



EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGIES IN ACT

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR ACT THERAPISTS

By Dr. Russ Harris



IS “EMOTION REGULATION” PART OF ACT?

Like many other terms in psychology, there is not one agreed definition of emotion regulation (ER). The simplest and most practical definition of ER I have found comes from James Gross, a giant in the field. (E.g. Gross, J. J. (2014). Emotion regulation: Conceptual and empirical foundations. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), Handbook of emotion regulation (pp. 3-20). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.)

Gross defines ER as: How individuals influence which emotion they have, when they have them, **and how they experience and express them.**

If we go with this definition, then there’s a lot of emotion regulation in ACT, involving the elements highlighted in bold type above. In ACT, we rarely teach people to influence which emotions they have and when they have them, but we do teach everyone to influence **how they experience their emotions and how they express their emotions.**

The biggest difference between ER in ACT and ER in most other models is the intention or purpose underlying it. In most models, the aim of teaching ER strategies is to help people feel better; gain more control over their feelings; get better at reducing, avoiding or escaping painful feelings; get better at replacing those unpleasant emotions with ones that feel good.

In ACT, this is not our aim. We teach people to experience and express their emotions in new ways not so that they can feel good, but in order to help them act more effectively, guided by their values.

In other words, we help learn new skills to reduce the influence of their emotions over their actions. The primary aim of this is not to reduce the frequency or intensity of difficult emotions (although this usually happens as a by-product), but to reduce the impact of emotions over behaviour - in order to facilitate values-based living.

What follows on the next few pages are common examples of how we do this in ACT. (By the way, I'm not advocating we start using the term "Emotion Regulation" in ACT; I think that would probably be confusing. I'm writing this document because people often ask me about the role of ER in ACT, and I want to help build bridges between ACT and other models.)

NEW WAYS TO EXPERIENCE EMOTIONS

All of these ACT interventions/processes give us radically new ways to experience difficult emotions (instead of experiencing them as threats we need to fight or run from):

A / Mindfulness & Acceptance

- Dropping anchor or other mindful grounding techniques
- Noticing and naming the emotion
- Defusion from unhelpful cognitions about the emotion (e.g. judgments, rules, reason-giving)
- Acceptance
- Self-compassion
- Self-as-context

B / Appreciating & Utilising

Utilising the wisdom of the emotion: What's it telling me to address or change? What's it advising me to do differently? What's it bringing my attention to? What's it reminding me?

My pain is my ally: How's this emotion trying to help me?

Utilising the energy/power of the emotion – e.g. channelling the energy of anxiety into a performance, or the energy of anger into effective actions in the service of justice and fairness.

Appreciating the evolutionary purpose and adaptive functions of an emotion.

C / Metaphors

Seeing challenging emotions in new ways:

- Emotions are like the weather, and I am like the sky
- Emotions are like waves that rise and peak and fall
- Emotions are like chess pieces and I am like the board
- Emotions are just one aspect of the broad stage show of life
- Emotions are harmless even though painful or uncomfortable
- Emotions are normal; a full human life comes with the full range of emotions
- Emotions don't have to control me; I can live my values even when difficult feelings are present



NEW WAYS TO EXPRESS EMOTIONS

In private, we learn new ways to express our emotions to ourselves:

- “I’m noticing anxiety”
- “I’m having a feeling of sadness”
- “Here is anger showing up”
- “This is a moment of suffering”

With others, we learn to express emotions in new and more effective ways, in the service of our values and values-based goals.

(Keep in mind that committed action includes skills training; so we teach clients communication and assertiveness skills if these are lacking.)

For example, in the service of building a loving, intimate relationship, we learn to communicate clearly how we are feeling and what we want:

- “I notice I’m feeling angry right now”
- “I’m noticing the urge to yell at you and I don’t want to act on it”
- “I’m feeling sad and angry and I’d like to talk to you about it.”
- “I’m feeling really down and I need a hug.”
- “I’m sorry I snapped at you. My anger’s on the surface, but underneath, I’m really hurting.”

Last but not least, artistically-inclined ACT therapists often help clients to express their emotions through creative media: drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, and collage.



ACT *DOES* CHANGE YOUR THINKING!

There's a popular misconception that "ACT does not change your thinking". Clearly this idea is false; when clients (and therapists) encounter ACT, it usually dramatically changes the way they think about a vast range of topics and issues, including the nature and purpose of their own thoughts and emotions, the way they want to behave, the way they want to treat themselves and others, what they want their lives to be about, effective ways to live and act and deal with their problems, what motivates them, why they do the things they do, and so on.

However, ACT doesn't achieve this by challenging, disputing, disproving, or invalidating thoughts; nor does it help people to avoid, suppress, distract from, dismiss, or "rewrite" their thoughts or try to convert their "negative" thoughts into "positive" ones.

ACT helps people to change their thinking through
a/ **defusing from unhelpful cognitions and cognitive processes** and
b/ **developing new, more flexible and effective ways of thinking,**
in addition to their other cognitive patterns.

ACT actively fosters flexible thinking through many different methods, including reframing, flexible perspective taking, compassionate self-talk, values clarification, values-based goal setting and problem solving, values-based planning and strategizing, and looking at thoughts in terms of workability.

In order to help our clients handle difficult emotions more effectively, we dramatically change the way they think about them, as we shall see in the next few pages.



“COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL” - IS IT A PART OF ACT?

Cognitive reappraisal (CR) is an emotion regulation strategy that can be simply defined as “The attempt to reinterpret an emotion-eliciting situation in a way that alters its meaning and changes its emotional impact”

(Gross and John, 2003. Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. Gross JJ, John OP - J Pers Soc Psychol. 2003 Aug; 85(2):348-62.i)

CR is a term that originally comes from traditional Beckian CBT. Because of this, people tend to assume that CR must always involve challenging negative interpretations of the situation and replacing them with more positive ones in order to reduce the intensity of the difficult emotions present. Now obviously, that traditional CBT concept of “cognitive reappraisal” doesn’t fit with ACT. However, we do something very similar in ACT, in a mindful, values-based manner without any attempt to challenge thoughts or reduce the intensity of emotions.

We don't call it "cognitive reappraisal" in ACT – and I don't think we should call it that, because the term comes from Beckian CBT, and it'd just create confusion if we started using this term in ACT. However, the next few pages will demonstrate how in ACT we often help people to reinterpret an emotion-eliciting situation in a way that alters its meaning and changes its emotional impact (i.e. reduces the impact of the emotion over behaviour).



STEP 1: HELPING PEOPLE TO REINTERPRET AN EMOTION-ELICITING SITUATION IN A WAY THAT ALTERS ITS MEANING AND CHANGES ITS EMOTIONAL IMPACT

The first step is to mindfully acknowledge our initial emotional/psychological reaction. This can involve any combination of:

- **Dropping anchor** – or other forms of mindful grounding
- **Non-judgmentally noticing and naming** relevant aspects of our emotional reaction (e.g. thoughts, feelings, urges, impulses, cravings)
- **Noticing** –with openness and curiosity, our thought processes: in particular, noticing how our mind is interpreting the situation and what it is telling us to do.

This step also includes noticing and naming unhelpful interpretations of the situation - a useful first step in defusion. For example, a client is furious because her partner is now over 3 hours late in returning home. While dropping anchor, she might say to herself something like:

“My mind’s in judgment mode.”

“Here’s the ‘She’s out to get me’ story!”

“Here’s the ‘She doesn’t care’ story!”

“My mind’s telling me she did this on purpose to hurt me.”

“Here’s radio blame and rage broadcasting again”

“Here’s overgeneralising showing up.”

“Here’s my mind judging and accusing.”



STEP 2

The second step is to look at our cognitive processes in terms of workability, and if they are unworkable, then unhook from them, and get into values-based strategising.

- a. **Workability** : We consider: if we let these thoughts guide our actions, where will they take us? Towards or away from our values?
Towards or away from the person we want to be? Towards or away from effective actions likely to build the sort of life we want?
- b. If the answer is “away”, then we next consider, what can we do that might be more workable? In other words, the client reappraises the situation as an opportunity to live her values.

For example, a client may ask herself: In the face of this situation ...

“What do I want to stand for?”

“What sort of person do I want to be?”

“What values do I want to bring into play?”

“What outcomes do I want to aim for?”

A client may run through an internal process like this:

- I'm getting hooked.
- It's the 'she did it to hurt me' story.
- I don't want to start shouting, yelling, blaming when she gets home.
- My values as a partner: loving, patient, and kind.
- How would a loving, patient, kind partner interpret this situation?
- Is there another way of looking at this situation that can help me handle it better, like the partner I want to be?

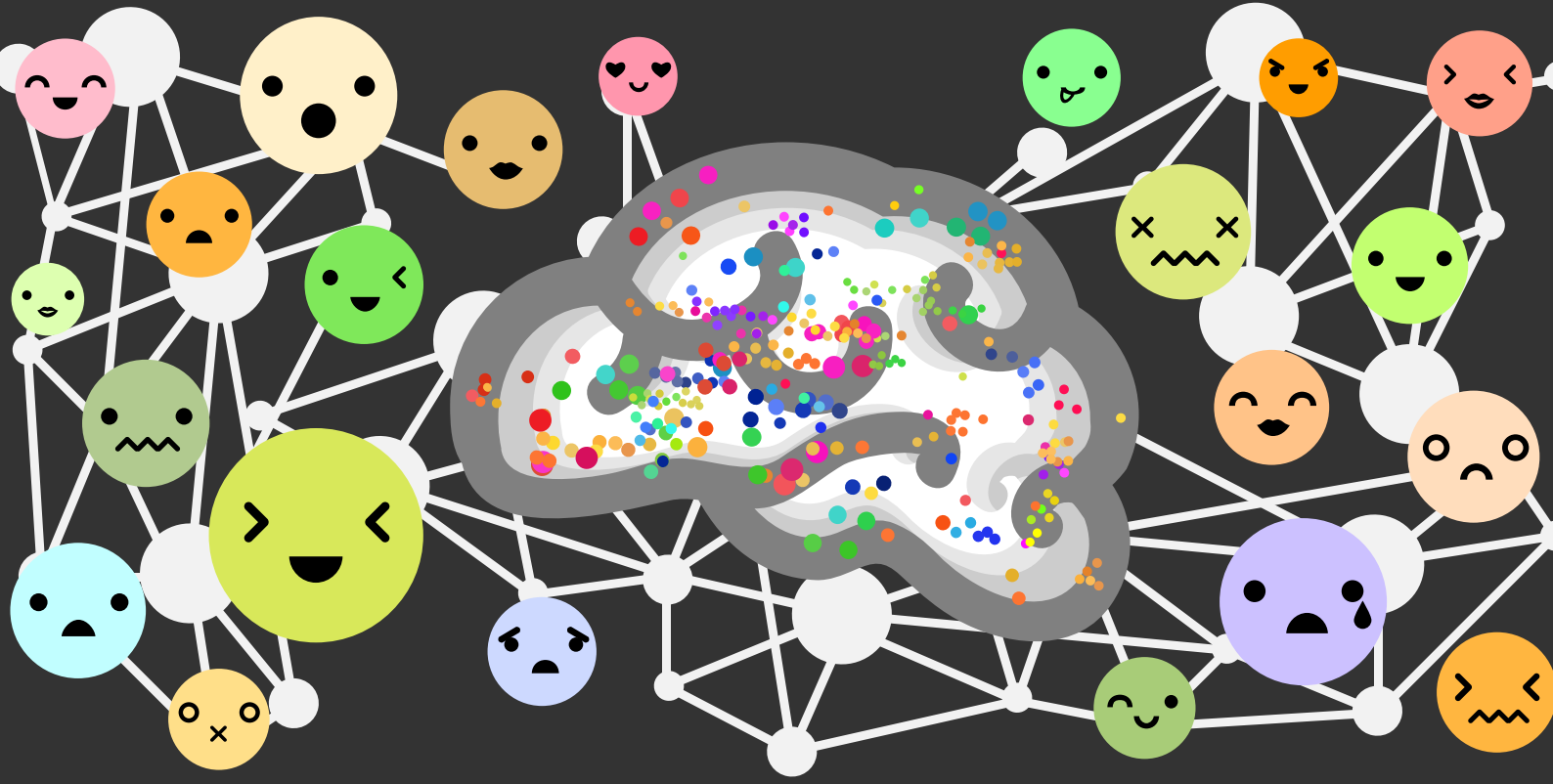
The client may also reappraise the situation as an opportunity to try out her new mindfulness skills - such as grounding, acceptance, self-compassion – to help her handle her emotions more effectively; not to reduce/avoid or get rid of them, but to unhook and make room for them.

So she may ask herself: “What new ACT skills can I use to handle my emotions here?”

Or she may simply start practising grounding or acceptance or self-compassion or defusion or self-as- context skills.

You can see that these interventions include

- a) **defusion from the original unhelpful interpretations** of the situation and
- b) **reinterpretation of the situation as an opportunity** to live one's values and/or practice new skills and/or experiment with new more workable behaviours. This effectively changes the meaning of the situation, and alters the emotional impact of it.



REINTERPRETING EMOTIONS IN ACT

In ACT, we often apply the strategies from the previous 2 pages to difficult emotions themselves

An unwanted emotion is present and we notice and name it, and we notice how our mind is interpreting it: e.g. bad, horrible, awful, unbearable, getting in the way of my life, have to get rid of it, means something is wrong with me.

We defuse from those interpretations, and we bring an attitude of openness and curiosity to the emotion, and we reinterpret it in ways that facilitate grounding, acceptance, and self-compassion

For example:

- I'm having a feeling of anger
- This emotion is normal; it's a natural reaction to a difficult situation
- Emotions are like the weather and I am like the sky

- Emotions are like waves: they rise, and peak, and fall
- I have room for this feeling; no matter how big it gets, it can't get bigger than me
- This is a moment of suffering; everyone feels like this at times
- I'm willing to make room for this feeling, even though I don't like it
- It can't harm me; I don't need to fight it or run from it
- I don't have to let it control me; I can have this feeling and choose to act on my values
- This feeling will rise and fall in its own good time
- Like all feelings, this will come and stay and go
- This feeling is an opportunity to practice my new mindfulness skills

Again, you can see that these interventions include

a) **defusion from the original unhelpful interpretations** of the emotion and
b) **reinterpretation of the emotion in ways that facilitate acceptance**, self-compassion, living one's values, experimenting with new more workable behaviours. This reinterpretation of the emotion effectively changes its meaning and reduces its impact over behaviour.

Russ Harris

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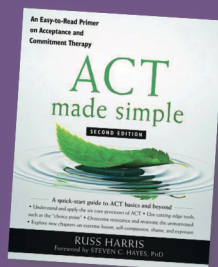
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A very practical, experiential workshop where you'll come out with a solid grounding in ACT. It will be useful for therapists, coaches and practitioners.

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Kirk Strosahl & Patricia Robinson – Mindfulness in ACT – September

Yvonne Barnes-Holmes – Enhancing ACT with RFT – October (available by webcast)

Louise Hayes – ACT for Young People – November

Joe Oliver – Intermediate Skills Workshop – November

Ray Owen – ACT for Physical Health – April