

Advanced Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: A Guide for Practitioners

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Objectives

1. Participants will recognize connection between six core yearnings and six core ACT processes.
2. Participants will learn about the dark side of 'feel goodism' and the importance of assisting our clients in increasing psychological flexibility.
3. Participants will learn various ACT skills to assist clients in creating a valued life focused on direction rather than destination.

Who I am and my Acceptance and Commitment therapy (ACT) journey

- Primary therapist at Center for Change Boise
- Background in Art, Psychology, and Addiction.
- Started learning about ACT in 2019
 - Approachable
 - Authentic
 - Life changing



Why ACT? It works!

- Clients that attended ACT groups while in residential treatment showed lower rates of rehospitalization after 6 months compared to those that did not attend ACT groups ([Juarascio, et al., 2013](#)).
- For adolescents with AN or subthreshold AN, a family-based approach based on ACT has shown to reduce ED pathology ([Timko, Zucker, Herbert, Rodriguez, & Merwin, 2015](#)).
- In an ED sample, an ACT group intervention focusing on body image was effective in reducing residual ED symptoms and body image problems ([Fogelkvist, Gustafsson, Kjellin, Parling, 2020](#)).

Why ACT? One word: BURNOUT

- Acceptance-based treatment may be beneficial for patients with more severe eating disorder pathology (Juarascio, et al., 2013).
- Psychological flexibility is associated with lower compassion fatigue and greater compassion satisfaction (Emma Victoria Garner, E. V. & Golijani-Moghaddam, N., 2021).
- ACT has been helpful as an intervention for sexual minority employees struggling with work stress and burnout (Singh, S.R, Watford, T.S, Cotterman, R.E., O'Brien, W.H, 2020).

ACT: Third wave CBT

1st wave: conditioning (behaviorism)



2nd wave: thoughts and beliefs in understanding and changing emotions and bx (CBT)



3rd wave: mindfulness, emotions, acceptance, the relationship, values, goals, and meta-cognition (ACT, DBT, mindfulness, etc...)



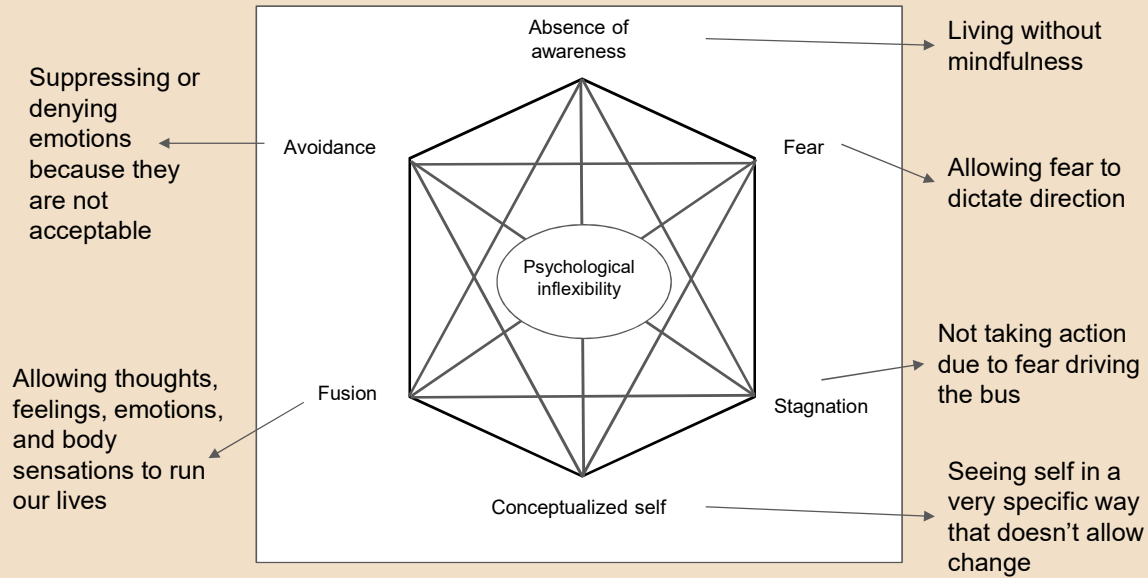
ACT: An introduction

- Founded by Steven Hayes in 1982:
 - “...the primary source of human unhappiness is the way language and cognition interact with the circumstances of our lives to produce an inability to persist or make changes that are in the service of long-term valued ends.” -Luoma, Hayes, and Walser, 2007, p. 9
- Inflexibility happens when we use language and tools in ways that are ineffective or problematic.
- The point of ACT is not to *feel* **BETTER** but to better FEEL.

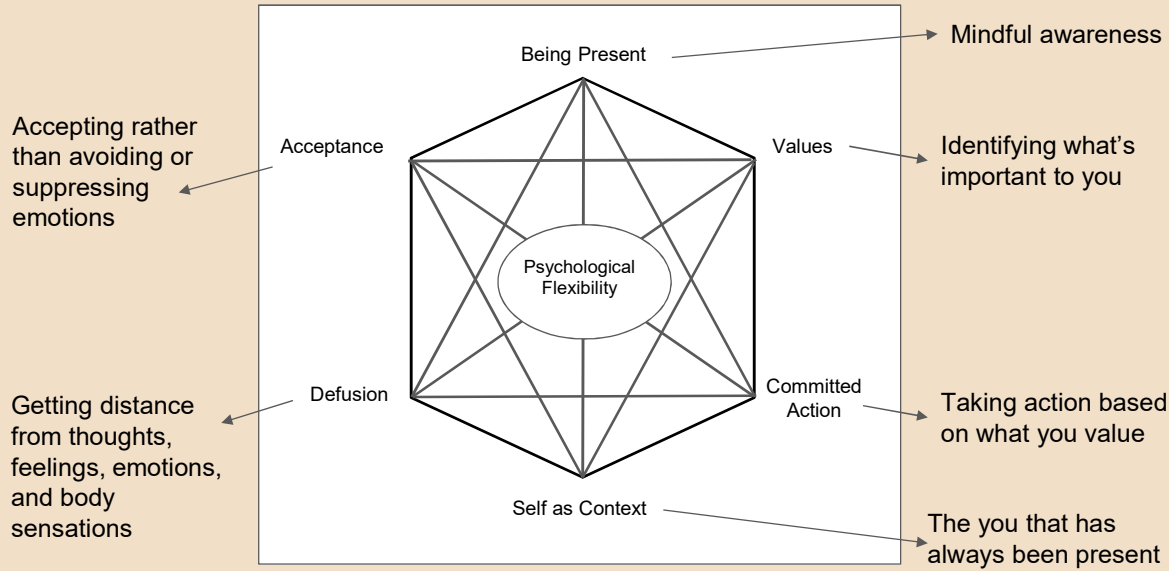
“The best way to ‘fail’ is to be stubborn.”

-Steven Hayes

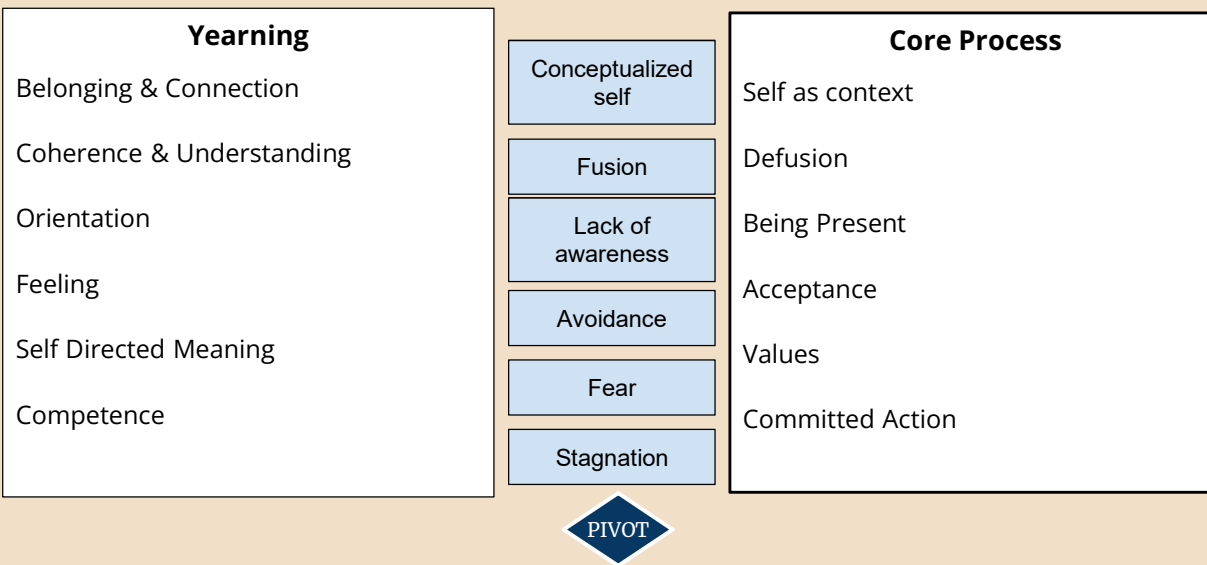
Psychological Inflexibility



ACT Hexaflex for Psychological Flexibility



Core Yearnings and the Matrix



“It’s normal to have a story about your life.
But it is harmful to your connection with others
when you become fused with that story.”

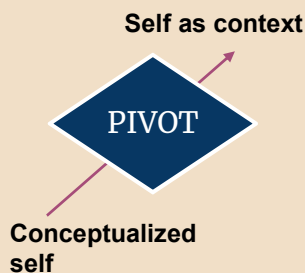
-Steven Hayes

Core yearning: Belonging and Connection

We long to belong and often feel we cannot belong unless we are special.

Inflexible response:

- Diagnosis can become a prize
- Identity becomes all consuming and inflexible
- No room for growth or change
- Suffering



Flexible response:

- Identification with self-as-context
- Identity becomes the you that has always been present
- Can promote deeper connection with self
- Growth

Conceptualized self

- Who we are is often attached to what we DO.
- Body image declines later in life, often linked to feeling purposeless.
- If we hold tightly to things that are bound to change, we are bound to suffer.
- What do you need to hold loosely?

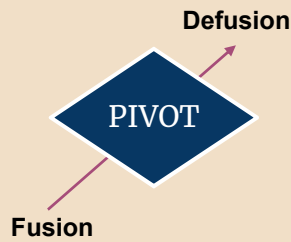


Core yearning: Coherence and Understanding

We yearn to make sense of what we are experiencing

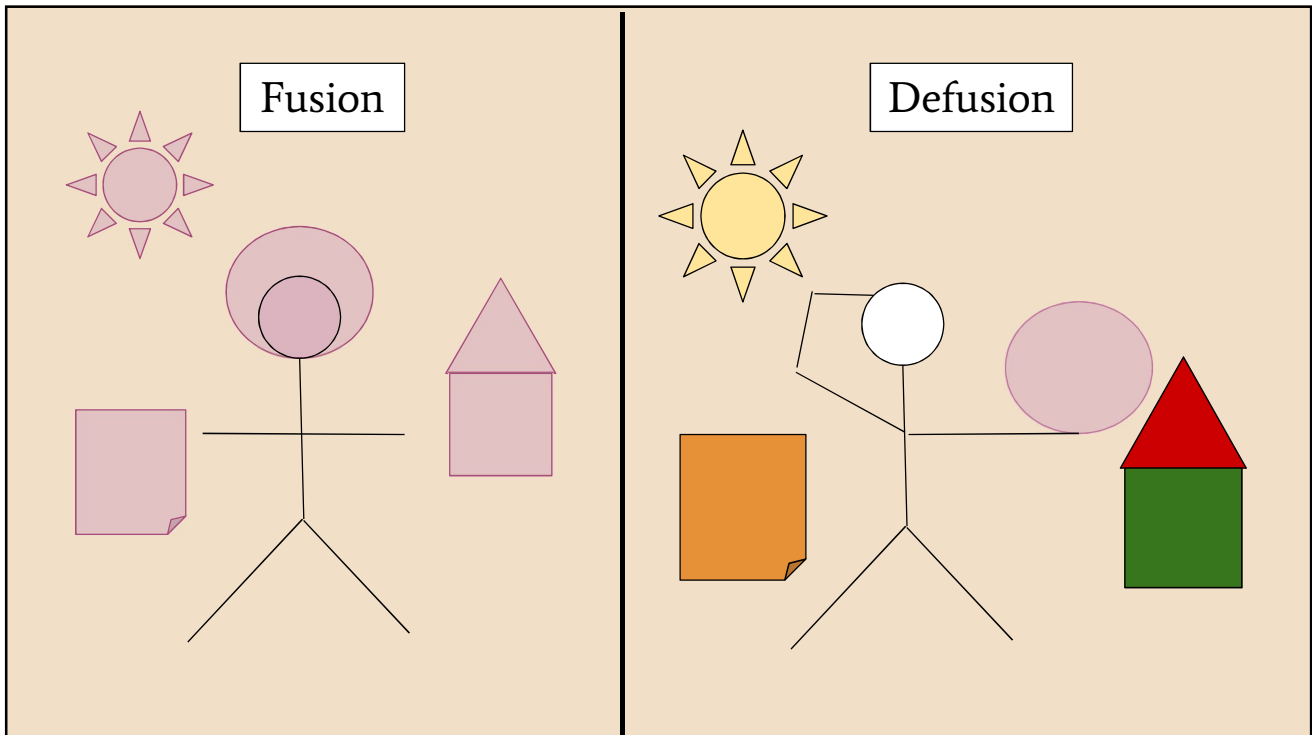
Inflexible response:

- Only one way of thinking
- How I feel/think must be true
- Fusion between thoughts, feelings, emotions, and body sensations.
- "I am not enough." -full stop



Flexible response:

- Defusion: separation from thoughts/feelings/emotions and body sensations.
- "I notice I have the thought that I am not enough."
- "...AND I am willing to do _____ because it aligns with my values."

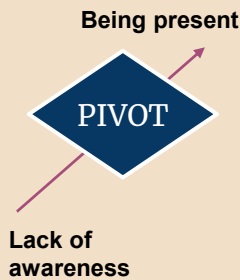


Core yearning: Orientation

We yearn to know the space we are in physically and spiritually in the past, present, and future.

Inflexible response:

- “I don’t know where I am supposed to be.”
- “I have no roadmap.”
- Direction does not have meaning.
- Life happens TO me.
- Stuck



Flexible response:

- Who and what is important to you?
- Present where I am, mindful of where I am going.
- What can you do to move towards a direction that matters?
- I am here, committing to valued actions.

Passengers on a bus metaphor

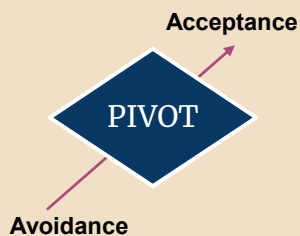


Core yearning: Feeling

We yearn to feel and come in contact entirely with our experience.

Inflexible response:

- I can only feel safe emotions.
- Reduces what we are willing to feel.
- Numb
- Suffering continues as emotions are suppressed.



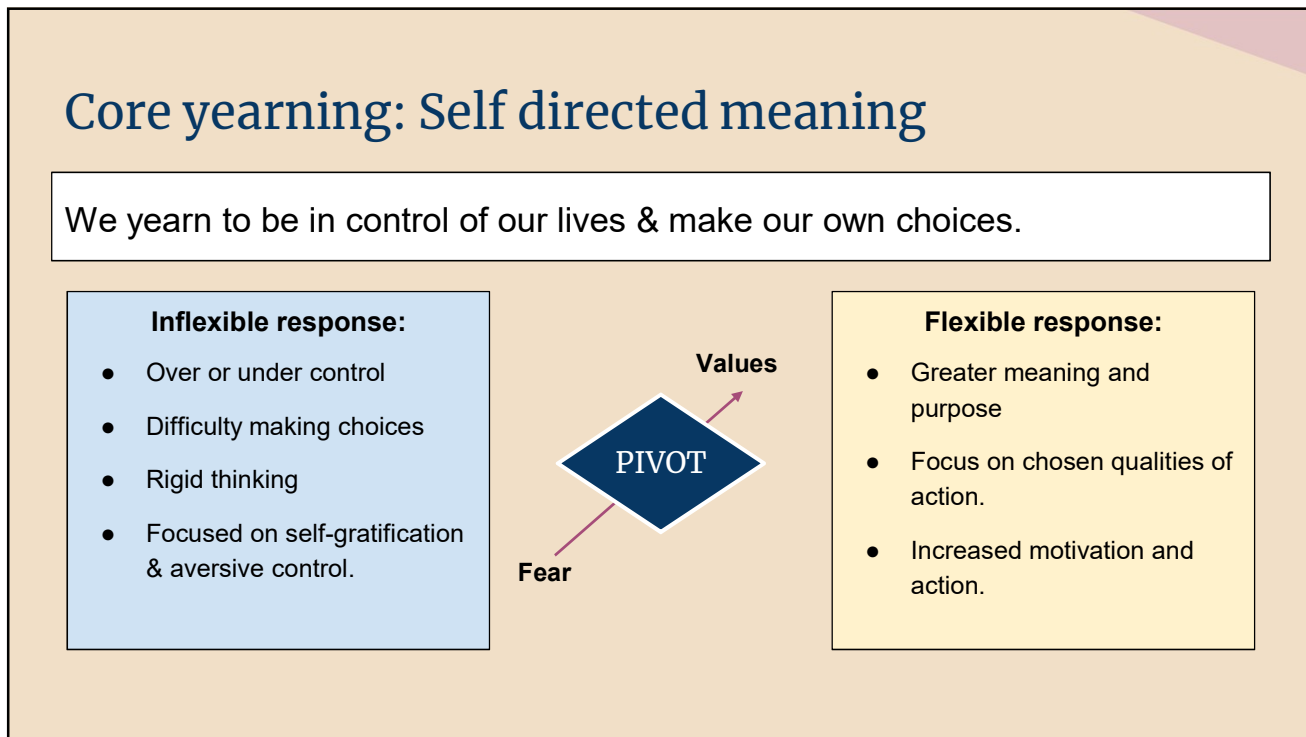
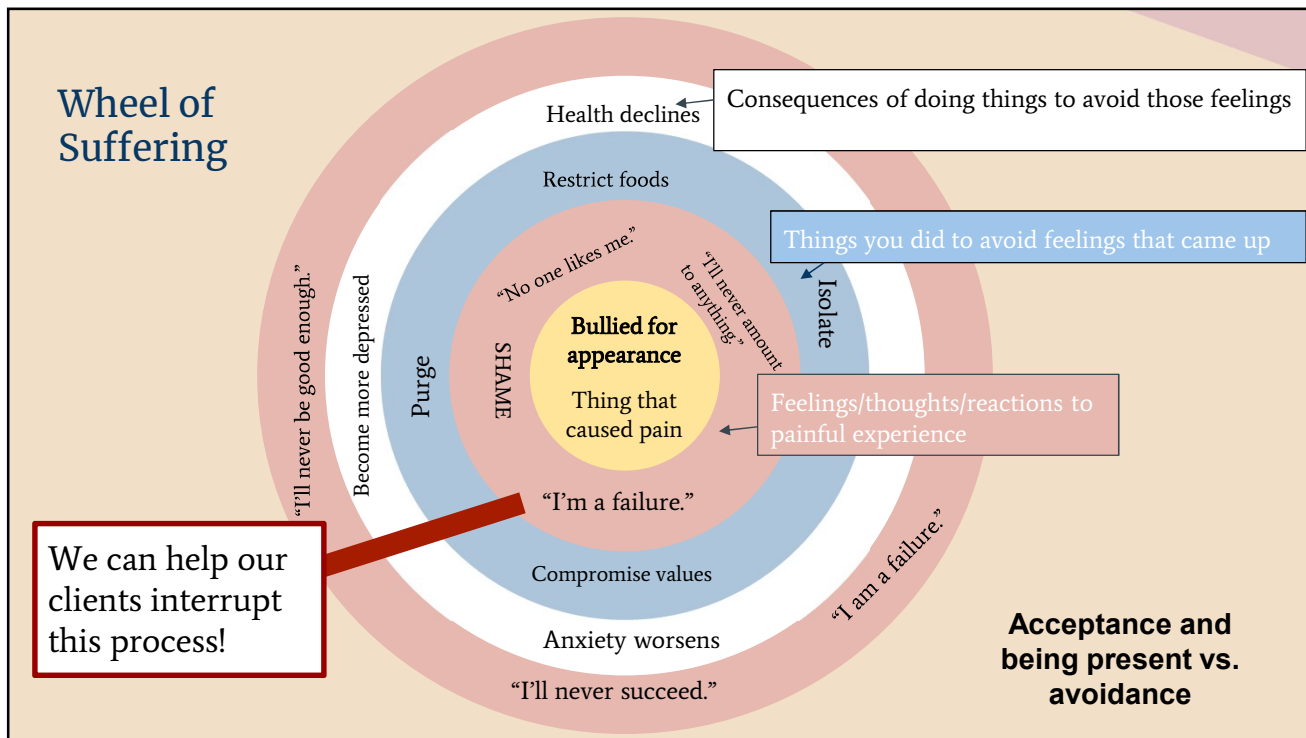
Flexible response:

- I can accept all emotions as part of my experience.
- Challenging emotions do not override my direction because I am willing to accept them.
- Pain is inevitable, suffering is not.

The dark side of “feel goodism”

- Core issues:
 - I don't want to feel bad, I only want to feel good. Therefore, ↘
 - If I feel bad then I must be doing badly. Therefore, ↘
 - Something is wrong with me = shame + isolation.
- In ACT, every emotion has a place and doesn't need to limit or change our direction.





Valued actions

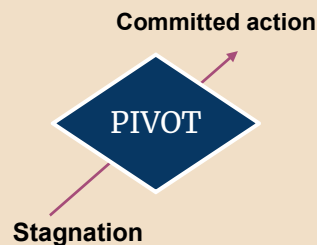
- According to ACT:
 - Values cannot be right or wrong.
 - Values are not goals. Values are never finally completed accomplished.
 - Values are about PROCESS, not outcome.
- **Take action:**
 - Monitor current bx, create goals aligned with values, examine: “Does this align with my values or am I being fused with thoughts, feelings, or emotions?”

Core yearning: Competence

We yearn to be good at what we are doing.

Inflexible response:

- Prefer perfectionism over failure.
- Stuck, unable to move.
- Focused on outcome only.
- “What if I fail??”



Flexible response:

- Reach outside comfort zone
- Try new things in accordance to values.
- Commit to actions that bring us closer to our values.
- Process vs. outcome.

Process vs. outcome based therapy

- Outcome based therapy is focused on goals of actions.
 - Draws attention away from the present moment
 - We continually fall short
- Process based therapy is focused on living and being present.
 - There is no final 'something' to be achieved
 - We are focused on *direction*, not destination.



Introduce willingness

- Compassionate act of self-validation in which you embrace the here and now as it unfolds.
- Willingness is a choice
 - You can observe your reason for not wanting to be willing AND still take action
 - It is not the reason that chooses, it is the person that chooses.
- Example: "List all the things you've done to try to overcome your eating disorder. Have they worked? If not, would you be willing to try to do something different if it meant you got to live your life?"

Willingness and commitment to change

- Commit not to perfection but larger and larger value based actions
- Mistakes will happen- remember, pain is inevitable!

- **When** you or your clients make a mistake, ask:

“Which of your values have changed?”

- If they haven't, you have two choices:

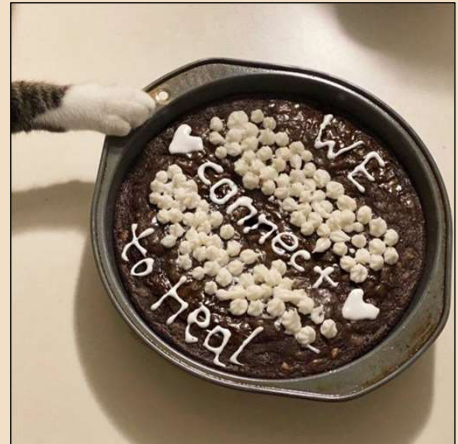
commit, slip, quit **OR** commit, slip, commit

Four simple examples of putting ACT into practice:

1. **Art piece:** Passengers on bus exercise
2. **Experiential:** Have clients write down a thought/feeling/emotion/body sensation and show with their body how close they feel they are to that thought/feeling/emotion/body sensation. Introduce concept of defusion.
3. **Worksheet:** Wheel of suffering
4. **Journal exercise:** Write down what painful thoughts/feelings/emotions/body sensations showed up each day, what you did to escape or avoid them, and what it cost you to practice avoidance.

Final thoughts

- You are uplifted in your life by people that model psychological flexibility in their relationship with you.
- *Why wouldn't that also be true for your clients?*
- Modeling happens in the in-between.



Assessments and additional trainings:

- Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-2)
 - Can be used weekly or biweekly to measure psychological flexibility
- The ACT Advisor
 - Can be used to help identify how you are doing in learning flexibility skills
- Trainings:
 - Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS): www.contextualpsychology.org
 - ACT Immersion: StevenHayes.com
 - Pesi

Further reading

- *Life After Trauma: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Heal From Trauma and PTSD* by Follette and Pistorello
- *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Eating Disorders* by Sandoz, Wilson, and Dufrene
- *Learning ACT: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Skills-Training Manual for Therapists* by Luoma, Hayes, and Walser.
- *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris
- *The Upside of Stress* by Kelly McGongial

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Questions or comments?

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