

# What is acceptance and commitment (ACT) therapy?

An introductory guide to ACT





## **What is acceptance and commitment (ACT) therapy?**

Acceptance and commitment therapy (said as one word – ‘ACT’) is, a widely recognised and evidence-based approach to psychotherapy. Its main focus is to increase psychological flexibility and promote meaningful behaviour change through the use of processes like acceptance and mindfulness.

ACT encourages the acceptance of thoughts and feelings rather than trying to change them, working with issues head-on instead of trying to bury them. ACT views suffering as a normal part of the human experience and focuses on helping individuals create a rich and meaningful life despite challenging circumstances.

This free guide will introduce you to the concept of psychological flexibility and take you through the six core concepts of ACT.



## **Psychological flexibility - embracing change for a meaningful life**

Psychological flexibility is a powerful concept rooted in ACT that empowers individuals to adaptively respond to life's challenges while staying true to their values. It involves being present, accepting uncomfortable thoughts and emotions, and taking values based, committed actions.

Psychological flexibility offers numerous benefits and applications:

### **Enhanced well-being:**

By accepting and embracing the full range of human experiences, individuals can reduce inner conflict and increase psychological well-being.

### **Increased resilience:**

Psychological flexibility equips individuals to adapt and bounce back from adversity, fostering resilience and emotional strength.

### **Greater authenticity:**

Through present-moment awareness and being true to their values, individuals can live more authentically, aligning their actions with their genuine selves.

### **Improved relationships:**

Psychological flexibility enhances interpersonal relationships by facilitating empathy, effective communication, and understanding.

### **Treatment of mental health conditions:**

ACT, with its focus on psychological flexibility, has shown effectiveness in treating anxiety disorders, depression, trauma, and chronic pain.

### **Performance enhancement:**

Psychological flexibility is valuable in sports psychology, academic settings, and organisational development, promoting focus, motivation, and excellence.



## **Strategies used to increase psychological flexibility**

Developing psychological flexibility is an ongoing process that requires intentional effort and practice. Some popular strategies used in ACT therapy that can increase psychological flexibility are:

### **Mindfulness practices:**

Engage in mindfulness meditation, self-reflection, or other mindfulness-based exercises to foster present-moment awareness and acceptance.

### **Thought observation:**

Practice cognitive defusion by observing thoughts without getting caught up in them, recognising that thoughts are mental events and not necessarily accurate representations of reality.

### **Emotional acceptance:**

Learn to accept and make room for uncomfortable emotions, allowing them to arise and pass without judgment or avoidance.

### **Values exploration:**

Reflect on personal values, clarifying what truly matters, and consider how they can guide decision-making and actions.

### **Goal setting:**

Set meaningful goals that align with your values and commit to taking consistent action towards their achievement.

Psychological flexibility encompasses the six core processes of ACT that contribute to adaptive responses - we will now explore these in more detail.



## The six core components

The core processes of the ACT model include:

- attention to the present moment
- acceptance
- defusion
- self as context
- values
- committed action



By incorporating the six core components, individuals can navigate their way towards psychological flexibility and a more fulfilling or meaningful life.

Support from a practitioner, such as a coach or therapist can be valuable, offering guidance, perspective, and a safe space to reflect and apply these ideas.

## Acceptance

Acceptance is about being open to experiencing difficult thoughts and emotions without trying to change, avoid or control them. It encourages us to accept and embrace thoughts and feelings as they are, rather than trying to suppress or change them.



## Defusion

Defusion involves creating distance from thoughts, allowing us to observe and notice them without being ruled by them. Defusion encourages us to see thoughts as simply thoughts, not facts, and nor do they represent reality. This shift in perspective is powerful to reduce the impact of harmful thoughts and offers greater mental flexibility.

## **Self as context**

Self as context encourages us to notice thoughts and feelings without attaching judgment or value to them. It involves understanding ourselves as the space in which these thoughts and feelings occur. This idea includes three aspects of the self: self as content, self as context, and self as process. It's about being a mindful observer of our experiences rather than getting caught up in them.



## **Attention to the present moment**

Paying attention to their current environment is about immersing ourselves in the present moment and observing everything happening around us. This concept is all about focusing on the here and now, rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

## Values

Values in the ACT model refer to what is truly important to us. It's about understanding what matters most and then living a life that aligns with our core values. This part of the model helps us consider our personal values and use them as a guide for our decisions and actions.



## Committed action

Committed action involves taking proactive steps to pursue the important things in your life. Committed action is how we make a conscious effort to live a value-driven life using the skills and understanding we've acquired from the other five steps in the model.

## Supporting evidence for the success of ACT therapy

Over the years, ACT has gained recognition and popularity as an evidence-based therapy for a wide range of mental health conditions. Its effectiveness has been supported by numerous research studies and clinical trials. ACT has been successfully applied to treat conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse, chronic pain, and many others.

ACT has extended its impact beyond therapy. It has been applied in education to enhance student well-being and academic performance. In sports psychology, ACT helps athletes build mental resilience and manage performance anxiety. Workplace settings benefit from ACT by promoting employee well-being and job satisfaction. ACT principles support parents in nurturing relationships with their children. Furthermore, ACT techniques have been used in performance-oriented fields, such as the arts and leadership development, to manage anxiety and enhance performance outcomes. These applications demonstrate the versatility of ACT beyond therapeutic contexts.

There are now over 1000 randomised controlled trials that have been conducted, exploring the effectiveness of ACT. Alongside this, there are over 400 published meta-analyses and systematic, scoping, or narrative reviews of the ACT evidence base.



## **About this guide**

This guide has been designed for practitioners and clients as an introduction to ACT and is ideal for anyone who is committed to building meaningful, values-driven lives.

## **About Contextual Consulting**

Contextual Consulting are specialists in ACT, an evidence-based psychotherapy approach. ACT focuses on mindfulness, accepting difficult emotions, and aligning your actions with your values to create a more meaningful life.

We are committed to providing leading edge evidence-based ACT training to therapists and practitioners so that they can deliver the very best outcomes for their clients. We only engage the very best world-renowned ACT experts as trainers and presenters to ensure that practitioners attending our courses receive the most up to date and practical ACT training and techniques. And we endeavour to make our training as affordable and convenient as possible.

Learn more about how ACT can support you on our website: [contextualconsulting.co.uk](http://contextualconsulting.co.uk)



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