language, we don't mean only the ability to communicate verbally to others, such as when conversing with someone or using body

language to communicate, like waving hello. We are also referring to the inner verbal world of thoughts, images, and memories. This area of study revealed the particular abilities humans have that enable us to develop language, and led to the development of *relational frame theory* by psychologist Steven Hayes and his colleagues.

Relational frame theory provides an account for how we learn language and how this very ability, although powerful and helpful, also causes us to suffer in ways other species never will. Animals can't develop the concepts used in making painful evaluations, for example. Animals don't think they aren't good enough or that their lives are meaningless. They don't worry about how they're going to die or make a decision to die because they evaluate their life as unbearable.

Take a moment now and consider if these ideas would exist for us without words. If you had no words, what is a "future" or even a "tomorrow"? What is "meaningless"? Relational frame theory illuminates the processes involved in learning a concept such as "worthless" and how we learn to apply such concepts to ourselves. So, not only did this area of study help us understand why humans suffer in the way we do, it suggested ways to alleviate that suffering.

ACT arose directly from the scientific study of language. It is a therapeutic approach that draws upon mindfulness and acceptance strategies, combined with commitment and behavior-change strategies, to promote *psychological flexibility*. Psychological flexibility involves learning to relate differently to distressing thoughts and feelings, freeing us up to engage in our lives in ways that matter to us. It helps us to be more present to *all* the different types of emotions that come and go, including both pain and joy. It helps us shift perspective so that we're not stuck with viewing the world and ourselves through the lens of trauma.

Psychological flexibility also helps us to change our behavior so that avoidance no longer dictates our life. Rather than focusing on eliminating trauma-related symptoms—thoughts, sensations, and memories—ACT offers a way to relate to them differently. A key is learning that even very painful emotions, thoughts, sensations, and memories are not dangerous in and of themselves. ACT encourages us to approach our internal experiences with openness, awareness, and engagement, thereby reducing avoidance and its associated costs.

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Although eliminating or reducing trauma-related symptoms is not the focus of ACT, a bonus of this work is that you may experience a lessening of symptoms. To date, studies looking at ACT for trauma do indeed show reductions in symptoms. While still more research is needed, a number of studies indicate ACT is working well as a treatment for trauma.

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Exposure in Therapy

Exposure is as it sounds—individuals are invited to confront or be exposed to the things they have been trying to avoid or eliminate that are causing significant problems in life. The word "expose" means making something visible or known, and it comes from the old French word "esposer," which means to "lay open" or "reveal." In this book, we invite you to lay open your internal experiences, revealing them for what they are; you will not be asked to lay open your experience for its own sake but for the sake of better living.

Exposure is one of the most effective treatments known for post-trauma avoidance of thoughts, emotions, and sensations related to the trauma experience. Exposure helps individuals confront and learn to relate to their fears differently. We are not suggesting survivors are reexposed to traumatic events. Rather, they are systematically guided to get present to the fallout of trauma, meaning the difficult trauma-related thoughts, emotions, sensations, and memories they experience. Because these internal experiences endure, survivors can continue to act as though the trauma is still occurring.

Reminders of the trauma can elicit an internal experience, such as anxiety, and then to reduce the anxiety, the individual escapes the situation or engages in behavior that dampens the experience, such as leaving the family barbecue, drinking alcohol, or engaging in self-harm. In exposure treatment, individuals are guided to contact their fear without escape or avoidance so that new learning can occur. Exposure lines up nicely with ACT, as ACT helps people to approach their feared experiences (to expose them) in a compassionate and grounded way, while also linking this work to creating meaningful living.

Let's take a closer look at exposure. If someone is afraid to drive or even ride in a car after surviving a bad car accident, they might gradually expose themselves to their fear by sitting in a car, then being a passenger on shorter and then longer drives, and eventually getting behind the wheel and

driving. As they discover that they can tolerate their fear and successfully ride and then drive, their fear decreases. Notice how in this example the car is not the problem. The problem is the understandable accident-related thoughts, feelings, and sensations that present a barrier to living fully. When the individual learns they can contact and relate to those experiences differently, they are able to learn that being in a car or even driving a car does not equal being in an accident. They learn they do not have to eliminate memories or anxious thoughts and feelings in order to drive.

With exposure, individuals are encouraged to remain in contact with their difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations for different lengths of time and under different contexts until new learning occurs. Individuals learn that they can contact these internal experiences while intentionally refraining from escape or avoidance strategies (such as distraction, shutting down, or staying away). Instead, they learn to stay present in the situation, understanding that they are safe in the process.

Exposure treatments are typically done in a therapeutic setting with the therapist guiding the process and providing ongoing support. In Chapter 10 we will walk you through a way to engage in self-directed exposure.

Exposure can be done gradually or all at once. There are three main avenues:

1. *Imaginal exposure* involves imagining the feared event and its associated thoughts, feelings, and sensations in your mind and reporting about these events through talking or writing about them. You are exposed through imagination, a powerful tool for re-creating the feared material. Continuing the previous car accident example, you could imagine sitting in the car at the wheel and starting the car while also observing the rise and fall of your fear.

2. *In vivo exposure* involves confronting the feared event and its associated internal events in real life. Continuing the car accident example, you could sit behind the wheel of an actual car and remain there while observing your fear rise and fall. Remaining in the presence of the avoided experience—which, again, is the fearful thoughts, feelings, and sensations—allows you to distinguish the present moment (being safe) from the past (the car accident) and to learn that avoidance or escape is not necessary.

3. *Interoceptive exposure* is used to specifically confront the fear of bodily sensations, such as those experienced during a panic attack. You might be asked to intentionally induce symptoms like dizziness or a racing heart, to notice the experience, and to notice that it arises and falls.

Each of these three kinds of exposures will be used throughout the book. However, they will be done through an ACT lens, creating a safe and stable way to approach the work.

In ACT, the goal is to relate to your internal experience openly and with awareness, revealing its true nature as a human experience that rises and falls, like all experiences. This new relationship to internal experiences and adapting your behaviors to be more mindful of your choices in the moment, guided by personal values, is what psychological flexibility is about.

LEARNING TO BE OPEN

One of the painful things about being human is how we can torture ourselves with our own thoughts. Thinking never stops. We all experience painful and seemingly limiting thoughts that come again and again despite our best efforts to keep them at bay. The research now explains why we can't eliminate such thoughts or ensure they won't arise. We can't unlearn the thoughts we have learned. To help us illustrate this, we invite you to consider a painful thought. Write it down.

How old is this thought? Meaning, for how many years have you had this thought?

Now, consider whether you would be able to unlearn that thought. Write about how likely or unlikely it would be here:

If you decided that unlearning the thought was likely, we invite you to do that now. Unlearn the thought, and when you have succeeded, write about your experience here:

If you are like most humans, you discovered in this exercise how unlikely it is that you can make yourself unlearn this thought. It is impossible. This is why efforts to eliminate and control thoughts set up a struggle. In fact, we now understand how our relationship with language creates a full-on battle with our minds (thoughts and thinking) in a way that only makes things worse. This is why, in ACT, we do not attempt to change, "fix," or eliminate thoughts—it can't be done. If any change is to occur, it will be through addition, adding to what you already think. Thus, the aim is to reveal the nature of thinking and reduce the power of our thoughts, changing our relationship with them while also expanding or broadening thinking. Essentially, we set the therapeutic context for seeing the reality and impotence of Oz, the famous wizard, behind his curtain. We learn to see thoughts for what they are and free ourselves from being imprisoned by them.

Similarly, our understanding of language informs how we work with difficult emotions and physical sensations in ACT. We can't force ourselves to be unbothered by bothersome thoughts, to not be in pain, or to feel less tense when we remember painful events or think about the effect trauma has had on our lives. How is it, then, that we believe something is wrong when this is occurring? How is it, then, that we think we are worthless or broken because we have painful emotions and uncomfortable physical sensations? We now know. You have been taught that these experiences mean something is wrong with you. We are here to declare that this is not so.

We didn't come into the world thinking something was wrong with us because we were angry, sad, or physically uncomfortable. We feel pretty sure that newborn babies are not referring to themselves as broken because they cry when hungry. But as we grow, we learn. Through language, we are taught certain experiences are okay to have and others are not, a subject we will dive into more deeply in Chapter 5. In brief, we are taught countless times that something is wrong with us or we are somehow failing if we are feeling sad, angry, or vulnerable . . . and we then have more thoughts and feelings about that!

Eventually we find ourselves in a terrible bind of being unable to escape our thinking and emotions and then beating ourselves up for not having that control. This futile cycle supports a false and limiting notion that we are at the mercy of our thoughts and emotions. It supports the idea that we are in actual danger when we are in emotional pain.

In ACT, we engage new learning that supports a different relationship with your thinking, thought-filled mind and other internal experiences. We take a very different approach to what we experience internally. This

approach is one of openness instead of control. We invite a stance of openness—being open to the thoughts and feelings arising from one moment to the next.

We will explore this carefully in the following chapters, but it is important to clarify here that we are not talking about feeling indifferent about things you have experienced. We do not suggest that you should somehow be okay with things that are not okay. It makes complete sense that you feel the way you do (and even if it didn't make sense, this isn't something you—or anyone—can control). However, there is a way to hold your experiences that takes you out of the terrible bind of believing something is wrong with you for what you are experiencing.

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This new way of relating frees you from the notion that you have to somehow change or fix what you are experiencing inside to be okay and live a good life. You can open up to your inner experiences, letting them rise and fall as they rise and fall. A key focus of ACT is building the skills involved in taking this more open stance.

EXERCISE: Temperature Check

Now is a good time to take a temperature check on what you are thinking and feeling. We invite you to change the relationship to your emotional experience by being open to what arises within you, including thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Write about your initial reactions to this invitation, including any thoughts that might be doubtful or defensive.

Keep in mind what you have previously written as you embark on the journey of working through this book. See if you find that what you wrote changes as you explore ACT and what it has to offer in treating the fallout of trauma.

LEARNING TO BE CENTERED

Another problematic fallout of language, or thinking, is its extraordinary capacity to keep us mentally captured and busy living in our minds. Learning to change the relationship with our thoughts includes a second area of focus in ACT: building the ability to be present in our lives and centered within ourselves. It involves shifting from a life filled with "What happened?" and "What is coming next?" to a life more focused on "What is happening in the here and now?" We learn how to be centered in that space. When we learn to be present to our lives, we bring our attention to the opportunities that await us in the present moment. We will be exploring this ability and what it offers more deeply in Chapter 6.

When we learn to be present in the moment, we bring our attention to the opportunities that await us in our lives.

Creating this space can be tough for anyone, but for those who have experienced trauma, it can be especially hard. Everyone can struggle with painful thoughts and feelings. However, with trauma, the mind can dish out one painful memory after another, one awful thought after the next. In this circumstance, survivors try to help themselves by working to not remember, to fix themselves by distracting, avoiding, self-medicating, or essentially running, hiding, or fighting with themselves—all unsuccessful efforts to eliminate their past. We have worked with many trauma survivors who come to the painful realization that their lives have been consumed by the effort to erase their history, or at the very least, to avoid thinking or feeling about it.

There's something very isolating about trauma as well. In our work, we often hear comments such as "You can't possibly understand what I've gone through" or "You don't know what it's like." And it is true. No one but the person who has gone through a traumatic experience fully knows what that experience was like or how it continues to play out in that person's life. Traumatic events, by definition, are a departure from the norm of human experience. It is easy to see how someone who has experienced

this departure from normality can feel separate from the rest of the world, as though they are forever marked as being different—and are therefore alone. It is challenging to recover when this is your reality. It can feel hard to reconnect with life.

As you will see in later chapters, in ACT, we learn to reconnect with the present, even while carrying our histories and the memories, thoughts, and feelings that come along with trauma. While not easy, this is where everything else becomes possible—the ability to feel fully, connect with others, and reengage is a part of recovery. The ability to feel centered can be empowering, leading to choices that are about meaning rather than running from the past.

It is safe to say that one of the most painful outcomes of trauma is the effect it can have on how survivors feel about themselves. As mentioned, through the study of human language, we have learned a lot about how these painful outcomes happen and why trying to force ourselves to think or feel differently doesn't work. The greatest gift of ACT, in our opinion, is that it utilizes this understanding to help those who have experienced trauma contact a sense of self that is whole and acceptable.

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EXERCISE: Exploration of Being Present

When was the last time you felt centered and present to the moment? Describe here:

How has trauma impacted your ability to have these kinds of moments in your life?

As you read through this book, look to see if being centered and present changes. Consider how life would change for you if you were able to be more centered and present. Write about the possibilities.

Grounding

Grounding is a way to get present, returning from being caught in memories, emotion, and thought content. Grounding helps us become centered in our physical surroundings in the here and now. It can be particularly useful when experiencing intense emotions, intrusive thoughts, or dissociation. The primary aim of grounding is to help you when you are feeling overwhelmed to return to the current time and space (environment), regulate in the moment, and then, if possible, continue on with an exercise you are completing in this book, for instance, or move forward with your daily life. Remaining centered, focused, and present is the goal.

There are several ways to practice grounding. Mindfulness, a skill you will practice in Chapter 6, is one way to ground. Mindfulness is used to

Remaining centered, focused, and present is the goal.

intentionally turn your focus away from distressing thoughts, emotions, memories, and sensations and toward the present moment. One way to connect to the present moment is by tuning in to the senses. The senses can help anchor you to your current environment. Techniques that can be useful here involve attending to the physical details in the current surroundings. This might include focusing on color, texture, sound, or taste. If you want or need to ground, consider engaging the five senses: touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell.

EXERCISE: Grounding through the Five Senses

Allow at least 10 minutes for this exercise, in which you will bring your attention to each of the five senses, one by one. Spend at least one minute with each sense to fully engage, connecting to what you are experiencing in the here and now. Notice colors, textures, qualities, intensity, or any other aspects you encounter. Afterward, describe in writing each sense as a way to develop your noticing skills; in future practice you can simply note what you experience to yourself.

1. **Sight.** What did you see?

2. **Sound.** What did you hear?

3. **Touch.** After touching several objects, what do you notice?

4. **Taste.** What was the taste experience in your mouth? (Feel free to get some food and then describe the taste.)

5. **Smell.** What did you smell, even if faint?

Remember, this kind of grounding is available to you at any time. Your senses are continually operating. You can experiment with spending more time on each sense, or with directing your attention through them more rapidly. Connecting to your senses can be a great way to foster a sense of presence and feel safe.

Other forms of grounding can also be helpful. Try each of these and see which one works best for you. You can use all of them or find a few you like. You may need them at times, so practicing grounding several times a day is essential.

- **Temperature focus:** Hold something cold or warm, such as an ice cube or a cup of tea. Tune in to the cold and warmth, noticing the experience and using it as a physical anchor to the here and now.
- **Thought redirection:** Turn your mind to thinking of something neutral, like counting backward from 100 or stating your ABC's. Or think of your five favorite things and describe them. Or mentally describe the physical environment in great detail, naming the objects you see in the room or environment.
- **Physical grounding:** Push your feet firmly into the floor, literally anchoring yourself to the ground. If needed, you can stomp your feet, reminding yourself more forcefully that you are in this moment in this space. Or touch the chair you are sitting in, squeezing the armrests, or noticing how your body is located in the chair. If you are standing or lying down, notice your feet on the ground or the surface you are lying on.
- **Movement grounding:** Begin to walk, noticing your feet as they touch the ground. Begin to stretch, noticing your muscles and body as it moves—feel the sensations.
- **Breathing grounding:** Place your attention fully on the breath and count while breathing. On the in-breath, breathe in while counting to four, hold it for the count of one, then breathe out while counting to four, hold it for the count of one, and repeat.

We will state it again: It is essential to practice. Grounding can be helpful at any time as you move forward. If needed, ground while reading or working on the exercises in this book or just whenever you need help to anchor to the now. This can be particularly important when working on your trauma or when engaging in an exposure.

LEARNING TO BE ENGAGED

One of the other problems stemming from our relationship with language is that we've learned we can't move forward in life until we feel a certain way. We are told we require feeling happy, good, content, or confident to lift us up and have good lives. However, as we will explore in this book, seeking these thoughts and feelings before one can engage in life actually prevents engagement. Trying to feel a particular way or having specific thoughts gums up the whole living well process.

Once we learn to change our relationship to thoughts and our internal experience, we can engage, no matter the thoughts and feelings. The acronym "ACT" itself points to what we hope to convey as you heal and learn to engage. These skills compose the overarching aim of ACT, which is to develop psychological flexibility. You will notice nothing in the term "psychological flexibility" about chasing happiness, getting rid of terrible memories, or having figured everything out. But, flexibility does offer promise, allowing for meaningful movement and change.

ACT is more than simply loosening the grip of language; it is also very much about *what's next*. What might you be doing if you weren't running, hiding, and fighting your own experience? We get it—trauma makes one want to run, hide, and fight. But we are invested in you living a life that is about more than that. We are invested in you getting your life back. When you are able to learn that you no longer need to turn away from pain or discomfort, you are free to direct your formidable will toward creating vital and meaningful living. As you move into engagement rather than avoidance, we will help you uncover what is deep in your heart—to articulate how you want to live, what you care about, and how you want to *be* in this world.

EXERCISE: Imagining Freedom

If you were to imagine a world where you are free from trauma-related thoughts and feelings, what would that world look like? Think big.

When you finish the book, we invite you to return to what you wrote here and notice the possibilities.

HEALING FROM TRAUMA

The ACT skills you'll learn in this book help you to be *open*, *centered*, and *engaged*. These also happen to be the ingredients to building psychological flexibility, which is about moving through life—in all its unpredictable, weird, awful, and wonderful moments—in a way that is free. This can feel like a tall order when you are burdened by the effects of trauma. We intend to show you this freedom is possible and help you experience it yourself. The best news is that being a different you is not a requirement. You already have everything you need! In the next chapter we will explore values and the important role they play in building the life you want.