

CBT vs ACT – how do they work with thoughts?

One of the key differences between CBT and ACT lies in how they aim to influence thoughts and emotions. CBT works on the assumption that thoughts and feelings can often be modified by examining their accuracy and usefulness. By actively reshaping unhelpful thinking patterns into more balanced and realistic ones, CBT seeks to reduce emotional distress and support effective behaviour.

ACT takes a different approach. Rather than prioritising changes in the content of thoughts, ACT focuses on changing their function and impact. Research and clinical experience within ACT suggest that attempts to eliminate or control unwanted thoughts and feelings can sometimes increase struggle and distress. Instead, ACT helps people learn to make room for internal experiences as they arise, while loosening the grip those experiences have on behaviour. The emphasis is not on whether a thought changes, but on whether it continues to dictate what a person does, particularly in relation to what matters to them.

To better understand how CBT and ACT work, this handout provides some practical examples of how each approach might respond differently to three thoughts.

"I'm a failure."

"I'll embarrass myself if I speak in the meeting."

"Nobody likes me."

Thought – "I'm a failure."

CBT response: Challenging and reframing the thought	ACT response: Changing the relationship with the thought
<p>Identify the thought</p> <p>"What is the thought that's causing you distress?"</p> <p>Client: "I'm a failure."</p> <p>Examine the evidence</p> <p>"What evidence do you have that supports this thought? And what evidence do you have against it?"</p> <p>Client: "Well, I made a mistake at work, but I've also done a lot of things right recently."</p> <p>Reframe the thought</p> <p>"Could we reframe this thought to make it more balanced?"</p> <p>Client (with therapist's help): "I made a mistake, but that doesn't mean I'm a failure. I've succeeded at many tasks before and can learn from this experience."</p> <p>Translate the new perspective into action</p> <p>"Based on this more balanced view, what would be a helpful next step?"</p> <p>Client: "I could apologise for the mistake and make a plan to avoid it in the future."</p>	<p>Notice the thought</p> <p>"Let's take a step back. Notice the thought, 'I'm a failure.' It's a string of words your mind has created."</p> <p>Create distance</p> <p>"Try saying, 'I'm having the thought that I'm a failure,' rather than 'I am a failure.' Does that feel different?"</p> <p>Client: "It feels less personal, like it's just a thought rather than the truth."</p> <p>Observe without judgement</p> <p>"Imagine the thought as a leaf floating down a stream. You can notice it passing by, without needing to analyse it, respond to it, or make it go away."</p> <p>Refocus on values</p> <p>"What's important to you right now? What small action could you take that aligns with your values, even if this thought is present?"</p> <p>Client: "Being reliable at work is important to me. I could apologise for the mistake and make a plan to avoid it in the future."</p>

Thought – "I'll embarrass myself if I speak in the meeting."

CBT response: Testing predictions and building coping confidence	ACT response: Defusing from the thought and acting on values
<p>Challenge the prediction:</p> <p>"What makes you think you'll embarrass yourself? Have you spoken up in meetings before? How did it go?"</p> <p>Client: "Usually, it goes fine, but I always feel so nervous beforehand."</p> <p>Behavioural experiment</p> <p>"Let's test this. In the next meeting, try saying one small thing, even if you feel nervous. Afterwards, we'll look at what actually happened and how you coped."</p> <p>Reframe the thought:</p> <p>"Instead of 'I'll embarrass myself,' could you try 'I might feel nervous, but I can cope with it and it usually goes better than I expect'? How does that feel?"</p> <p>Client: "That feels more doable."</p>	<p>Acknowledge</p> <p>"It's understandable to have the thought 'I'll embarrass myself.' Let's notice it as something your mind is producing, rather than something you have to obey."</p> <p>Practise defusion</p> <p>"Let's try relating to the thought differently. You might repeat it slowly, sing it, or say 'I'm having the thought that I'll embarrass myself.' What do you notice?"</p> <p>Client: "It makes it feel less serious, like it's just a thought, not a fact."</p> <p>Focus on values</p> <p>"Why is it important to you to speak up in the meeting? What value does that connect to?"</p> <p>Client: "I want to contribute to the team and show that I care about the project."</p> <p>Act with the thought present</p> <p>"Even if the thought is there, what's one small action you could take that fits with that value?"</p> <p>Client: "I could share one quick idea, even if I feel nervous."</p>

Thought – "Nobody likes me."

CBT response: Examining interpretations and testing assumptions

Identify the interpretation

"Let's slow this down. The thought is 'Nobody likes me.' What's been happening that led to that conclusion?"

Client: "People haven't been messaging me much lately."

Identify thinking patterns

"That sounds like a broad conclusion based on limited information. We might be seeing some mind-reading or all-or-nothing thinking here."

Examine the evidence

"What evidence supports the idea that nobody likes you? And what evidence suggests a more mixed picture?"

Client: "I do have a couple of friends who check in, and colleagues are friendly at work."

Develop a more balanced view

"Given all of that, how could we rephrase the thought in a way that fits the evidence more closely?"

Client: "Some people don't reach out much, but others do care about me."

Test the new perspective through action

"Based on that more balanced view, what could you do this week to test it?"

Client: "I could message a friend and suggest meeting up."

ACT response: Loosening the grip of the story and moving toward connection

Notice the thought

"Your mind is telling a painful story right now: 'Nobody likes me.' Let's notice that as a thought, rather than a fact."

Create distance from the thought

"Try saying, 'I'm having the thought that nobody likes me.' What do you notice when you say it that way?"

Client: "It feels a bit less overwhelming, like it's not the whole truth."

Optional metaphor "If it helps, you can imagine that thought like a radio playing in the background. You don't need to turn it off or argue with it, just notice it while you bring your attention back to what you're doing."

Clarify values

"What matters to you in your relationships? What kind of friend or family member do you want to be?"

Client: "I want to be kind and supportive."

Act with the thought present

"Even with this thought here, what's one small action you could take that reflects that value?"

Client: "I could send a message to my friend to check how they're doing."