

The “hands as thoughts & feelings” exercise

This exercise is predominantly a metaphor for defusion, although it references all 6 core ACT processes. It’s evolved from my earlier “hands as thoughts” exercise (*in "ACT Made Simple"*), and the instructions overlap a lot (but also differ significantly in places) with my “pushing away paper exercise” . It’s very useful to help clients understand the rationale for and benefits of developing defusion skills, and to explicitly link these to the client’s therapy goals. However, it’s only a metaphor; it won’t give clients the ability to defuse. We need to follow it up with active training of defusion skills, in session.

The script that follows is a generic version, suitable for just about anyone. It’s much more powerful if we can make it specific to each unique client; so that instead of saying non-specific things like “all the people you care about” we’d say “your husband, Michael, and your teenage daughter, Sarah”.

When I do this, I usually carry my chair over to the client, and we both sit side by side, with our backs to the wall, facing towards the room, and we both do all the actions simultaneously. You don’t have to do it this way, of course; like any exercise in ACT, you can modify and adapt it freely to suit yourself; I’ve just found it more powerful to do so. I also like to do two lovely variants on this exercise. One option is to write down some relevant thoughts and feelings on a sheet of paper, and use this instead of one’s hands; and yet another option is to write them down with an indelible marker on something thin, flexible and transparent such as bubble wrap, celluloid, or acetate.

Therapist (*sitting side-by-side with the client, both facing the room*):

Imagine that out there in front of you (*gesturing to the contents of the room and the far wall*) is everything that really matters to you, deep in your heart; everything that makes your life meaningful (or used to, in the past); all the people, places, and activities you love; all your favorite foods and drinks and music and books and movies; all the things you like to do; and all the people you care about and want to spend time with.

But that’s not all. Also over there are all the problems and challenges you need to deal with in your life today, such as ... (*therapist gives some examples based on the client’s history, e.g. "your conflict with your son", "your financial issues", "your health problems", "your court case", "your search for a job", "your chemotherapy for your cancer"*)

And also over there are all the tasks you need to do on a regular basis to make your life work: shopping, cooking, cleaning, driving, doing your tax return, and so on.

Now please copy me as we do this exercise. Let’s imagine that our hands are our thoughts & feelings, and let’s put them together like this. (Therapist places his hands together, side by side, palms upwards, as if they are the pages of a book. The client copies him.) *Now, let’s see what happens when we get hooked by our thoughts.* (The therapist slowly raises his hands

towards his face, until they are covering his eyes. The client copies him. Both keep their hands over their eyes as the next section of the exercise unfolds.)

Now notice three things. First, how much are you missing out on right now? How disconnected and disengaged are you from the people and things that matter? If the person you love were right there in front of you, how disconnected would you be? If your favorite movie were playing on a screen over there, how much would you miss out on?

Second, notice how difficult it is to focus your attention on what you need to do. If there's an important task in front of you right now, how hard to focus on it? If there's a problem you need to address or a challenge you need to tackle, how hard to give it your full attention?

Third: notice how difficult it is, like this, to take action, to do the things that make your life work, such as *(therapist gives gives some examples based on the client's history, such as "to cook dinner", "to drive your car", "to cuddle your baby", "to type on your computer", "to hug the person you love")*. So notice how difficult life is when we're hooked. We're missing out, we're cut off and disconnected, it's hard to focus, and it's hard to do the things that make life work.

Now, let's see what happens as we unhook from our thoughts & feelings. *(Therapist now slowly removes his hands from his face, and lowers them until they drop into his lap. The client copies him.)* So notice what happens as we unhook. What's your view of the room like now? How much easier is it to engage and connect? If your favorite person were in front of you right now, how much more connected would you be? If your favorite movie were playing, how much more would you enjoy it? If there's a task you need to do or a problem you need to address, how much easier to focus on it, like this? Now move your arms and hands about – *(therapist gently shakes his arms and hands around; client copies)* How much easier is it now to take action: to drive a car, cuddle a baby, cook dinner, type on a computer, hug the person you love? *(Therapist mimes these activities as he says them; the client usually will not copy this part, but that doesn't matter.)*

Now notice these things *(therapist indicate his hands, now once more resting in his lap)* haven't disappeared. We haven't chopped them off and gotten rid of them. They're still here. So if there's something useful we can do with them, we can use them. You see, even really painful thoughts and feelings often have useful information that can help us, even if it's just pointing us towards problems we need to address or things we need to do differently, or simply reminding us to be kinder to ourselves. And if there's nothing useful we can do with them, we just let them sit there.