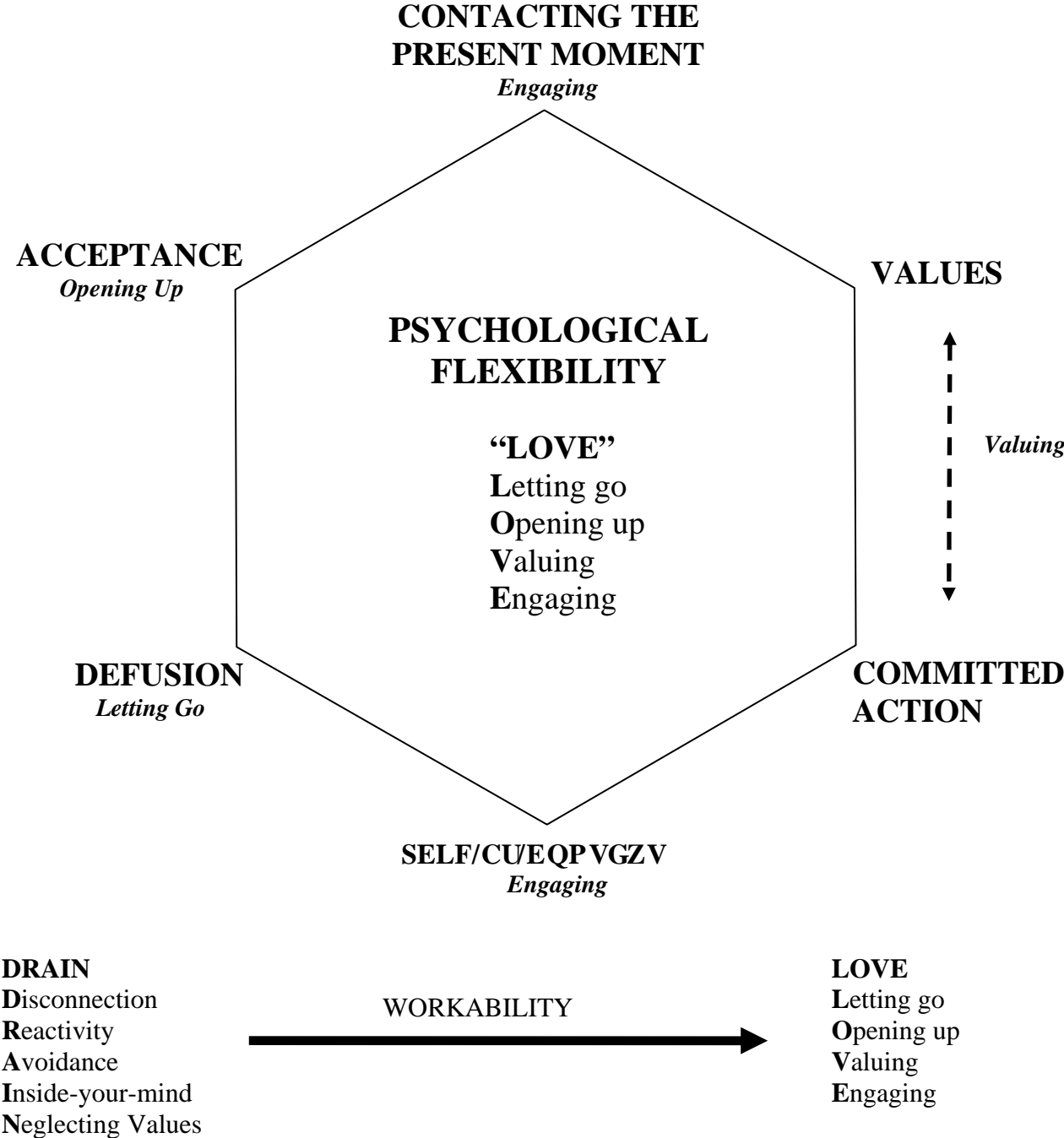


ACT WITH LOVE:
 Using Acceptance & Commitment Therapy
 for Common Relationship Issues
 Dr Russ Harris, 2035
 www.vjgjcrrkpguater.com www.actmindfully.com.au

The aim of ACT: to create a rich, full and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it. A key message: *accept what is out of your personal control, and commit to action that enriches your life.*



Basic Steps For Therapy

Initial Session(s)

1. Informed Consent (all in one go, or dispersed through the session)
2. Emphasize workability as the guiding principle & get permission to interrupt and point out unworkable behavior BEFORE you start taking a history
3. Assess commitment & willingness to work
4. Take a history, (including positives, problems, values, goals, and needs)
5. As you do, validate, normalize, empathise; encourage both partners to engage
6. Summarise any workable/unworkable patterns you have seen in session
7. Agree on “Live Person’s” treatment goals (which may initially be generic)
8. Homework: notice what *you* do that is a) workable and b) unworkable

Subsequent sessions

9. Highlight both workable and unworkable behaviour whenever it happens
10. Interrupt conflict and turn it into compassion
11. Clarify values & set values-consistent goals
12. Identify barriers to valuing: DRAIN – Disconnection, Reactivity, Avoidance, Inside-your-mind, Neglecting values
13. Overcome barriers to valuing: LOVE – Letting go, Opening up, Valuing, Engaging
14. DRAIN Vs LOVE for every issue that arises; repeatedly identify both DRAIN and LOVE as they occur in the room
15. Skills-training & psycho-education as needed (e.g. assertiveness skills, communication skills, conflict resolution, sex therapy etc)
16. Continued emphasis on homework

Informed Consent:

Number of sessions, individual and/or joint

Confidentiality: anything revealed in individual sessions can be shared in joint sessions, (only if relevant)

About ACT & what the sessions will involve; importance of skills practice/experiments
Workability is the guiding principle: is what you are doing working to give you a richer, fuller relationship?

‘Ground Rules’ for joint sessions:

Declaration of therapist values:

- a) to help the couple build the best possible relationship
 - b) to create a safe space, with an emphasis on openness, honesty, and respect
- Permission to interrupt arguments & point out unworkable behaviors

Assessing Commitment & Willingness To Work

Discuss control versus influence. Point out: *the one thing you have most control over in any relationship is: your own behaviour. You can’t control your partner, no matter how hard you try. But you can influence them, through your own behaviour:*

1. *You can influence your partner in ways that improve your relationship in the long run. We’re going to call this ‘workable’ behavior, meaning it works to make your relationship better, richer, fuller.*
2. *You can influence your partner in ways that worsen your relationship in the long run. We’re going to call this ‘unworkable’ behavior, meaning it does **not** work to make your relationship better, richer, fuller. Rather, it keeps you stuck or makes things worse.*

3. *If you want to influence your partner in ways that are workable, you'll need to handle your own thoughts and feelings effectively, and take control of your actions. So again and again, I'll be asking you to look at yourself, and what you are doing, and assess whether it is workable or unworkable. Is that okay?*
4. *Can I have your permission to interrupt you, and to point out, as it happens in this room, both the workable and unworkable ways that you are influencing each other, through your words, actions, and body language?*

Assess willingness and commitment in each partner:

- Are you willing to take an honest look at yourself; at how your own words and actions either worsen or improve the relationship?
- Are you each willing to work on handling your own thoughts and feelings more effectively, and taking more control of your own actions?
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- On a scale of 0 – 10, how hard are you willing to work on improving the relationship, where 10 = I'll do whatever it takes, and 0 = I'm not willing to put any effort in at all.

Taking A History

- Validate each partner's pain
- Normalize & validate both partners' thoughts, feelings and actions
- Facilitate compassion: e.g. *What does it feel like for you when he/she does that?*
- Model and encourage factual, non-judgmental 'video description' versus judgment & criticism
- Draw out values wherever possible
- Keep both partners fully present; if one disengages, point it out

Consider adding the questions below into your history. Note each person's answers, and also the reactions of their partner (e.g. interested or disinterested, open or closed, warm or cold, accepting or defensive etc). You might use a spiel like this: *Obviously you've come here because of problems in your relationship, and I'll ask you about those shortly. But before we get onto the problems, I'd first like to ask you some other questions, about the history of your relationship; about what you like, respect or appreciate in your partner; and what - if anything - is okay or good in your relationship.*

Eliciting Positives

- How did you meet?
- How long was it before you realized you were in love?
- Aside from looks, what did you find most attractive in your partner?
- What did you see as their greatest strengths and qualities?
- What did you enjoy doing?
- What is the happiest memory you have of your time together? Describe it in detail, please. What did your partner do that made it a special event?
- If married: what was your wedding day like?
- What do you see as your partner's greatest strengths and qualities today?
- What do you currently appreciate most about your partner?
- What do you currently enjoy doing together?
- In what ways – if any -- is your relationship going along well, or at least okay?
- What *wouldn't* you change about your relationship as it is today?

Eliciting Problems

- Ask for ONE specific example of the main problems, e.g.: Please describe a recent event that best represents the main problems in your relationship today.
- What have you tried so far to fix this? How did that work?
- What sort of thoughts and feelings show up for you as you're telling me this?
- If you could change just one thing about your relationship, what would it be?

Eliciting Values, Goals, Wants & Needs

- If I had a magic wand, what would you change in your relationship? What would you like more of, and what would you like less of, from a) your partner, and b) yourself? As a couple, what would you do more of, and what would you do less?
- If I had a magic wand and I turned your partner into the PERFECT SOULMATE – perfect in every way, no flaws or weaknesses or failings – then how would *you* change? How would you treat him/her differently? What would you stop doing, and what would you start doing?
- What do you want to stand for in this relationship? What personal strengths and qualities do you want to develop or apply within this relationship?
- What do you see as the qualities of a 'good relationship'? Does your relationship have any of those qualities already? What qualities would you like it to have?

6 THINGS EACH PARTNER CAN DO

1. Stop acting in ways that make it worse
2. Clarify and act on your values: be more like the partner you ideally want to be
3. Accept what is out of your control
4. Notice & reward behavior you like
5. Facilitate change via effective negotiation & communication skills
6. Create rituals for affection, warmth, fun, sensuality, sexuality, intimacy etc.

The best outcome is likely if both partners do these things.

No two partners will do these things to the same extent.

Many approaches focus heavily on 5 & 6

In ACT, we use all six approaches, but we focus first and foremost on 1, 2, 3, 4

Why? They are more empowering; you can apply them regardless of what your partner does.

The Paradox: If you live by your values, stop trying to change your partner, and instead practice acceptance ... often your partner will make positive changes spontaneously! This is good news if your partner is unwilling to participate in therapy; you can still improve it unilaterally. (However, this doesn't mean you give up trying to influence your partner; you just find more workable ways of doing so, and more workable ways of responding when you don't get what you want.)

SKILLS TRAINING

Skills-training comes under 'valuing': i.e. it involves committed action, in the service of values. May include: communication, assertiveness, negotiation, problem-solving, parenting, conflict resolution, self-soothing, sex therapy, etc. A good resource is the book "Couple Skills", by Matthew McKay, Patrick Fanning, Kim Paleg.

Ambivalent Partners: Three Options For The Relationship

You only have 3 choices:

1. Leave
2. Stay and actively work to make it better
3. Stay and give up trying, thus ensuring it will stay the same or get worse

Until the day you actually leave, you have only two options: 2 and 3.

The more you choose option 3, the worse the prospects for your relationship.

If you choose option 2, there are no guarantees, but the prospects are much better.

In the worst-case scenario, if you choose option 2 and give it everything you've got, but nothing works and you do end up leaving - then at least you can look back and know you gave it your best shot, plus you've also learned some useful new skills for other important relationships in your life.

Stay or Leave?

- If it hasn't been done already, assess pros & cons of each option
- Have you given it your best shot?
- Whichever option you choose, you'll need to make room for anxiety, doubt, worry, and thoughts that you're 'making the wrong decision'.
- Sitting on the fence metaphor: short term relief from avoiding a difficult decision, but the fence soon starts sticking into your flesh – and sooner or later, if you sit there long enough, the fence will topple over, making the choice for you.
- Each day that you stay, what do you want to stand for?
- Notice daily costs of choosing option 3
- Notice anything you do that improves the relationship
- Live by your values, whether you stay or leave

Disrupt Rumination & Worrying

- Assign a short period once a day to review the relationship and the pros and cons of leaving or staying.
- After this period, practice *leaves on a stream* or *mindful breathing* or engage fully in a valued activity
- Throughout the day, when thoughts show up related to the issue, try thanking your mind, naming the story. E.g. *Aha! Here it is again, the 'Stay or Leave' story. Thanks mind!* Then engage mindfully in current activity.

Whether You Stay or Leave

- Change what can be changed
- Accept what can't be changed
- Live by your values

If Separation Is Inevitable

- What do you want to stand for as you leave this relationship?
- How would you like to look back and remember the way you handled this?
- If children are involved: What do you want to model for your kids? Given you will have ongoing contact with each other and shared responsibilities, what kind of relationship do you want to have?

VALUES CLARIFICATION

- Magic wand
- Visualize: self as ideal partner Vs self as reactive partner – reflect & share
- 10 yr Anniversary Exercise – reflect & share
- Life compass; bull's eye
- Values checklist
- Share values with partner – in session or on a date

10 Year Anniversary Exercise:

Imagine that magic has happened, it's ten years from now, and your relationship is wonderful. Imagine you have gathered together your closest friends and relatives to celebrate the last ten years of your relationship. This could be a small intimate affair in your family home or a plush affair in a fancy restaurant. It's your imagination, so make it look however you wish. Imagine that your partner stands up to make a speech about the last ten years of your life together—about what you stand for, what you mean to him/her, and the role that you have played in his/her life. Imagine your partner saying whatever it is, deep in your heart, you would most like to hear. (This is not about what they would realistically say—it's about what, in a world where magic could happen, you would love to hear them say.) Imagine them describing your character, your strengths, and the ways in which you have contributed to the relationship. ... Now imagine that they talk about a really tough period in their life, a time they were really struggling, really hurting ... and they talk about how you responded to their difficulties ... what would you love to hear them saying about what you did, and how you responded, during this period?

3 Common Core Values

1. Connection
2. Caring
3. Contribution

'Valuing' = Acting on Your Values

What's a small step you can take?

What's a little thing you could do?

- Gestures
- Words
- Physicality
- Attention

Positive Reinforcement

If your partner actually does that, what difference would it make to you?

How will you let them know that?

If client makes positive changes:

What was that like for you?

What happened to your relationship as a result?

What's another little step you can take?

If client doesn't make positive changes:

What was that like for you?

What happened to your relationship as a result?

What got in the way?

What could you do differently next time?

Identify the DRAIN In Your Relationship (From ACT With Love, Ch 2)

D – Disconnection, **R** – Reactivity, **A** – Avoidance, **I** – Inside your mind, **N** – Neglecting values

Disconnection: How do I disconnect from my partner? (E.g. do I get bored, irritable, stop listening? Do I go cold and distant? Do I close off/shut down? Am I distracted rather than present?)

How does my partner disconnect from me?

Reactivity: How do I react impulsively or automatically, without stopping to consider what I am doing? (E.g. do I yell, snap, swear, storm off, say hurtful things, criticize, blame, accuse, sneer, jeer?)

How does my partner react impulsively or automatically?

Avoidance: How do I try to avoid or get rid of my painful feelings that are related to the issues in this relationship? (E.g. do I use drugs, alcohol, food, cigarettes? Do I withdraw or stay away from my partner? Do I try to distract myself with TV, computers, books, going out? Do I avoid talking to my partner about the issue?)

How does my partner seem to avoid or get rid of his painful feelings?

Inside Your Mind: How do I get trapped inside my mind? (E.g. do I worry about the future, dwell on the past, relive old hurts, rehash old arguments, stew over everything that's wrong with my partner? Do I get caught up in judgment, blame, criticism? Do I get caught up in thoughts of rejection, betrayal, abandonment, or being controlled?)

How does my partner seem to get trapped inside his mind?

Neglecting Values: What core values do I neglect, forget about, or act inconsistently with, when I am disconnected, reactive, avoidant, or inside my mind? (E.g. do I lose touch with values such as being loving, kind, caring, generous, compassionate, supportive, fun-loving, easygoing, sensual, affectionate?)

What core values does my partner seem to neglect, forget about, or act inconsistently with?

If you're unwilling to work at your relationship

Many people don't feel like working on their relationship. You might think it all seems too hard or it's pointless, or you shouldn't have to, or the fault is all with your partner. The problem is, if you're not willing to work on your relationship, then you're effectively choosing to prolong your difficulties or make them even worse. So if this is where you're at right now, then take a few days to notice what this attitude is costing you. At the end of each day, fill in the chart.

How did refusing to work on my relationship – thereby making it worse – affect my health and vitality today?	What did refusing to work on my relationship today cost me in terms of emotional pain, wasted time, wasted money, wasted energy, and further damage?	Did I do anything today that seemed to improve my relationship? What was it?

How Did You Meet Your Partner?

How did you first meet your partner?

Aside from looks, what did you find most attractive about him/her?

What personal qualities did you most admire about him/ her?

What did you enjoy doing together?

What did your partner do that made those times enjoyable?

Describe one of the most enjoyable days you've ever spent together. Where were you? What did you do? How did you interact? What sort of things did you say and do to each other? How was your body language?

What do you miss most about the early days of your relationship?

What do you see as your partner's greatest strengths, best personal qualities?

On Reflection:

Can you contact any sense of warmth or appreciation for your partner? Or do you merely see him as a burden, an obstacle, a hassle?

What happens when you take time to reflect on her strengths and positive qualities? Do you see her at all differently?

Do you find it hard to acknowledge his positive attributes because you are so focused on his flaws and weaknesses?

You're Both Hurting

Take a few minutes to write about the major issues in your relationship. Do this with nonjudgmental description rather than with harsh judgment and criticism. For example, write, "Greg does not often help out with the housework" instead of "Greg is a lazy bastard." If you notice a harsh judgment slipped past you, just make a mental note of it. Silently say to yourself, "Aha! There goes a judgment!" or "There's judging!" Then cross it out and write something nonjudgmental instead.

Write about the painful emotions you have experienced as a result of these issues. What painful thoughts and feelings have you struggled with? If the main feelings you notice are anger, fury, resentment, rage, or frustration, then see if you can "go deeper." These are typically surface emotions. Beneath the angry exterior, you will usually find something like hurt, sadness, guilt, shame, fear, rejection, loneliness,

Acknowledge, openly and honestly, that this relationship has been painful. You have suffered. It has not been easy. Given what you have been through, it's completely natural to feel the way you do.

Now this is the most challenging part: take a few minutes to reflect on how your partner has also suffered. He or she may never have spoken about this to you, so you may have to use your imagination here. Think about what it must be like for your partner to be on the receiving end of your complaints and criticisms. If she tends to cut off, go quiet, and withdraw, then what must that be like for her—hiding away and closing down in order to cope? If she tends to brood, dwell, and rehash the past, how painful must that be for her—suffering again and again by replaying old events that can never be undone? If he gets angry and yells, then how unpleasant must that feel for him to be eaten up with anger and resentment? Surely there is no joy or pleasure involved; how much must he suffer, lost in his rage?

How I try to control my partner

Spend some time reflecting on everything you have ever tried doing to control your partner—then assess how effective it was in the short run and what it cost you in the long run.

What my partner says or does that I don't like	What I have said or done to stop or change my partner's behavior	Did my actions change my partner's behavior in the long term?	Did my actions enhance and enrich our relationship in the long term? If not, what has this cost in terms of health, vitality, pain, wasted time, bitterness, anger, regret etc.

Who do I want to be in this relationship?

Imagine that it's ten years from now, and you have gathered together your closest friends and relatives to celebrate the last ten years of your relationship. This could be a small intimate affair in your family home or a plush affair in a fancy restaurant. It's your imagination, so make it look how you want.

Imagine that your partner stands up to make a speech about the last ten years of your life together—about what you stand for, what you mean to him/her, and the role that you have played in his/her life. Imagine your partner saying whatever it is, deep in your heart, you would most like to hear. (This is not about what they would realistically say—it's about what, in an ideal world, you would love to hear them say.) Imagine them describing your character, your strengths, and the ways in which you have contributed to the relationship.

Close your eyes now and take a couple of minutes to imagine this as vividly as possible, then write answers to the questions below.

What sort of personal qualities do you want to bring into play in your relationship?

What character strengths do you wish to employ or develop?

How do you want to behave or act on an ongoing basis?

What do you want to stand for as a partner?

Suppose we asked your partner to describe the ten things he or she most appreciates about your character or personality. In the ideal world, what would you most love your partner to say?

Values-Guided Actions

Write about little things you could do – simple, easy values-guided actions -- to enhance your relationship. Following are a few ideas to get you started. Although we're focusing here on the three core values of connecting, caring, and contribution, obviously these are not the only important values in a relationship, so please add others of your own.

Words: What can you say to your partner that promotes a deeper sense of connection or shows him that you care? How about "I love you," "I'm here for you," "Let me know how I can be of support," or "I appreciate having you in my life"? Even simple phrases such as "Thank you," "I'm sorry," or "Please forgive me" can go a long way if said genuinely. Consider text messages, cards, and e-mails as well as the spoken word.

Gestures: What actions can you take that contribute to your partner's health, well-being, and vitality? This might include anything from cooking dinner, fixing the car, or organizing a night out, to helping your partner with her chores or tasks, or giving small gifts such as flowers or CDs.

Physicality: How can you facilitate connection and caring physically? Consider hugging, kissing, holding hands, stroking hair, back rubs, sitting together on the couch, and so on.

The Values Gap

Suppose a miracle happened and your partner suddenly turned into your perfect “soul mate”: no faults at all, no annoying habits, always there for you, able to meet your every need, want, and desire If that happened, then how would *you* change? Please take your time to seriously consider this and write your answers below.

What would you stop, start, do more of and less of?

What sort of partner would you try to become? What sort of personal qualities would you develop?

What attitude would you cultivate toward your partner?

How would you speak to him/her when you wanted something?

How would you respond to him/her when they were in pain?

How would you treat him/her when they made a mistake or screwed up?

Is there a gap between the way you'd ideally like to behave as a partner – the values you'd like to live by -- and the way that you actually are behaving?

What is stopping you from living by your values right now?

What do you fear might happen if you did start to live more by your values?

What do you think needs to happen first before you can start living more by your values?

Do you believe your partner should change before you do? If so, what do you expect your partner to do?

The judgmental mind—part 1

So what does your mind say to you when it really wants to beat you up? When your mind turns into judge, jury, and executioner—when it lays out all the evidence about what’s wrong with you, judges you as not good enough, and sentences you to suffer—what does that sound like? If someone could listen in to your thoughts, what would they hear your mind saying?

Take a moment to jot down some of the things your mind says. Complete each sentence with as many words or phrases as you can think of.

When my mind wants to judge me as “not good enough,” this is what it says:

My mind tells me that I am a ...

My mind tells me that I am too ...

My mind tells me that I am not enough of a ...

My mind tells me that I do too much of the following:

My mind tells me that I don’t do enough of the following:

My mind tells me that I lack the following:

Once you’ve done that, read through the list, pick the self-judgment that bothers you the most, and shorten it to a simple phrase of no more than five or six words—for example, I’m a loser, I’m too selfish, or I’m not witty enough. Then either work through the exercises in chapter 9 of ACT With Love, or run through similar exercises with your coach/therapist

The judgmental mind—part 2

When my mind wants to hook me into the “bad partner” story, this is what it says:

It tells me that my partner is a ...

It tells me that my partner is too ...

It tells me that my partner is not enough of a ...

It tells me that my partner does too much of the following:

It tells me that my partner doesn't do enough of the following:

It tells me that my partner lacks the following:

When I get hooked by this story, here is how it affects me: (describe changes in your feelings and your attitude towards your partner, and the way you treat him/her)

When I get hooked by this story, here is how it affects our relationship:

Once you've done this, either work through the defusion exercises in chapter 9 of ACT With Love, or run through similar exercises with your coach/therapist

Fighting Tactics You Use

Write down the tactics you both use in fighting. Start by acknowledging your own tactics (both the fair and the dirty tactics):

“When I want to win a fight, this is what I do ...”

“When my partner wants to win a fight, this is what he/she does ...”

Preferred Tactics And Ground Rules

Complete the following sentences, and then share your answers with your partner.

When we're having a fight --

I'd like you to accept me doing this:

I want to stop myself from doing this:

I'm willing to accept you doing this:

I want you to stop doing this:

Chasing And Running

Discuss chasing and running (as described in chapter 15 of ACT With Love). Share your answers with your partner.

Runners: When do you run? How do you feel immediately before you run? Why do you run? How do you feel when your partner chases you?

Chasers: When do you chase? How do you feel if your partner runs away? Why do you pursue? How do you feel when you're chasing?

Now put yourself in your partner's shoes. Think hard about what that would feel like. Write down what you imagine it must be like for them when they're running away or chasing after you:

Appreciating Your Partner

Fill in this form each day. It's okay if there's overlap and repetition between columns. Notice (at least) three things you appreciate about your partner. They don't have to be big things; they can be tiny. It might be the way he smiles, or the sound of her laughter.

Contemplate what your partner adds to your life. If you're stuck for ideas, consider these questions: If my partner were on his deathbed, what would I tell him I appreciated most about him? If my partner died, what would I find hardest about living alone? Each day notice (at least) three ways in which your partner contributes to your life. Again, they don't have to be big things. It might be the simple fact that she goes to work to earn money to help pay for some of the things you enjoy having. Or the simple pleasure of having someone to talk to over dinner. Or the feeling of added security you have when you're not alone.

Think back to when you first met your partner: what personal qualities and strengths did she have? What did he say or do that made him attractive? In all likelihood, those strengths and qualities are still there today. Each day notice (at least) three things your partner says or does that are representative of her personal strengths and qualities.

3 Things I Noticed Today That I Appreciate About My Partner	3 Ways My Partner Contributed To My Life Today	3 Things My Partner Said or Did Today That Represent Their Best Strengths and Qualities

Creating A Forgiveness Ritual

Many couples find it is very healing to create their own forgiveness ritual. You can use your own creativity to adapt this worksheet into something more personal.

Step 1: Complete these three sentences:

The thoughts, feelings, and memories I've been holding on to are:

Holding on to all this has hurt our relationship in the following ways:

I want to build a better relationship, based on the following values:

Step 2: Write, in your own words, a commitment to let all these painful thoughts and feelings come and go, again and again and again, no matter how many times they come back, without holding on to them or getting caught up in them:

My commitment is to ...

Step 3: Choose a special place and read your answers aloud to each other. This could be anywhere from a special room in your house, to a park or a beach. As one partner reads, the other listens mindfully and compassionately. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Step 4: Do something that symbolizes starting over—for example, burn the letters and scatter the ashes. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Step 5: Do something to connect lovingly—for example, kiss, hug, go out to dinner, or have a bath together. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do: